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Behind His Father's Saying: Robert Frost's Wisdom Tradition

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ABSTRACT

BEHIND HIS FATHER'S SAYING: ROBERT FROST'S WISDOM TRADITION

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It is no coincidence that Robert Frost draws on the European/American aphoristic wisdom tradition. From the fables of Aesop, to the esotericism of pre-Socratic Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Empedocles, to the works of moralists like Blaise Pascal and Michel De Montaigne, to Erasmus, Frederick Nietzsche and others, Robert Frost weaves diverse wisdom into his work. He does not, however, as much take verbatim the words or sentiments of those who inspire him. Rather he adapts the spirit of their thoughts for his own purposes. Why and how does he do this? What are those purposes, and their subsequent implications?

Frost's poetry lends itself to aphoristic and proverbial statement. That being understood, I believe that the role of such proverbial statements is first and foremost to reveal and examine the character of those involved in the poems in which such phrases appear. Examination is not always positive, but is always enlightening. Also, through such statements, Frost reveals a great deal about why he uses aphorisms and proverbs in the first place. By such, I mean more than just his love of classical learning. His love of order

and the beauty order can bring forth in the face of chaos also plays into his fondness for aphorisms. So does an ever present attention born of his need to break away from constraint.

Along with thoroughly reviewing the relevant literature on my topic, I begin my study with an overview of what is broadly meant by the wisdom tradition. In this, I include such things as adages, aphorisms and proverbs. I also discuss how they are customarily employed, that is to say, how Robert Frost might have been used to hearing them employed by those around him. My goal in doing so is to show Robert Frost's placement in terms of the wisdom tradition, and therefore to make his adaptations of it, and/or deviations from it clearer and more impactful to my readers.

Within my study I move from the ancient to the modern. I begin with the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers accompanied, where fruitful, by the fables of Aesop. I believe that the philosophy of Pythagoras, particularly the Pythagorean mysteries with their accompanying aphorisms, is highly applicable to many Robert Frost poems, such as "Mending Wall," and "Directive." Many of his essays, such as "The Figure A Poem Makes," show the same ideas. The theories of Empedocles likewise illuminate many Frost poems, simultaneously revealing much about the figures in each poem. Such revelations occur whether the figures are human or natural, and also whether the poetic landscape created for them is man-made or natural. Although Robert Frost was a self-styled Dualist, philosophically, he still found much of use in the writings of the Monist Pre-Socratics because of their application of aphorisms to help explain their world and

how one should live in it. Such an outlook rings through the heart of many of Frost's best poems.

Robert Frost was predominantly a classicist. Nevertheless, he was open-minded enough and hungry enough for new wisdom to explore that the works of thinkers like Blaise Pascal, Michel De Montaigne, Erasmus, Frederick Nietzsche and others inevitably influenced the characters and landscape of his poems. I do not believe that any such modern influence was in conflict with the classicism Frost valued so highly. Instead I believe Frost took these other influences and adapted them to circumstances he deemed appropriate.

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CHAPTER 1

"BEING ONE TRAVELER": "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN" AS PYTHAGOREAN TEMPLATE

Interpretation begins in choice among attractive alternatives. In "A Poem for All Seasons; Reconsidering Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'" Mark Schwehn asserts that "The most incredible reading of "The Road Not Taken" consists of the absurd suggestion that the poem describes Frost's decision to become a poet" (7). I mention this interpretation not to endorse it, but to emphasize that whether or not someone else endorses it is not my concern. The journey of Robert Frost, from young poet to mature master, promises less to my purposes than does the assimilation and adaptations of the wisdom tradition that he made while on his journey. Similarly, when in "Whose "Road Less Traveled By"? Frost's Intent Once Again" R.F. Fleissner relates an anecdote from Frost's friend Reginald Cook in which Cook remembers "When I said: Well you know they'll always associate 'The Road Not Taken' with you," he replied: "Yes, I suppose they will but it's about Edward Thomas" (23). While other scholars of Frost may see fruitful ground in the question of who it is that is the main inspiration for "The Road Not Taken," I admit, at present, I do

not. The actual namesake of "The Road Not Taken" does much less good in my inquiry than does an examination of what lies within the wonderful poem Robert Frost created.

It is no coincidence that Robert Frost draws on the European/American aphoristic wisdom tradition. From the fables of Aesop, to the esotericism of pre-Socratic Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Empedocles, to the works of moralists like Blaise Pascal and Michel De Montaigne, to Erasmus, Frederick Nietzsche and others, Robert Frost weaves diverse wisdom into his work. He does not, however, as much take verbatim the words or sentiments of those who inspire him. Rather he adapts the spirit of their thoughts and those of his New England homeland for his own purposes. Why and how does he do this? What are those purposes, and their subsequent implications?

As for the beginning of an answer, or at least a hypothesis, let me say that Frost's poetry lends itself to aphoristic and proverbial statement. That being understood, I believe that the role of such proverbial statements is first and foremost to reveal and examine the character of those involved in the poems in which such phrases appear. Examination is not always positive, but is always enlightening. Also, through such statements, Frost reveals a great deal about why he uses aphorisms and proverbs in the first place. By such, I mean more than just his love of classical learning. His love of order, and the beauty order can bring forth in the face of chaos also plays into his fondness for aphorisms. So does an ever present tension born of his need to break away from constraint. I will begin my study of how he does this with an overview of what is broadly meant by the wisdom tradition. In this, I include such things as adages, aphorisms and proverbs. I will also discuss how they are customarily employed, that is to say, how Robert Frost might have been used to hearing them employed by those around him. My goal in doing so is to show

Robert Frost's placement in terms of the wisdom tradition, and therefore to make his adaptations of it, and/or deviations from it clearer and more impactful to my readers.

Although my study may not be at all times strictly chronological, I do intend to move from the ancient to the modern. I shall begin with the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers accompanied, where fruitful, by the fables of Aesop. I believe that the philosophy of Pythagoras, particularly the Pythagorean mysteries with their accompanying aphorisms, is highly applicable to many Robert Frost poems. In particular, "The Road Not Taken" demonstrates clear evidence of Pythagorean influence.

As I begin my close reading of "The Road Not Taken," I want to make certain my intentions and arguments come through clearly to the reader. I see the speaker in the poem as a beginning Pythagorean. He does not yet know all there is to know, but he knows enough to know what he does not know and that he wants to know more. I do not think the speaker has yet earned his place in the inner circle of Pythagoras. The journey he undertakes here serves to test his mettle as to how deep his commitment to the mysterious community really runs.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
(Frost *CPPP 103).*

Certainly, the two roads here could be taken to symbolize the two branches of Pythagoreanism, the aphorists and the scientists. Nevertheless, a more general outlook of the Pythagorean way as opposed to conventional thinking appears far more likely. The speaker is "sorry" because he knows he has to commit himself wholeheartedly to whichever choice he makes. He makes no mention of the possibility of getting off the

road and cutting across a cow pasture or anything like that. He only has the option to take one path or the other and see it through to the end. Likewise, for the Pythagoreans a disciple either succeeded in absorbing enough of the symbols to become an esoteric for life, or failed badly enough to be completely rejected by the entire group once and for all. Disciples of Pythagoras had no opportunity to waver in their convictions. That need for permanence necessitated the long apprenticeship they had to endure.

To say Pythagoras utilized highly selective methods, significantly understates the idea. Furthermore, Iamblichus of Chalcis reports that "to begin with he inquired about their relation to their parents and kinsfolk. Next he surveyed their laughter speech or silence, as to whether it was unseasonable" (74).

Few, if any, other purveyors of homespun wisdom took such pains to make sure that the person receiving instruction truly deserved it. In fact, most aphorisms, proverbs, fables, and the like were intended for widespread general public consumption. Distributors of these types of knowledge believed that a broad dissemination would yield the best results by making everyone just that little bit wiser, or more cautious, or what have you. Pythagoras, by contrast, insisted on searching out a small number of elite persons and thereafter filling them with as much profound knowledge as they could hold. He and his followers felt that this approach produced the best outcomes by allowing the truly worthy to ascend to new heights of knowledge of which the average person could not even conceive. It's a bit like how K-strategists in the animal kingdom put all their energy into a few high-quality offspring rather than just having bushels of offspring like

R-strategists.[1]

This initial filtration was not fine enough for Pythagoras' purposes. Iamblichus of Chalcis relates how "after this the candidate was compelled to observe silence for five years, so as to have made definite experiments in continence of speech, inasmuch as the subjugation of the tongue is the most difficult of moral victories…" (74). Whether the silence observed was constant during this initial probation is not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that opinions and especially knowledge were not to be handed over to just anyone who asked for them. Long stretches of silence, whether continuous or intermittent, would have taught the perspective Pythagorean the immense power of words to do both good and evil depending on how a speaker chose to employ them. Robert Frost embraced the same idea in "Some Definitions by Robert Frost" when he wrote "my definition of poetry (if I were forced to give one) would be this: words that have become deeds" (Frost *Collected Prose of Robert Frost* 84).

The notion of language leading to and influencing actions coincides with Pythagoras' belief that one's reason must master one's emotions. It is no stretch to say that words have their genesis in thoughts. If one wishes to act in a temperate manner, the words that lead to actions must be as pure as possible. Such purity ultimately comes through disciplining the mind at the start. Hence, we encounter Pythagoras' emphasis on silent observation on the part of new initiates.

Silent or not what was it that a novice Pythagorean encountered upon entering, and settling into the community? In *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History*

[1] In ecology, r/K selection theory refers to the differing characteristics within species that inversely connects parental investment and the quantity and quality of offspring. r-selection species divide parental investment between many offspring whereas K-selected species devote theirs to a few. Neither mode is innately superior, and they can coexist in the same habitat; e.g., ants and tigers.

Charles H. Kahn tells us that “Members were called homakooi, "those who come together to listen" and their assembly Hall was a homakoeion a place "for hearing together". What they heard was an akousma, a “hearing” or symbolon or “password” (8-9). Once again, Pythagoreanism had its basis in the idea that not everyone could or should understand everything. They believed some things are best left out of the hands of the average Joe.

The screening process, which mandated initiates, had to surrender all their property to the community allowed for no shortcuts whatsoever. Kahn states that

> Only after the successful completion of this test period were the initiates permitted inside: they then became "esoterics" members of Pythagoras’ household or inner circle, and were allowed to see the master in person. If they failed the test, they received double their property back but were treated as dead by their "fellow hearers" (8-9).

In such a ritual, the truly committed are separated from the casual adherents. Such examinations reward the diligent while excluding the less so. In large part the goal of such rituals appears the rearranging of mortal priorities. By such I mean, in most situations of life to end an endeavor by earning twice the profit with which one began would be a praiseworthy thing. Similarly, in business someone capable of doubling investments on a regular basis is not shunned but embraced by the larger community. That is the peculiar difference between the Pythagoreans and the rest of the world. To them, riches lie in nature and the next world. To keep such a community functioning, every member had to be a true believer. Everyone had to buy in, even then, the belief had to be kept quiet and rarely be spoken of. Robert Frost refers to the same notion in “The Four Beliefs” when he observes that “the self-belief, which is a knowledge that you don't want to tell other people about because you cannot prove that you know. You are saying nothing about it till you see” (*Collected Prose* 145)

Such knowledge necessarily becomes secret because virtually no one else would understand if told. Now, to “prove” something means not only to show the correctness of that thing or idea, but also to put the thing or idea to the test, such as with Alcohol content and bullet resistance. In this case, Frost points to the notion of how difficult it is to accurately depict internal understanding to somebody “on the outside looking in.” Therein lies the reason why the speaker of “The Road Not Taken” concludes that he will wait quite some time to tell what he knows. It will take a goodly while for the significance of his “road trip” to dawn on him. The wisdom contained in these types of sayings is not often fast acting.

Undoubtedly, the speaker did not stand observing the two roads for the five years customary to a Pythagorean in training, yet the detail "long I stood" is anything but accidental. The speaker ponders his decision with great care. He does not consult with anyone partly because there is no one around with whom he can consult, and partly because to Pythagoras the understanding behind such decisions came entirely from inside oneself.

And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; (Frost *CPPP 103).*

The speaker scrutinizes the road he does not take "as far as I could" because he needs to assimilate all the information about it that he can. He does not wish to go about in darkness or ignorance. The reason for this comes from Robert Frost’s belief that “there ought to be in everything you write some sign that you come from almost anywhere” (Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing,* ix). Indeed, Frost does come from many places at once in his borrowing and adaptation of various forms of wisdom. When

he refers to a sign of one's origins he means simply that. A writer should not, in Frost's estimation, be coming completely from nowhere with no knowledge of what has come before. Just as importantly, a poet must have some sense of what has worked before in connecting with readers in terms of both style and substance. As Frost himself observed:

> You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that follow easily under formulae all the fun is outside, saying things suggest formulae but won't formulate that almost but not quite formulate. I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to a casual person altogether obvious (Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, x).

Herein lies the point of Frost borrowing what he does and how he does. Namely, he wishes to have the weight of tradition behind whatever he himself has already decided to believe. Very much the same idea underpins the framed narrative in Mark Twain's "The Jumping Frog" and "The Knight's Tale" from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Simply put, readers or listeners are often reluctant to receive new insights, even wise ones, if it appears that the person delivering them made them up right off the top of his head that very moment. Even wisdom becomes dubious if it appears too new and ungrounded in previous conventional knowledge. Moreover, as Poirier observes "nothing pleases people more than the evidence that however new the style however unconventional the sounds they carry you nonetheless to conventional meanings" (5). Robert Frost carries through on this lesson to an extraordinary extent. His interest in a wisdom tradition stems largely from a need to say readily understood things in unexpected ways.

That sentiment fits in perfectly with Frost's belief that poetry could and should stem from almost anywhere in the known universe. Moreover, Frost felt that the Greco-Roman world, and its learning as distilled in proverbs, needed to be recaptured and assimilated

by every truly educated person. What, to Robert Frost, qualifies a person as one of the intellectual elect? He tells us that "The way to read a poem in prose or verse is in the light of all the other poems ever written" (Helen H. Bacon "In-and Outdoor Schooling: Robert Frost and the Classics," 36). To Frost, there is no way to avoid doing this because one cannot write a truly worthwhile poem out of thin air. Every poem is built somehow or other out of the rest. Moreover, he asserts in "Original Originality – Robert Frost's Talks" by Lisa Seale that "I write poetry because it's been written before. I'm not original enough to originate a whole new realm of action" (105).

Here, again, we have the dichotomy in Frost between the desire to adhere to tradition while at the same time following one's own direction. He says that an entirely new action is beyond him. He does not say, however, that adapting existing actions is in any way something he cannot or will not do with regularity. Mind you, he did not want to appear garish in doing so.

Robert Frost valued subtlety above nearly all else. He enjoyed challenging his readers to see who could catch on to what he was up to. Helen Bacon observes that "it is part of Frost's 'fooling' not to draw it to our attention, but to leave it for the properly schooled to discover. ("In-and Outdoor Schooling: Robert Frost and the Classics," 36). It is a particularly appealing idea to Frost that only those with proper training and an uncorrupted way of thinking can really get at the meat of whatever is being talked about. Ostensibly, anybody could do it, but only those who showed themselves worthy and skillful in proper disciplines were really able to. This is the same reason why in "Directive" only those who are purified can go all the way and receive what is waiting seemingly for everyone. Luckily, most proverbial wisdom has at least a somewhat less

obscure character. Despite the fact that homespun wisdom goes by a variety of names (Proverbs, adages, aphorisms, etc.) most sources use the blanket terms “proverb” or "proverblike sayings," even when referring to specific types. Timothy O’Brien provides a useful definition.

> By "proverblike sayings," I mean as most commentators on proverbs agree, statements that are short and balanced in their expression and that seem to speak from a sense of the shared, traditional, customary wisdom of a community, rather than reflect individuality and irony toward received wisdom (*Names, Proverbs, Riddles, and Material Text in Robert Frost* 52).

Such wisdom is undoubtedly not only shared within the community but widely disseminated. It usually is not directly attributable to just one person or doctrine. Therefore, the wisdom contained in proverbs, adages, and fables is specifically meant not to be esoteric in the Pythagorean sense. Also, unlike the Pythagorean maxims, such wisdom is meant to conform to the comfortable conventions of an already established community, and not meant to help create any sort of specially self-contained subculture. O’Brien continues with this line of reasoning by pointing out that “like all proverblike sayings, it represents an intrusion of some timeless, universal realm into the specific, historical realm of personal experience” (88-89). At their best, these types of sayings are meant to be widely applicable by the general population across many disparate situations.[2]

Pythagoras, by contrast, intended, from the beginning, that his insights should only reach the ears of a chosen elect. Barnes notes that “although the Italian school was founded by émigrés from Ionia, it quickly took on a character of its own” (The Pre-

[2] Such sayings are often paradoxical e.g. “it’s always darkest just before the dawn” or contradictory e.g. “absence makes the heart grow fonder” and “out of sight, out of mind.”

Socratic Philosophers: Volume 1, 100). From the very beginning the teachings of Pythagoras were meant to be a thing only unto themselves which only some people could readily access and understand. Irrespective of any traits of other Ionian philosophy Pythagoreanism did or did not originally contain it achieved its intellectual independence owing to the fact that it was, from the start, and wanted to be for all time, separate, both geographically and spiritually, from the other modes of early Greek thought. Pythagoras himself "founded a society whose members bound themselves to a life regulated by definite religious and ethical principles" (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 32). Hence, why not everyone could enter into it, or was even intended to try. Pythagoras and his followers maintained secrecy because

> …their aim was to be freed from the circle of births and to enter again into the last, divine state of bliss. The road to it, the way of salvation, is here fundamentally the same: the purification from sensuality, and the renunciation of the earthly (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 32-33).

This makes sense when taken with the idea that one's physical self is temporary, but the soul is, in one form or another, permanent. In such case, to focus on the worldly is a waste of time because you won't really get to enjoy it anyway. The supposed worthlessness of the material world the Pythagoreans perceived in their physical surroundings emerged from the fact that "the spirit, the principles and practices of the Pythagorean order all have their root in the doctrine of transmigration" (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 32).

Here, we have the origins not only of a strictly Pythagorean belief, but also of those later espoused by Parmenides and Empedocles. As such I mean, since the Pythagoreans believed that the soul moved around from body to body, it never really died

out and never really changed. It only seemed to change because each new body projected a different physical form. When Pythagoras is said to have recognized his friend within the mortal body of a dog, it is not just because he was probably a dog lover, but instead because regardless of anything else some unchanging quality of his departed friend came through in the visage of the canine. Clearly, in the mind of Pythagoras "All living and organic beings (including the plant world) were regarded as interrelated" (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 34).

Given the idea that souls move around and never entirely disappear, and, moreover, that a mortal can never be sure which guise a departed soul may assume then of course one would attempt to be as careful as possible when dealing with the living world for fear of, say, squashing the soul of a friend along with the cockroach in the kitchen. More particularly, although not a strict Pythagorean, Robert Frost and his speakers usually adhere to such principles as seen in their respect for trees and birds.

Just as important as the constant nature of mortal souls, was their unchanging character. The fundamental essence of each individual soul remained unaltered time after time. The Pythagorean idea in that regard was that "it is motionless and unchangeable, everywhere similar to itself, comparable to a rounded sphere with equal extension on all sides from its centre" (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 50)

In keeping with this fundamental idea of transmigration of the soul it is not much of a stretch to think that the essences of all forms of matter also migrate and spread out evenly before returning back and striking the balance again. Change, fundamental change in the way we think of it today would, for the Pythagoreans constitute an imbalance because things could not be counted on to "return to sender." Moreover, Pythagoras felt

that “The only perception which is true is that which shows us in everything an unchanging being namely reason; the senses, on the other hand, which present us a manifold of things creation, destruction and change” (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 50)

Due to the paramount position balance held for Pythagoras and his strictest followers the continual flux registered by the senses would have proved deeply unsettling. The most troubling aspect of such flux comes from the uncertainty it creates because under such conditions the balance so critical to the Pythagorean way of life cannot be counted on or even realistically hoped for

To go along with the permanence of organic souls, the Pythagoreans also believed in the indestructability of mathematical concepts and numbers. They regarded them with special reverence while referring to them in their activities. Recall that, within the group “individual numbers were considered particularly sacred, especially the "Tetractys of the Decad”, by which they were accustomed to swear i.e., the representation of the number ten by (1+2+3+4) dots arranged as a pyramid” (Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* 36). Such a mystery, or symbol as they called it, would not be easily understood by outsiders. They most likely would not see the purity the Pythagoreans saw in number or the hierarchy leading up towards heaven.

In keeping with his Pythagorean mentality, the speaker feels compelled to make sure the road is not too crowded or too well-known. It would be unfair to label him or the Pythagoreans antisocial, as such, on the basis of this and similar behaviors. They simply kept to themselves and maintained a sort of closed system within their communities. I find it notable that the road the speaker did not choose "bent in the undergrowth."

Because of its curvature the speaker cannot see all the way along it. Not only does its relative congestion become much more difficult to ascertain for this reason, but it also becomes well-nigh impossible to determine what sort of destination awaits him and what sort of sensual temptations may attempt to ensnare him upon arrival. Also, keep in mind that even if the road did not curve it does go into the undergrowth where it becomes more difficult to find one's way. Therefore, the speaker:

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
(Frost *CPPP 103).*

Although we learn later on that the two roads are almost indistinguishable on a superficial level I have difficulty believing that Robert Frost who took such care in presenting meaning through metaphor would place this description of the road the speaker took in the poem simply to fill up space. There must be more to it than that, and, in fact, there is. The lack of evidence signifying a human presence provides only part of the reason the speaker chooses the road he does. The road the speaker takes also has "the better claim" because we are not told that it bends in any way. Such a lack of curvature presumably allows the speaker to see down it much further and much more clearly than the road he did not take. Granted, temptations of all kinds could lay on that road as well. However, the fact that the speaker has a more unobstructed view, and therefore, will not have to "move in darkness" makes that road the superior choice. Just as, in this case, a clear-cut Pythagorean maxim provides a preferable alternative to a traditional proverb. As previously noted, “Proverb” is the generally accepted term for the whole variety of wisdom which has the most bearing on the present investigation. This is true even when

the source material purports to focus on a specific sort of "proverb" like aphorisms or adages. I point this out because as it originally confused me, it may confuse the reader. In an effort to prevent such confusion, a more exacting look at Pythagorean aphorisms, as opposed to another kind, is in order. Jonathan Barnes in "Fifth Century Pythagoreanism" relates how "The philosophy of the Aphorists consists of unproven and unargued aphorisms about what should be done…" (163).

That is the point of so much Pythagoreans thought which Robert Frost adapted. The maxims themselves were not up for debate. The hearer had a responsibility to take them to heart and apply them in particular circumstances. Those who espouse the maxims "do not claim to say anything on their own behalf, nor do they think that they ought to say anything" (Barnes "Fifth Century Pythagoreanism" 163). This is very reminiscent of Robert Frost's belief about writing because someone else already beat him to it. If one attributes personally held thoughts and feelings to somebody else, deeper discussion of them and their significance becomes possible due to a certain level of distancing that becomes established. That is, of course, when discussion takes root at all. As it is, Iamblichus of Chalcis relates that Pythagoras' teachings took the form of "lectures without demonstrations or conferences or arguments, merely directing something to be done in a certain way, unquestioningly preserving them as so many divine dogmas, non-discussable…" ("The Life of Pythagoras" 77).

The important point here is the lack of debate involved. Couple that with a very limited dissemination, and you have a recipe for a doctrine that is going to remain largely unaltered as it moves from one person to the next. This is in stark contrast with other kinds of folk wisdom such as proverbs, fables, and even ballads all of which inevitably

become subject to innumerable misinterpretations and variations as they go around from place to place in a real life version of the telephone game. Little or no discussion leads to little or no variance. After all, if the things being taught are divine as the Pythagoreans felt strongly that they were who are mere mortals to debate with the gods, or alter anything they hear?

Clearly, strict, original, Pythagoreanism flowed exclusively from the name and person of Pythagoras. Before delving deeper into his doctrines, let us, briefly, for sake of comparison, explore the ideas of another sage, Aesop. Some of the main differences between the morals of Aesopic fables, and the Pythagorean symbols lay in the fact that the Aesopic morals were always intended to have as wide a circulation as possible. The purveyors of such morals made no substantial effort to place the wisdom their morals contained in the hands of only a select few. As such, the purveyors of Aesopic morals made them straightforwardly homespun enough to where almost anyone could understand them. Granted, it might take your average Athenian, or medieval countrymen, a few moments to discern what a particular storyteller meant by the application of a certain moral.

Nevertheless, the point of such a moral was the improvement of society at large not just of a few select individuals. Also, few can deny that such morals have come to be seen in the new millennium as little more than worn-out clichés. Despite such public perception, the original purpose of such morals is just as clear and valuable as was the case in antiquity. Robert Frost deeply valued the order such wisdom, particularly Pythagorean wisdom, could provide.

Pythagoreanism not only essentially sprang from one overflowing intellect, but also worked toward a single, unified moral superstructure. Every aspect of the philosophy pointed in a single direction without the contradictions often endemic in the more widespread wisdom of Aesop. For instance “one must not walk along the highways or dip one's hand in a font or wash in the bath-house (for in all these cases it is unclear whether one's fellows are pure)” (Barnes “Fifth Century Pythagoreanism 163). Here we see a major tenant of Pythagoreanism, namely, the idea of cleanliness, both physical and spiritual. One must avoid too much contact with other people who might unwittingly contaminate a believer through their ignorance. To guard against such corruption of the cherished principles, Iamblichus of Chalcis informs us that

> They took solitary morning walks to places which happened to be appropriately quiet, to temples or groves, or other suitable places. They thought it inadvisable to converse with any one until they had gained inner serenity, focusing their reasoning powers. (“The Life of Pythagoras” 81)

It is not, then, a stretch to conclude that the speaker of "The Road Not Taken," is a Pythagorean. He requires the solitude he encounters in the poem to gain his composure for the day. Pondering the conundrum of which road to choose helps him to focus his intellectual faculties. In the same way, when Pythagoras asks “what is the most powerful? Mental decision,” (Iamblichus of Chalcis “The Life of Pythagoras” 77) it is not an idle inquiry.

In a very real sense decision-making has to be the most powerful thing to a Pythagorean. Every individual Pythagorean had to actively decide to become a candidate for membership. From the long and grueling apprenticeship the prospective member had to continually make a conscious decision to keep going. Even once a person gained

admittance into the inner circle as an esoteric, he still had to actively decide to keep the symbols secret day by day. In the same way, once the speaker of "The Road Not Taken" is faced with his choice he cannot waver. He has to pick one road or the other and stick with it come what may. All the same, although the speaker has to commit himself to the Pythagorean lifestyle, Robert Frost does not. His own personal love-hate relationship with restrictions of any kind compels him to compel the speaker to keep his options open

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. (Frost *CPPP* 103).

Here, we are not just talking about a novice Pythagorean being wishy-washy about his commitment to the teachings of the master. Here we have the natural movements of life. Even as the speaker holds out the possibility of returning to the rejected option life precludes any such thing from actually happening. Frost makes his speaker understand that circumstances build upon each other moment by moment leading to decisions which themselves preclude options, create circumstances, and necessitate further decision-making. In other words, the speaker is not just making a literal road trip. He cannot simply memorize the location and go back and forth the way he came whenever it suits him. The moment he makes his choice and starts walking he sets in motion a series of events which very quickly begin to operate on their own independent momentum. Now, that momentum may someday lead him back to this exact same spot. The reader cannot deny that any more than can either the speaker or the poet. However, even if such does occur circumstances will have altered the scene to such an extent that the speaker will not really have returned to the same spot at all. What I mean is this. Supposing, for a moment, the speaker's great journey eventually does send him

meandering back to this exact point at which he can choose to take the other road at last. Perhaps the season will be different at that time making not only the road not taken, but also the road the speaker is about to take much less desirable. Even if that does not happen, the experiences the speaker will eventually gain by traveling the road he does will affect his desire to take the other road depending on if those experiences ended up having positive or negative consequences. As it is, the experiences he is about to have on the road he chooses may prove themselves so satisfying that he may forget about the road not taken even if he shows up at this particular place sometime in the future. In any such case, the speaker imagines he will eventually relate the results of the journey on which he now embarks either to someone else, or to himself in order to reminisce

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence: (Frost *CPPP* 103).

Sighing when relating a recollection can sometimes reveal regret about the experience in a "dear God, why did I ever do that?" kind of way. However, it need not always do so. As often as not, people sigh when recalling happy events. The sigh thus serves a sort of "those were the days," or "you should have seen it" function. Which will it be for the speaker of "The Road Not Taken?" I do not propose to know that answer. I do not think even Frost himself could foresee his speaker’s fate were the poem to continue on down the road for twice its current length. The speaker certainly does not have any concrete notions about what specifically awaits him. He does know that whatever dividends this choice pays him, they will have an impact on his life. That is why the speaker's choice is an important one. He will not be precisely the same at the end of his journey as he is at this very moment. It does not matter how long or short the

journey turns out to be. It really does not even matter how eventful or not the journey proves. The fact he's taking it at all means he will end up in a different "place." The speaker is justified in concluding:

I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Frost *CPPP* 103).

CHAPTER TWO

"CLOSED TO ALL BUT ME": PYTHAGOREANISM IN "DIRECTIVE" AND "MENDING WALL"

Metaphor, especially as deployed in parable, is paramount to everything Frost tries to do. Therefore, while he himself is not a Pythagorean, he is able, when he chooses, to exemplify Pythagorean principles both within the actions of characters that espouse them and the responses of those that don't. When it comes to a Frost poem, what you see is not entirely what you get. In 1927 Frost said, "I almost think a poem is most valuable for its ulterior meanings… I have developed an ulteriority complex." (Bacon "Frost and the Ancient Muses" 75).

Such a compulsion on Frost's part helps to explain the somewhat curious beginning of "Directive."

The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
Who only has at heart your getting lost,
May seem as if it should have been a quarry— (*CPPP* 341).

This particular journey does not involve Empedocles' continual cycle of union and secession. Neither does it center around Parmenides' desire to get at one single all-encompassing essence. In fact, the poem focuses on a central Pythagorean pillar, the act of getting out of one's comfort zone in order to discover some otherwise inaccessible knowledge. This particular road possesses few characteristics of a main highway. We could easily expect to see the equally Pythagorean speaker of "The Road Not Taken" coming around the bend at any moment. I called the speaker of "Directive" a Pythagorean

as opposed to an Empedoclean, or a Parmenidean because he only wants his charges to gain whatever knowledge they can along the way. When he tells them about the town and the houses that used to be there, he does not give any notable indication that they will be returning anytime soon. Empedocles' doctrine depends on the perpetual motion of the cycles. No motion, no cycles. No cycles, no presence for Empedocles. Likewise, although we see the way the area was in the past, placed right up against the way it is currently, the speaker makes a demarcation between the two phases of the town's existence. In the strictest sense of his philosophy, Parmenides wanted to do away with all such distinctions.

By his own admission Frost saw meanings in his poetry that he did not believe everyone would be able to find. Neither did he think it a good idea to make such meanings obvious enough where everyone could find them. Despite his self-avowed dualist philosophical leanings Frost nonetheless had a great deal of sympathy for the pre-Socratics. That sympathy undoubtedly ran deeper than he realized, as in his description of the "guide" in "Directive."

You must not mind a certain coolness from him
Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.
Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
Of being watched from forty cellar holes (*CPPP* 341).

Even if the speaker had no noticeable Pythagorean tendencies, the guide he recommends certainly does. The "coolness" he demonstrates bears a strong resemblance to the type of distancing Pythagoras maintained from his less mature disciples who had not yet entered his inner circle. The idea that this guide is said to "haunt" his lofty domain also bares comparison to the secretive aura surrounding the Pythagorean mysteries and

rituals. Hence, where Bacon detects "…wildness, harmony, and a mysterious journey on a hidden path to a spring at the very top of the mountain – a journey that suggests to most some kind of initiation (Frost and the Ancient Muses 80-81). Here again we have the idea of the struggle to reach the ideal, and of the failure of most people to do so. Enlightenment in Frost, be it spiritual or poetic, cannot be obtained easily and should not be taken lightly. Thus, the speaker insists

And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
Then make yourself at home. (*CPPP* 341-2).

Here we have an overtly Pythagorean suggestion on the part of the speaker. The sign will not only keep any curious onlookers away, but will allow those who have gained entrance truly to feel "at home." Behind the makeshift barrier, they who know the secrets will be able to relax secure in the knowledge that what they have struggled for is now theirs and theirs alone.

I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it, (Frost *CPPP* 342).

Although the speaker of "Directive" never claims to be Pythagoras himself, he does a passable imitation in many ways. The hiding of the cup in an inhospitable place mirrors Pythagoras's withholding of the best information from all but his most diligent disciples. Though the Holy Grail carries distinctly Christian symbolism, it functions well in a Pythagorean context because of the idea that only the chosen and purified could ever hope to possess it.

To find a single philosophically unified Frost is impossible. Knapp contends "…we cannot expect to find in his work a systematic account of the very complex issues raised by the pre-Socratic philosophers" ("The Greek World and the Mystery of Being" 174). Such was not Robert Frost's aim in his poetry. He merely did his best to give as thorough an account as he could of the pre-Socratic philosophy he believed still had merit when placed alongside his dualist convictions.

As Robert Frost makes clear in "The Constant Symbol" (1946) "And there are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority" (Frost *The Collected Prose* 147). That idea of the secret nature of poetic language gets to the core of the Pythagorean symbols. They were not meant to be readily understandable by just anyone. Their very opacity compels one to study them deeply.

To do that takes dedication. Concerning Frost's ideas, Poirier comments "The exercise of the will in poetry, the writing of a poem is analogous to any attempted exercise of will in whatever else one tries to do (*The Work of Knowing* 9). Exercising of the will, and just as often the containment of the will, in the Pythagorean sense, constitute equal parts of the essential qualities of poetry for Robert Frost. Certainly, one must display some degree of will in order to get a proper poem written. However, one must also be careful not to put into the poem extraneous detail that takes away from either the delight or the wisdom the reader is meant to gain. As it is, Osborne observes "while science asks how matter behaves, and tests its theories with observation, philosophy asks what matter is, or how observation can teach us anything

(Pre-Socratic Philosophy: a Very Short Introduction 97). For that reason, Frost is more a philosopher than scientist. In "Mending Wall," his speaker wants to know what good the wall will do, not how it will stand up to a storm. In "Directive," the speaker encouraging us to get lost is less concerned with the physical properties involved in the decay occurring in the described scene, than with what those who get lost can gain spiritually.

The journey serves to craft the lens though which the experiences it imparts will acquire context and become, in some way or other valuable. Lentricchia asserts that for Frost "… poems do not imitate a fully structured antecedent reality but rather inform a disordered world with value and meaning." ("Robert Frost and Modern Poetics" 51). Here we have the Pythagorean ideal of disciplining the mind and body in order to bring coherence to existence. To the Pythagoreans, if one spoke and ate with abandon, structure would break down and chaos would ensue. To Frost, if it were not for poetry the bulk of humanity would be deprived of beauty and learning because they would take no time to pursue them. As it was, "for Frost, metaphor was the heart of thought as well as poetry. Therefore, he insisted, one must discover for oneself the often subtle and obscure analogy" (Bacon "In-and Outdoor Schooling" 35). Such an analogy permeates Frost's seminal poem "Mending Wall."

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. (Frost *CPPP* 39).

Concerning the character of that vague "something," Hinrichsen notes how it "exerts a threatening force" ("A Defensive Eye" 47). That mysterious something threatens to bring both unity and chaos simultaneously. Neither of these forces appeals to the two neighbors, and they shortly set about repairing the wall so as to avoid the

problem altogether. They do not want unity. That is to say they established the wall and the property line it signifies for a reason. They have their own individual hopes, desires, and concerns that beyond a certain limit do not intersect. The chaos would come not so much from there being no boundary line between them, as from there being no demarcation line telling poachers where they had better not go.

The "something" is not only natural by way of the weather. It is also man-made in the sense that human nature tends to disdain separation from others. As such, Pythagoreanism becomes a wall unto itself. The distance Pythagoreans tried to keep between their community and the general population went a long way toward constructing such a wall. The rest of the psychological "wall" comes from the speaker's considerable befuddlement over the cause of the gaps in the physical wall, and over the purpose of the wall. Moreover, the speaker does not seem to catch on to the differences in perspective between himself and his neighbor. All the same, he does recognize the fundamental differences between himself and others around him.

The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding, (Frost *CPPP* 39).

The hunters do not concern themselves with the maintenance of any sort of boundaries, or with the thinking that enters into erecting them. The hunters lack not only the neighbor's philosophical convictions, but also lack the speaker's genuine curiosity about the situation. The behavior of the speaker and the neighbor is meaningless to them, except that it complicates their hunting expeditions. In that regard, they are actually the most primal characters in the poem. They only want to ferret out their quarry, thereby

completing their self-appointed "work." By contrast, the speaker's occupation is repairing the wall as best he can. To facilitate the repairs, he enlists his neighbor's help. He reports that

I let my neighbour know beyond the hill; (Frost *CPPP* 39).

The fact the speaker has to alert his neighbor indicates significant geographical distance between them. That distance also appears to run deeper still. While the fact that the neighbor's homestead is situated "beyond the hill" provides a vividly realistic detail, it simultaneously points to a pervasive isolation surrounding the characters, especially the neighbor because the speaker must travel some distance to reach him at his seemingly Pythagorean compound. That order of business having been concluded, they eventually come together to get on with the chore. Notice how:

And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go. (Frost *CPPP* 39).

V.Y. Kantak comments that "in this lonely and desolate world these isolate men and women lack communication with each other" ("Poetic Ambiguity in Frost"164). That is true enough. Yet such a situation is not always a bad thing. The Pythagoreans disliked having too much contact with other people before having a chance to gather their thoughts. It can therefore be said that the solitary men and women are in fact on one level keeping themselves much purer than would be possible in a crowded urban environment.

The two men apparently do not so much as exchange pleasantries as they set to work. We get no indication they share any news, or even simple gossip. While such singular focus is sometimes admirable, in this case, it hints at a disconnect between the

two men. Aesop has something to say about this situation as well. In “The Bear and the Travelers” we are advised that “Misfortune tests the sincerity of friendship” (Aesop *Aesop’s Fables* 48). In his recasting of this moral in "Mending Wall," Robert Frost shows us that in many situations it is not just trouble that tests the character of relationships, but the nature and severity of the trouble. The speaker and his neighbor are not picking up the pieces of a post-apocalyptic world in a desperate attempt to ensure their own survival. They are conducting a rather mundane annual chore that carries with it no significant risk of harm or injury. Granted, completing it holds meaning for them. It not only keeps the hunters away, but also allows the speaker and his neighbor to maintain their accustomed relationship. The comparatively minor misfortune of having to repair the wall sheds light on the workings of their "friendship" by showing them more or less just going through the motions. They display no appreciable concern for each other beyond simply repairing the wall. They have sufficient familiarity with the task, and, presumably, as much familiarity with each other as they desire. They feel nothing else needs to be said. Their only "dialogue" involves an exceedingly closed off "discussion" on the necessity of the wall itself. The respective outlooks of the two characters differ significantly enough that they are neighbors only in the loosest possible sense. No spirit of community binds them beyond the urge to maintain their personal space. Eventually, they reach a point where conditions change a bit, and the speaker starts getting antsy because:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. (Frost *CPPP* 39).

Here the speaker, in a sense, displays a purely practical attitude. As far as he can figure, the natural boundary created by the trees accomplishes part of the job for them. One can scarcely blame him for not wanting to do any more work than he has to. To try to convince his neighbor to go along with his labor saving notion, and also to lighten the mood a little, the speaker observes that his trees are no threat to their surroundings. Unfortunately for him, his neighbor pushes away his little ploy easily enough. As Pythagoras advised “suffer no swallows around your house” (159). According to tradition this maxim simply advises us to not associate too closely with those who talk too much, especially when it comes to things about which they have no real knowledge. This goes quite a long way in justifying why the neighbor in "Mending Wall" appears to have felt the need largely to keep silent in the presence of the speaker. Moreover, Pythagoras cautions “Do not easily shake hands with a man” (159). According to tradition this maxim refers directly to the idea that a person must not be too quick to try to form deep friendships with those who have not shown themselves worthy of such a relationship. The neighbor in "Mending Wall" holds back for this reason especially after the speaker asks for more explanation of a maxim the neighbor obviously believes he instinctively understands. Whether the neighbor has sufficient justification for holding such a belief may be somewhat debatable to the reader, but, it seems to me, the point is beyond debate to the neighbor himself. The neighbor believes the point settled because he pondered it for quite some time, quite possibly to the exclusion of other lines of inquiry he could follow. In much the same way, the original Pythagoreans engaged themselves in “the intensive and continuous puzzling out of the most difficult speculations, for the sake of

which wine, food and sleep would be minimized" (Iamblichus of Chalcis "The Life of Pythagoras" 103).

Such an idea contains within it a prime example of what differentiates Pythagoreanism from other permutations of the wisdom tradition. Other types of wisdom largely serve to help one attain worldly prosperity, for instance, "a penny saved is a penny earned," and the like. By contrast the Pythagoreans used their symbols or maxims entirely to assist one in letting go of all worldly desires. Hence, to a Pythagorean, mulling over almost impossible problems provided a much more valuable type of nourishment to the intellect than could money, or food to the body. Such belief becomes doubly apparent when put in the context of how little stock the Pythagoreans placed in the things of the mortal world. Thus, we find the rather dispassionate reaction from the speaker's Pythagorean neighbor.

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors." (Frost *CPPP* 39).

Here we have an interesting situation indeed. The neighbor says only the maxim. That leaves room for a couple of possible implications. On the one hand, he might "only" repeat the proverb because he doesn't know what else to say. In other words, it's sort of a blanket that he just tosses over this type of situation irrespective of what he actually believes or doesn't believe. On the other hand, it is far more likely that the neighbor "only says" what he does because the maxim contains more meaning than might be indicated at first glance. The neighbor, then, has more on his mind than does the speaker. He understands that the trees provide something of a barrier. However, the barrier they constitute does not do enough to maintain the separation he seeks. It is a bit like the

speaker in Tennyson's "Mariana" when "She only said my life is dreary" (9) thereby leaving the reader to fill in the rest of the significance based on context, and knowledge of back story when available.

Mieder picks up on that idea "The inherent ambiguity of the proverb is that its metaphor contains both the phenomenon of fencing someone or something in while at the same time fencing that person or thing out" ("Good Fences Make Good Neighbours": History and Significance of an Ambiguous Proverb 155). This is true enough, however, to the Pythagoreans that ambiguity was beside the point in comparison to the real issue of separating the worthy from the unworthy. We today find great ambiguity in the notion of whether it is more important to build a wall for the purpose of including persons in something, or excluding them from it. To the Pythagoreans, such pondering hardly warrants mentioning. To them, ritualistic boundaries serve the purpose of demarcation at least as effectively as do physical walls. In either case, those on the inside have access to something unavailable to those on the outside

To the neighbor, his recitation provides the final word on the subject. Pythagoreans often observed silence, and they strove to make their words count when they did speak. This is another instance demonstrating that a Pythagorean should give the best possible advice to instruct the receiver. As far as the neighbor is concerned, he told the speaker all he needed to know. As such, the situation requires no further explanation, or even any additional conversation. Pythagoras advises his followers to "Speak not in the face of the sun" (160)

Scholarly consensus takes this maxim to mean, roughly, do not let the outside world know your innermost thoughts. Here we find yet another piece of plausible

evidence as to why the neighbor in "Mending Wall," keeps himself so tightlipped around the speaker. He does not want to reveal too much of his mental process to a person he considers unable or unwilling to understand him. The idea is reminiscent of why John Donne has his speaker in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” observe that for him and his wife to display their affections openly “’Twere profanation of our joys to tell the laity our love” (71). As it turns out the speaker has other ideas which he begins to reveal within a telling snapshot of his character

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
" *Why* do they make good neighbours?
(Frost *CPPP* 39).

Regardless of the relative ages of the two characters in the poem, the speaker is far more of a free spirit. He enjoys "mischief," in this case in the form of trying to make his neighbor delve into what he believes and why he believes it. I find it interesting that the speaker feels compelled to try to place an idea in his neighbor’s head that has probably been there from time to time over the years. After all, if the speaker likes to break the monotony of the work with inquiries like this, and if the two of them have worked together to repair the wall year after year for some time, the case can be made that the speaker may have brought this point up to his neighbor any number of times before. Granted, no direct evidence points to any such fact, but given the curiosity, temperament, and tenacity of the speaker, such a scenario is not that far-fetched. Bacon notes “Frost’s sense of the violence and indifference of nature, inside and outside people, which no skill or devotion of man can totally subdue…” (“In-and Outdoor Schooling” 41).

Here again, we see Frost employing Pythagorean principles even if he himself was not strictly Pythagorean. In “Mending Wall,” the wall has to be rebuilt to keep familiar things in and unfamiliar things out. In “Stopping by Woods,” the journey has to be completed because the speaker will have failed to keep his word if he turns back and to break one's word shows a lack of discipline.

As we may think of the neighbor as a Pythagorean, likewise we should think of the speaker as very much an outsider to the philosophy. He does not know the answer that his neighbor apparently knows because he does not have the means by which to come to know it. He does not have the inside information his neighbor possesses and undoubtedly came to terms with some time previous. Hence, the speaker's curiosity remains as shown in his remark

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence. (Frost *CPPP* 39-40).

Poirier comments “he is a poet who finds his freedom of movement out of a sense of restraint: the movement to one extreme is provoked by the imminence of the other” (*The Work of Knowing* 138). Those two seemingly contradictory needs, to be held in check, and to be let loose create the essential tension in Mending Wall that in turn makes the poem meaningful. The speaker feels the inherent need to rebuild the wall even though part of him is not thrilled with doing so, and is not even sure why he is bothering. Mind you, he bothers because, as Henn points out “he cannot simply jettison the commonly accepted beliefs with which has come in contact… (Parmenides of Elea: a Verse Translation with Interpretive Essays and Commentary to the Text 8-9).

That is why in “Mending Wall” the speaker initiates and then actively participates in the repairing of a boundary he claims he doesn't fully understand. Despite his confusion on a conscious level over the exact reason why the wall is necessary, on another subtler level he does understand to more or less the same degree his neighbor does. That understanding does not come from the cost-benefit analysis he attempts to do while hashing out what the wall prevents from moving across their shared property line. It comes instead from instinct crafted year after year by seeing neighbors and friends doing the same thing, and admonishing him when he didn't join in. As it is, he can't help but mend the wall. He wouldn't know what else to do.

In other words, the speaker finds himself largely befuddled by the entire situation. As O’Brien observes “…the speaker's failure of understanding — exposed by dramatic irony — is the central issue in the poem (“Archetypal Encounter in ‘Mending Wall.’” 148). Indeed it is. Such misunderstanding designates him as neither a Pythagorean, nor a follower of Parmenides. His insistence on exploring the proverb despite the neighbor's reluctance to explicate it reveals that he does not understand that such answers must be found for oneself through diligent searching. Since the neighbor does not believe the speaker has done this, he cannot, in good conscience, give him the key to the Pythagorean mystery. Along those same lines, when the neighbor merely restates the maxim without giving any explanation, though he may seem hardheaded to us, he is in fact being true to the teachings of Parmenides. That is to say, however deeply or not he believes he understands the maxim he does not want to offer an opinion on it because any such opinion is probably inaccurate by virtue of its being an opinion. The speaker in his

conspicuous ignorance of either type of philosophy simply believes that the neighbor is being abstinent and unfriendly.

Yet, as the neighbor is a Pythagorean, “it is unlawful to give away things obtained with labors so great, and with assiduity so diligent to the first person you meet…” (75) Here we have a statement, in no uncertain terms, of why it is that Pythagorean precepts have to be guarded so jealously. It is not just that they are opaque. It is not just that they are thought of by their adherents as more than words. Is that they are key to an entire way of life to which one must buy in completely or not at all. Furthermore, to him that asks for counsel, give none but the best, for counsel is a sacrament. (78) This is likely a major reason why the neighbor in “Mending Wall” shows himself as exceedingly reluctant to explain his father's saying in any more detail. From the neighbor's point of view any further explanation is overkill and dilutes the wisdom provided in the saying.

The simple maintenance of tradition for the sake of maintaining such tradition provides insufficient motivation for the speaker to get on with the task. He wants to know the specifics behind it. He wants to know what good it will do, besides hopefully frustrating the hunters. Unfortunately, he has no luck getting that type of information from his neighbor. For that reason, he assesses his tightlipped neighbor thusly:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
(Frost *CPPP* 40).

To the speaker, his neighbor violates Pythagoras’ warning “Do not sleep at noon” (Iamblichus “Pythagorean Symbols or Maxims” 159). When this maxim is defined as "do not continue in darkness" it has a couple of interesting implications for Mending Wall. From the neighbor's point of view it refers to the idea of not wasting too much time

dealing with the uninitiated. By contrast, from the speaker's point of view, it means the opposite; don't continue trying to understand an idea that apparently esoteric. Also, just as importantly, do not try to take a person who follows such a maxim as a guide for a civilized life

Just as there are two sides to every story, there are multiple interpretations to most impactful pieces of poetry. Here we have an ideal example. The significance of the line depends entirely upon one’s point of view. What I mean is this. If we look at the line through the lens of the speaker, we get a portrait of a bullheaded neighbor essentially sleepwalking his way through life without stopping to examine why he does any of what he does. Such a portrayal leaves the neighbor as a pretty pathetic little figure possessing only scant control of his own destiny, and, worse yet, desiring no more. While under this way of thinking, his memorized maxim undoubtedly provides the neighbor with a "stay against confusion" as he copes with a changing world partially symbolized by the hunters continually knocking down established boundaries, it also serves as an impediment to further growth because he clings to it and does not let any new or contradictory information get in its way. This is how the situation stands if we take the speaker's word for things. However, should we look at the scene through the eyes of his neighbor, we gain different insights. The speaker, after all, is requesting information the neighbor presumably already knows. Who is to say what the neighbor had to do to get it?

As I believe the neighbor is a Pythagorean I contend that he will not give out the information the speaker desires because the speaker has not proven himself worthy of possessing it. After all, as far as the neighbor is concerned, the speaker is just playing around, not to mention the fact the speaker tells us as much himself. To a Pythagorean,

who thought it barbarous to reveal secrets of the cult to those who were not at least making an effort to amend their conduct so as to become worthy of possessing the secret knowledge, the speakers speculations border on the ridiculous. To the neighbor it is the speaker who continues on in ignorance because he thinks he can figure out by himself from the outside things that only those of the inner circle ever came to know. As to which perspective Robert Frost himself adheres more faithfully, I leave it to others to decide. One single coherent philosophy is not necessarily to be found in the works of Robert Frost. He simply adapted everything he thought he could use to his immediate purposes. Thus, it is the speaker more so than Frost himself who chides his neighbor for his stalwart words regarding the necessity of the wall. O'Brien continues "In addition, the speaker engages in his own informal kind of psychoanalysis when he interprets the relationship between landscape and his neighbor's psyche…" ("Archetypal Encounter in 'Mending Wall.'" 148).

Remember that the whole idea that the neighbor "walks in darkness" comes from the speaker. The speaker, in turn, does not fully understand either the neighbor or his father's maxim. The neighbor, I would argue, understands the speaker thoroughly. He realizes the speaker wants an answer, and so he gives him one. We can hardly blame him if the speaker finds the answer insufficient. Such is an interesting point, one means by which it can be true is if we think not of the speaker of the poem but of Robert Frost. If we consider that Frost is not trying to get away from proverbial wisdom, but to get away from leaving it unexamined, then the idea makes a good deal of sense. Then the question becomes how successful is he at doing this? Quite successful in fact, because he is able to leave the speaker and the neighbor each feeling as if they have won their point. Neither

one has to feel disappointed. Meanwhile, Frost shows us that certain types of proverbial wisdom speak for themselves based upon how they are employed.

He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours." (Frost *CPPP* 40).

Hinrichsen claims that any power the saying contains is “undone” by its being repeated, making it appear “both earnest *and* absurd” (“A Defensive Eye” 52). I propose that the weight of earnestness trumps any perceived absurdity here. The repetition actually strengthens the impact of the maxim by simultaneously emphasizing it and demonstrating it. The line would only be absurd if it were not repeated as then it would become nothing beyond an offhanded throwaway.

The speaker certainly wants to examine the saying in greater detail. By extension Frost does as well because he created the speaker in the first place. However, to definitively say that the speaker is right and the neighbor is wrong is far too simplistic. The speaker does not possess some kind of enlightenment in which the neighbor is deficient. Remember that the notion about the neighbor moving in darkness comes from the speaker and not from any sort of omniscient narrator which we can equate directly with Frost himself. Ultimately, I see Frost as playing both sides of the issue. He wants both characters to be right because he wants it both ways. Frost's overarching statement in "Mending Wall" about maxims of this kind is that the character of the individuals who either apply or do not apply them to their lives determines their legacy.

CHAPTER THREE

LOVELY, DARK AND DEEP: PARMENIDES AND EMPEDOCLES IN FROST

Tension drives Robert Frost's poetry. Tension pulls at each sentence revealing a constant tug-of-war between the desire for structure and the drive for innovation. It also shows itself in the simultaneous need to express knowledge fully while nonetheless keeping it out of the hands of those deemed unable or unfit to understand. Hinrichsen points out that although, at first glance, Frost's work appears placid "threatening, disorderly anxieties" lurk just over the horizon ("A Defensive Eye" 45). To Frost, wrestling with such issues leads to exciting new knowledge. As he observed "for myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom ("The Figure a Poem Makes" 133).

Surprise was diligence's reward for writing poetry that blended cautious hopefulness and stoic resignation into a churning artistic batter that evolved. Reading worked basically the same way. In both cases, patience and thoughtfulness gradually lead those willing to practice them onward into understanding. Pythagoras did not emphasize "delight" or pleasure as a central pillar of his program of self-improvement. Neither did two of his more notable disciples, Parmenides and Empedocles. Still, I cannot help thinking that the continual striving it took to proceed slowly from silent listener to esoteric insider must have entailed substantial satisfaction to those who could manage it.

Parmenides and Empedocles each deal with the Pythagorean notion of moving from ignorance to knowledge by putting aside tenants of his thought they saw as

secondary, and instead focusing on what they felt were the central pillars of his philosophy. They also construct markedly dissimilar frameworks for dealing with the possibility of changes accompanying insights acquired along the way. Frost borrowed from both of them, and in some poems, like “After Apple-Picking” and “The Wood-Pile,” combined their ideas to create finished works.

The speaker of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is an apprentice Parmenidean, moving from the mysterious delight of the silent woodlands toward the wisdom he hopes to gain at his journey’s end. Frost writes, “Whose woods these are I think I know.” *(CPPP 207).* Regarding such conjecturing Parmenides emphasizes that “neither may you know that which is not (or is not to be accomplished) nor may you declare it (Henn *Parmenides of Elea* 46). Parmenides has to try to stick to absolutes. To do anything else breeds opinion, and opinion for him cannot help but be wrong. The speculative nature of "I think I know" and the speculations that follow in the poem disqualify the speaker from being an experienced protégé of Parmenides unerringly traveling the path of truth. However, unlike the speaker in "The Wood-Pile" he appears to have some direct knowledge of that about which he muses. Therefore, he is not just on the path of opinion either.

A certain aura of otherworldliness surrounds the mysterious “owner” of the countryside. A similar ethereal quality characterized Pythagoras’ relationship with those of his students who had not yet proven themselves worthy of joining his inner circle and becoming esoterics. Likewise, Parmenides cannot fully contact the Goddess who inspired his understanding of truth versus opinion. More information comes to light as the poem continues “He will not see me stopping here/To watch his woods fill up with snow.”

Since the owner's house is said to be "in the village," not on this particular piece of property, it is only natural for the speaker to conclude he will go unobserved at present. Moreover, such a scene also has the hallmarks of a Pythagorean lecture in which beginning candidates had to listen in silence while the master spoke to them while concealed by a curtain. Some accounts say he could see them, some say he could not. Regardless, they could not see him. They merely had to observe and listen as the speaker does at this point in the poem. The speaker takes on more a Parmenidean character in these lines because he is now taking his marching orders not from a concealed sage, but from an entirely absent advisor. The idea of something filling up with snow can at times imply stasis, or even stagnation and lifelessness. However, snow also beautifies and transforms landscapes. It can do the same to attitudes as it does in Frost's "Dust of Snow" when he writes that having the snow fall on him "Has given my heart/A change of mood/And saved some part/Of a day I had rued" *(CPPP 205)*. The speaker of "Stopping by Woods" experiences the same sorts of feelings as he and his horse travel onward. Mind you, the horse does not get the same benefit from the experience. The speaker tells us that:

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake. *(CPPP* 207).

We could hardly expect the horse to comprehend his rider's plan at this point. Doubtless even Black Beauty, Flicka, or Mister Ed would share the horse's confusion, at not having been "clued in" to the ultimate goal of the journey. On another level, we can think of the horse as a depiction of an even more novice Parmenidean than is the speaker.

The horse does not even understand the need for contemplation of truth. Parmenides' striving to see objectively into the heart of people and ideas is equally lost on the horse. The jangling of the bells belies the Pythagorean preference for silence, which Parmenides embraced. The landscape itself takes on a tense flavor in the revelation of how "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake" *(CPPP* 207).

The sweeping sound of the wind corresponds with the speaker's determination to continue his journey which adds immensely to the believability and charm of the scene. However, the true importance of these lines lies somewhere else. The continual movement of the wind and snow, even at an "easy" clip becomes valuable for the implication that the speaker and his horse cannot engage in contemplation forever. The journey has to be completed. Moreover, Henn asserts that "what Parmenides seeks to discover in the poem is decidedly not what it is for an individual thing to be the kind of thing it is, but rather what it is for a thing to be without qualification," (*Parmenides of Elea* 37-38). This comes from his unshakable belief in Pythagoras' doctrine of the transmigration on souls. For him physical form could not in any way alter the fundamental qualities of the soul in question.

Empedocles allows some wiggle room for change of a certain variety. As the soul passes from body to body, it goes through the cycle of birth and death each time, and presumably gains some new knowledge along the way. As he says "I will tell you another thing. There is coming to be of not a single one of all mortal things, nor is there any end of deadly death, but only mixture and separation," (McKirahan "Empedocles" 67). The eternal churning up of everything mortal ensures that nothing is lost because everything continually combines and divides again and again; everything created with each "turn of

the wheel" will contain within it large portions of everything else. Complete homogeneity will not always exist because each combination and delineation will contain within it a slightly different concoction of the original ingredients. The speaker perceives the woods in the unalterable fashion of Parmenides.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
(Frost *CPPP* 207).

The loveliness, darkness, and depth of the woods through which the speaker and the horse must pass symbolize the beauty, opaqueness, and vastness of the philosophy the speaker has begun to embrace. He will complete his journey and keep his word. He has to, for the sake of what he is trying to accomplish. It does not matter what else he must do. He has come too far. He has too much invested already:

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (Frost *CPPP* 207).

The repetition of the final line serves to emphasize the length to which the speaker must still go to complete his task. He cannot rest yet because he still owes a great deal to those to whom he made the promises and to himself. “The Road Not Taken” also contains significant tension.

In contrast to my assessment in chapter 1, that Frost portrays his speaker as a novice but not clueless Pythagorean I would now like to put forth the other pre-Socratic probability I see in the poem. By flipping the lens just slightly, "the Road Not Taken" becomes not just a classically Pythagorean template but a Parmenidean exercise in distinguishing the way of truth from the way of opinion

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood (Frost *CPPP* 103).

In this instance, the different roads mirror the way of truth and the way of opinion. The speaker laments his inability to travel both roads at once because he knows that, according to Parmenides, a person cannot travel the way of truth and the way of opinion simultaneously. Facts and speculation are mutually exclusive to Parmenides. Any traveler has to choose one or the other. The speaker does not take the decision lightly. He deliberates a considerable length of time while sizing up his options. Parmenides believed that such a choice really was no choice at all because the way of truth was the only way a rational thinking person could take. That goes some distance in explaining the speaker's temporary quandary over which road to take. In effect, he evaluates his own capacity for rational thought before choosing his path. In order to do so he had to account for everything thoroughly, and he does so: "And looked down one as far as I could/To where it bent in the undergrowth";

When he peers down the first road, he thoroughly examines just how far opinion and speculation can legitimately take a person. This is especially true when no other assenting or dissenting information is present. He is determining his precise willingness to go by pure speculation. At this moment his faith in such a course of action shrivels. One of the potential paths bends, veering off in some direction he cannot see clearly while disappearing into thick foliage. As far as Parmenides is concerned, the message is unmistakable; if you choose the path of opinion you leave yourself open to the unpredictable winds of change. That very change then pushes the seeker further and further from the truth. Finally, after due deliberation, the speaker chooses the path he believes is best.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
(Frost *CPPP* 103).

Admittedly, little physical difference exists between the two roads. This is the likely genesis of the idea of the speaker's choice being a random one. I put forth one rebuttal to that idea in chapter 1, and I will offer another in this chapter. For now, let me say, that the "better claim" possessed by the path the speaker took comes not only from the Pythagorean idea of it not being a public road, but also in this case from the fact it "wanted wear." In other words, the road the speaker took was not all tramped down and worn out in the way outdated, overstated, or insufficiently supported opinions inevitably become. The road the speaker chooses is "grassy" indicating a vibrancy opinion often lacks. Even with all that in its favor, the road the speaker chooses is not quite so enticing as to drive all thought of taking the other road from his mind:

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. (Frost *CPPP* 103).

Barnes makes an interesting observation about this. "To say that a man's path turns backward is presumably to say that he contradicts himself" ("Parmenides and the Object of Inquiry"168). In "The Road Not Taken," the speaker is doubtful he will ever return to the same spot because -- Parmenides would say -- one cannot turn away from the way of truth without losing knowledge of the truth in a morass of false opinion. Of course, the fact that the speaker holds out the possibility of returning shows that some part of him is still uncertain that he is on the path of truth to begin with.

Our Parmenidean speaker still lacks sufficient experience in distinguishing truth from opinion. He believes he may someday return to this spot. He does have enough sense of what it means to follow Parmenides to know that opinion will not get him anywhere explaining why he "doubted" a return engagement on this particular stretch of road. Even factoring in his inexperience, at heart our speaker, like his creator, wants to know and live in the truth. Through his writings, Robert Frost holds in his hand at least the possibility of creating such an accessible truth for his speaker. Whether he decides to do so is another matter. The speaker can have things much more clear-cut than can Frost. Moreover, after encountering whatever truth awaits him, it is doubtful the speaker would have much use for returning to the path of opinion anyway. There is no going back. He can only move forward into a rapidly unfolding future that will reveal the outcome of this choice and lessons from it. At some juncture, he will feel a compulsion to pass the experience on to someone else, “I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence:” (Frost *CPPP* 103).

In this permutation, relating a story "with a sigh" does not indicate emotions like happiness or sadness. Instead, the gesture speaks more to a sense of completion. The speaker, in recalling his choice and its consequences, will have the satisfaction of having learned how to tell the way of truth from the way of opinion regardless of whether learning the lesson proved easy or pleasant. Even if the experience turns out to be difficult, its ramifications have to be passed along. The speaker must inform others of what happened to him so they can discern which path to take. This time, when the speaker says “I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference,” he speaks in even broader terms than would a traditional Pythagorean. It is not just that the

speaker has been altered, but that his listener may be made better able to tell truth from opinion. That is the difference. Taking the road of truth has allowed the speaker not only to see things for himself as they really are but also to assist someone else in doing the same. That assistance will allow the listener to make wiser decisions, and to instruct others in the future.

It is interesting that his poems carry a degree of emotional hypertension. It is usually only at the end that the tension is worked out to any degree at all. In these situations, I hear the echo of William Wordsworth in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* when he refers to the idea that the best poetry is built out of "strong emotions recollected in tranquility" (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Second Edition*, 573). In connecting Wordsworth with Frost I do not claim there is an abundance of tranquility in Frost's poetry. Indeed there most certainly is not. However, when the poem reaches or nears the end, there is usually enough of a resolution to provide tranquility relative to the early stages of the poem.

In "An Old Man's Winters Night," after the old man has stumbled around a while, by virtue of the fact he came down for some reason he can no longer recall, he goes back to bed. After that he continues his night relatively peacefully. In that moment the poem has tranquility even though the old man does not. That is when the realization comes about the old man, "a light he was to no one but himself" *(Frost CPPP 106).* Normally we would say one is a light to the world, in other words giving forth knowledge or inspiration or some other useful commodity to those around him. In this case, though, the old man can only illuminate himself to the slight degree that he may, once he lies back down, remember what on earth he got out of bed for in the first place. It is what happens

earlier that is important in the traditional sense; in this instance by "traditional sense" I mean the sense of William Wordsworth. When the old man is stumbling around in the basement he is anything but in tranquility. Remember that "All out of doors stared darkly in at him" *(Frost CPPP 105).* Here is a truly Wordsworthian landscape where humans stand powerless in the face of nature's indifference. The old man is clearly not in charge of this situation. He cannot even remember what he wanted to take charge of down in the cellar. The same idea of increased tension from feeling overwhelmed surfaces again in "After Apple-Picking."

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
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. (Frost *CPPP* 70).

Here Frost provides a glimpse of Empedocles' cosmic cycles in motion. The apples being harvested are at the peak of ripeness. They can only degrade from this point forward. They have not yet begun their decline. The speaker cannot absorb or handle it all, as evidenced by the straggler apples still in the trees. The ritual of the harvest plays itself out year after year whether or not the speaker wants anything to do with it. His weariness at the relentlessness of the cycle soon shows itself:

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired. (Frost *CPPP* 70).

Aesopic wisdom influences the poem as well. The idea of "be careful what you wish for" comes through loud and clear in this instance. The speaker initially hoped for a

bounty just this size or larger. Yet, now, when he actually has to deal with it displeasure overtakes him because, on some level, he didn't imagine just the quantity of work it would take to reap his orchards. As with most Aesopic wisdom, we see nothing more than ordinary human nature at work in such an idea. Human beings tend to want what they want when they want it until they don't want it anymore and begin wanting something else. When people are bored they wish for something to do. When they find a task to alleviate the boredom, they inevitably want the task to come to an end. Such is the case in work perceived to be tedious, which at the same time must be precise, such as that presented here. As Paton points out "this 'great harvest' is not part of an unchanging paradise" ("The Fact is the Sweetest Dream that Labor Knows" 50).

The bounty the speaker is reaping distills the essence of Empedocles' cycle, and transports it down to the household level. All of the apples were a unified whole as they ripened on the trees just before harvesting began. As the work kicked into high gear, differentiation proceeded. Properly collected apples went into one of several separate barrels. Nearly all of the apples headed off to market. Many people will undoubtedly purchase them and put them to various uses. The apples the speaker keeps will also begin to take different roads as some are eaten as is, some get made into baked goods, and the bulk go into storage as a hedge against winter scarcity. As Frost has his speaker tell us, he must take great care with the apples and:

Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth. (Frost *CPPP* 70).

Pythagoras and his disciples apply here more than Aesop. Overall, this portion of the poem reveals a speaker seeking to combine portions of all the "Pythagorean" doctrines thus far discussed. For instance, Pythagoras gave his disciples instructions that they should not pick up or eat anything which dropped from the table. Part of the reason likely arises from a desire to prevent gluttony. Also, Pythagoras strove to engender in his disciples extreme precision and care in whatever task they engaged themselves. Phillips notices the poem contains significant “restlessness of an ambition that spurs us toward greater achievement, only to have us find, sometimes, that there is no ultimate satisfaction, no resting” (“On Restlessness” 135).

That idea of not being able to stop, of never attaining full pleasure despite a significant accomplishment causes the speaker of "After Apple-Picking" to grouse about the apples he could not harvest, or that may have become contaminated. A speaker of almost any other temperament would either not notice such comparatively miniscule losses, or would write them off as a necessary tenant of reaping what he has sown. Frost's speaker cannot do this because, much like Parmenides something in him simply cannot abide variations among the freshly harvested apples.

Empedocles enters the picture when we think about the different fates awaiting the individual apples, depending on whether they are collected in the conventional manner or allowed to drop. Those collected properly will have one fate. They will be eaten as fresh apples just as the speaker intended for his entire crop. The rest will have an altered destiny becoming a different product entirely. According to Empedocles, this implies strife because a new thing will emerge from what had previously been a united whole. To say that these leftover apples are seemingly worthless at first flies in the face

of Empedocles, but since such a lack of worth is only a momentary perception, such is not the case. Also, Parmenides would take issue with the cider apples having no worth because to him apples are apples. Regardless of their form they retain whatever essential characteristics distinguish an Apple from some other fruit. Paton observes that the "Fallen apples go not to a netherworld but the cider-press ("The Fact is the Sweetest Dream that Labor Knows" 50).

Indeed, the apples do not just dry up and blow away. They merely change their physical form, and corresponding function. If the apples have "no worth" after hitting the ground, it is only because they no longer suit the purpose which the speaker originally had intended for them. Empedocles' cycle shows its handiwork because the rechristened cider apples now find themselves differentiated from the other apples, thereby breaking the stranglehold love had previously held over the speaker's orchard.

The results of human effort infiltrate "The Wood-Pile" as well. The beliefs of Parmenides and Empedocles both come through in the poem. "Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day/I paused and said, "I will turn back from here" (Frost *CPPP* 100).

Strong echoes of Parmenides' way of truth versus way of opinion become visible here. The speaker is walking along a path upon which he can continue or not. Although we encounter such a scenario in "the Road Not Taken," but the situation has changed. We are not presented with two largely indistinguishable roads here. In fact, there is no second road at all. The speaker has merely to decide whether to stay the course or not. The choice, perhaps, becomes a bit more complicated when we remember that the speaker is not walking on a springtime lane. Instead, he makes his way over an initially barren landscape on a presumably bitterly cold winter day. As it can be said that the way of truth

is not always the most pleasant to travel, inevitably our apprentice Parmenidean decides to turn back. Why would he do this? A probable explanation lies in the speculative, even imaginative, nature of opinion. Truth, in its most stringent sense, leaves no room for negotiation. In such case, a fact is a fact, and a falsehood is a falsehood, permanently and without the possibility of alteration. Now, someone like the speaker of this poem likely found such a cut and dry dichotomy difficult to swallow. Therefore, he at first decides to return to the more free-flowing avenue of opinion

No, I will go on farther---and we shall see."
(Frost *CPPP* 100).

In one line the speaker reverses his previous stance. He holds to the path of truth because it is the path that will allow him to proceed onward and observe the way things really operate. Opinion, he concludes, can only take him so far. Opinion clings myopically to what one has thought about before. Simply stating an opinion about a topic does not in and of itself provide the person who put forth the opinion with any new insight. That is, unless, someone else hears the opinion and responds to it one way or the other. As Frost gives us no indication of anybody else in the speaker's immediate vicinity, any dialogue becomes impossible. "So as to say for certain I was here/Or somewhere else: I was just far from home" (Frost *CPPP* 100).

The speaker, by this point, becomes uncertain exactly where he is along the path of truth, or even of whether he has strayed from it. He has become merely a Pilgrim looking for a direction. In fact it is debatable how much good a direction by itself would do him because of his apparent lack of a destination. At that moment, the path of truth, and the concept of truth itself, has no concrete meaning for the speaker because he has no

effective means by which to judge it or even mark it out. Thereby, the speaker's natural curiosity which put him on this journey to begin with gets easily out-of-control when he encounters new stimuli he did not expect. Whether the bird is a harbinger of the path of truth or the path of opinion, at this point, the speaker cannot tell:

A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was (Frost *CPPP* 100).

Frost's now wayward adventurer now needs some means of separating truth from opinion. He also needs to find his way home. Lacking any better resources, he tries to gain the required insight from a bird flying nearby. The fact the bird gave no song not only adds an intriguing sensory detail, but, moreover, points to the idea that in isolated situations dialogue becomes meaningless. The bird obviously sees no point in bothering with the speaker since he does his best to avoid him. Yet, the speaker follows on overwhelmed by curiosity and sensory confusion of the type against which Parmenides warned repeatedly. However, while on his wild bird chase the speaker does encounter a fascinating display contained in the physical presence and condition of the woodpile:

And then there was a pile of wood for which
I forgot him and let his little fear
Carry him off the way I might have gone,
Without so much as wishing him good-night.
He went behind it to make his last stand. (Frost *CPPP* 101).

The wood in itself is a physical object. Therefore, according to Parmenides, it can be thought about and is actually real. So is the bird. However, the speaker quickly decides on some level that he has gained all he can from the little bird. While the literal cause of the bird's fear comes from being startled, from the perspective of Parmenides the bird

likely fears the speaker's descent into mere opinion. Therefore, he departs rather than get caught up in it

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
(Frost *CPPP* 101).

Here Frost encapsulates what Parmenides would love most. He showcases pure description with as little sensory detail or speculative commentary as possible. Although trying to determine the relative age of the wood could perhaps be considered opinion, it is more likely the case that the speaker is placing it within the context of all the other wood he has encountered lately in order to look at it purely as wood

The wood was grey and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
(Frost *CPPP* 101).

Hinrichsen notes that “tension between order and disorder is keenly felt in "The Wood-Pile," (“A Defensive Eye” 48). On the one hand, order, in the conventional human sense, has completely disintegrated. The wood has been left unattended, and has largely rotted away. Vines of some sort have ensnared the wood. This makes it all the more difficult to access even if the wood is still salvageable, which is doubtful to say the least. On the other hand, another order has taken over, or, to be more accurate reestablished itself. That is the order of nature, which preceded all human notions of order. This newly reasserted natural order is in many ways preferable to its human equivalent. The logs are slowly composting, not polluting the air as part of a conflagration. They will not be cluttering up a landfill, but will instead provide fertilizer for the surrounding forest.

The order which emerges from this scene is definitely not of the kind the absentee woodcutter intended. Still, it is not nearly as disheartening as that which Percy Shelley's traveler witnesses in "Ozymandius." After all, in "The Wood-Pile" no towering monument is being swallowed up despite efforts to the contrary. No king's regal legacy teeters on the brink of oblivion. The destruction wrought by the natural world in the two poems stands in direct proportion to humanity's apparent presence in each of the environments evoked. Shelley depicts his desert gradually erasing one of the greatest manifestations of the might and grandeur of Pharoahnic Egypt because only such a display can make evident the scope of such an empire's impact. The "destruction" Frost depicts is scarcely noticeable at all because the human element hardly makes a dent in the scene.

From the point of view of Parmenides we definitely start out with truth in the form of something that can be seen and conceptualized from evidence. The condition of the bark, or how the logs are being held together at this point is not up for debate. The speaker simply reports what he sees in this instance. This is all fact and truth of which Parmenides would approve. However, the speaker leaves behind the path of truth when he begins to speculate on the character of the woodcutter.

> These latter about to fall. 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 (Frost *CPPP* 101).

To Parmenides, such speculation is unhelpful because it cannot be proven. Only actual general truth is of any use to Parmenides. Therefore, regardless of how much Robert

Frost himself believed in the doctrine of Parmenides, he makes his speaker an eager but inexperienced disciple.

Empedocles, by contrast, would see in such detail not just impartial truth, but his cosmic cycle of rotating birth and death. The wood has lost one form of binding but has gained another. As the weather slowly wears away the wood's exterior it does not leave a black hole but instead gives the wood a new face to show to the world, and thereby the beginnings of a new existence. Frost's speaker feels much more at home with the cyclical doctrine of Empedocles. For instance, when the speaker discerns a new use for the discarded logs that have been left behind "to warm the frozen swamp as best it could/With the slow smokeless burning of decay"

As was the case with the new binding material the rotting wood might easily be seen as total irredeemable destruction. However, the speaker regards the decomposition as a simple change in function. The logs that once constituted a tree are now slowly becoming compost. They are burning not only in the sense that decomposition creates a significant amount of heat, but also in the sense that they still have a job to do. They had originally been meant only to warm a human house so as to make life in its interior more comfortable and possible. Their new condition mirrors that old destiny; it is simply turned on its head. The logs will eventually make their surroundings more lively not by providing illumination and warmth, but by providing nutrients to support new vegetation. Empedocles' principle of cyclical destruction and rehabilitation is showcased just as profoundly in "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Frost writes:

Nature's first green is gold, (Frost *CPPP* 206).

This line exemplifies of the initial stage of the cosmic cycle of Empedocles. At this moment, everything is ideal, ruled by love, and devoid of tension of any kind. Possibilities are endless. They do not stay that way for long. In the cosmos envisioned by Empedocles no possibility of enduring stasis exists. Change cannot be held at bay. Thus, why this perfection is “Her hardest hue to hold” Quinn comments that the fact that “man, unlike the dawn or the budding tree, can realize his transience is a sign of mastery” (“Symbolic Landscape in Frost's ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay’” 622). While such dominion over nature by the speaker is undeniable, it is also temporary. The speaker can no more fend off the changing of the seasons with his observations than can a homeowner keep out floodwaters with a broom. The cosmic cycle espoused by Empedocles cannot be halted, only accepted.

The idea that this natural moment is so ideal and homogeneous dictates that it cannot last. The cycles of Empedocles make clear that too much of any single condition leads to destruction. Also, even while organisms avoid immediate destruction, they continually differentiate from each other. That is why “Her early leaf's a flower;/But only so an hour” *(Frost CPPP 206).* All living things are fleeting in the end. As Empedocles states “the coming together of all things produces one birth and destruction, and the other is nurtured and flies apart when they grow apart again” (McKirahan “Empedocles 63). In such an explanation, Empedocles finds a way to reconcile his fundamental Pythagorean belief in the essential permanence of everything in the mortal world, with the empirical evidence of change he saw all around him.

Robert Frost saw the same cyclical phenomenon in the changing of the seasons. In "Nothing Gold Can Stay," Frost shows us that very same cycle. Although "leaf subsides

to leaf" there is nothing in the text that precludes the leaves from eventually returning. Frost shows us not ruin in such images, but rotation, back and forth, round and round forever. The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth proves inexorable for all life. Maturity inevitably replaces immaturity. No state of being is permanent. The speaker comprehends this. The knowledge does not trouble him because he knows that at some point the cycle will turn around again. He points out the idea in his observation, "So dawn goes down to day" *(Frost CPPP 206).*

For Frost, as for Empedocles, once the pinnacle has been attained decline must follow quickly. Regarding such decay, Quinn offers the suggestion that "Perhaps the progress of life to death, of beauty to loss of beauty, are primary rather than as stressed here, the replacement of one value by another ("Symbolic Landscape in Frost's 'Nothing Gold Can Stay'"623). I strongly disagree. The "death" implied in the changing character of the leaves is not cataclysmic because the leaves will eventually return in all their glory. No "beauty" actually gets lost in that the gradually altering hues of the leaves as the seasons advance each contain their own individual variety of beauty.

Frost's depiction of such variety should cause no alarm. One day follows after the other. Trees produce new leaves each spring. Nature does not destroy its faculties, it only realigns them periodically. Empedocles drives home the point by asserting "Fools. For their thoughts are not far-reaching, who expect that there comes to be what previously was not or that anything perishes and is completely destroyed" (McKirahan "Empedocles" 66).

The important point in the statement is that to Empedocles all change is superficial. Though Empedocles is no chemist in the modern sense, his theory does

adhere to the laws of conservation of mass and matter, in that it asserts that what is there at the beginning will be there at the end. This outlook alleviates tensions running through Robert Frost's poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BRIDEGROOM WISHED HE KNEW: SPIRITUAL UNCERTAINTY AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE IN FROST

Ambivalence, toward the Bible and Christianity, courses through the lines of Robert Frost's poetry. Marion Montgomery sees it coming from "acceptance of mystery" on his part ("Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers" 346). However, Frost never passively accepted any mysteries he encountered. Instead, he probed them to their core. Kathryn Gibbs Harris' idea that Frost fostered "a holistic attitude toward science and religion" ("Robert Frost's Early Education in Science" 23) works well except that Frost could not bring himself to create one contiguous whole out of two systems of thought so at odds with each other. As I see it, he struggles at every turn to reconcile deeply embedded skepticism with an unquenchable desire to believe in something that supersedes the human realm. Many of the characters he creates harbor serious doubts about religion. They crystallize the apprehension with which doubting Thomas wrestled. Even less cynical characters do not stand as firmly in their faith as we might expect. Frost channels his own spiritual misgivings into his poems. He simultaneously reinterprets wisdom from the Psalms, Proverbs, and the Gospels. Frost challenges his readers to reexamine what it takes to believe, and what believing really means.

It is only natural that Robert Frost would perceive spirituality as a great river carrying faith and unbelief along side by side. He could neither dismiss nor embrace Christianity. To dismiss it would deprive him of a potential source of the structure he valued so highly. Yet, to actively adhere to any formal religious doctrine would just as

quickly deny him the intellectual freedom of movement on which his poetry thrived. However, his innate desire to balance order with innovation kept him from disparaging any creed too much. “Respect for traditional Christianity was part of Frost’s religion” (Stanlis “Religion” 303). Indeed, how could it not be? His mother had raised him with a strong knowledge of Christian history and doctrine. Of course, neither she nor he fully embraced all of it, but nonetheless he had it in his storehouse of memory. Traditional Christianity, though, does not necessarily have only one meaning. Frost desired a personal connection with God. He yearned for it to such an extent that he looked back not only to the Old Testament, where God communed directly with his most faithful believers, but also to the Gospels where Jesus dealt directly with his disciples on a daily basis. “His lone-striking spirit worked stubbornly against whatever grain was presented…” (Parini *Robert Frost: A Life* 110) Any sort of dogmatic belief system presented a wall which had to be circumvented by stoic irony. Consider, for instance, when Frost writes “Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee/And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me” (Frost *CPPP* 440).

However, Frost wholeheartedly “subscribed the Puritan belief that we sinned in Adam's fall, and that salvation did indeed depend entirely on divine grace” (Fleissner *Frost's Road Taken* 161). Moreover, because of the stain of the fall, those seeking such grace did not initially deserve it. Grace and salvation needed to be earned through as close an imitation of Jesus's sacrifice as an individual can manage. Even that might not prove enough if God chose to ignore or reject whatever efforts that sacrifice contained. In either case, a person could never be quite sure how any sacrifice would impact God's ultimate verdict on human conduct. The issue of justification worried Robert Frost. C.S.

Lewis postulates that "if there is any thought at which a Christian trembles it is the thought of God's ‘judgment’" (*Reflections on the Psalms* 9). Frost does not squirm at the thought of judgment. Rather he puzzles over the nature of that judgment. Hence, why in “Forgive O Lord” Frost passes off any shortcomings as pranks done all in fun. He saw God as dispensing idiosyncratic justice on the spot through Jesus. Salvation, then, came less through trusting in Jesus then through emulating the code of conduct God demonstrated through him. As the apostle Paul asserted “in the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17 NIV).

Frost absolutely believed that every person willing to look for it could obtain divine perfection. Hard work and self-sacrifice led the way. Under that way of thinking Christ, had no more of a direct line to heaven than any other blessed biblical figure. He could only demonstrate what people had to do to achieve salvation for themselves. He could not provide it to them since God had not equipped him with the means. In “Out, Out” the unnamed speaker gives no indication that just waiting and doing nothing will save the boy’s life. The doctor is called without delay. Had the boy lived, the doctor would have amputated his hand in order to save him. The reader is not presented with faith healing, here. As much as anything the poem issues a challenge to God to send forth his power to help the boy. The poem makes the challenge because Frost wants to see Almighty God be Almighty by restoring the boy and allowing him to continue down the road leading to salvation. Frost creates a scenario where God should be able to save the boy if he chooses.

Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart--- (Frost *CPPP* 131).

The mortally injured boy was doing hard labor without any apparent confusion over what he should do or timidity about doing it. The fact we are specifically told that his is an adult occupation gives the reader a meat and potatoes example of what it means to work and suffer for a chance at redemption. His sacrifice embodies childlike faith, that God, through Christ will preserve and redeem him. The boy is, undoubtedly, the last character to abandon hope that he will survive.

What does it take to earn a show of God's power, whether positive or negative? This is what Robert Frost seeks to understand. He wants to discover if "the essence of the sacrifice was not really that men gave bulls and goats to God, but that by their so doing God gave Himself to men" (Lewis *Reflections on the Psalms* 93) The question, then, became what sort of offering did modern man, particularly an artist, have to make to receive the same closeness to God? Frost spent most of his poetic energy seeking the answer. We are told that Frost often thought about "Christ dying for 'the whole problem' (the paradox of justice and mercy), not-by his crucifixion-resolving or alleviating it (Hall "An Old Testament Christian"321). The crucifixion, therefore, served as the greatest possible example of what it would take to atone for earthly sins. The ordeal of Christ did not wash away all sin, or, if it did, human beings could not know it until after death. God certainly would not tell them because he only occasionally peeked in on their affairs, most often to punish wrongdoing severely. In "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" Frost sums up his point when he concludes "the strong are saying nothing until they see" (Frost *CPPP* 272). They do not speak either because they are already dead, or because they feel they do not have enough valid information to state an opinion. They want to see the salvation. They want to see the nail holes, and the consequent strength it took to endure

receiving them. They will “see” when their ultimate fate befalls them in terms of where and how they spend eternity.

In "Love and a Question" the stranger comes to the bridegroom looking for refuge. However, unlike the God of the Psalms, the bridegroom does not know if he should give shelter to those who request it. Why has stranger come? We do not know. That is Frost's point, the reason should not matter. We should simply offer such shelter regardless of circumstances in order to make a pleasing sacrifice to God. Timmerman observes that “‘Love and a Question’ expressly confronts the individual will in conflict with social demands” (114). No means exist in the poem by which to resolve the conflict easily either. On the surface the bridegroom finds himself in a nearly impossible situation. If he ignores his bride he may cause unnecessary tension in his marriage and with his newly minted in-laws. By the same token, if he ignores the stranger he will have to face the guilt of having turned away someone in need thereby having refused to offer up the sacrifice Frost saw as supremely necessary to earning salvation. Yet again, perhaps ignoring the stranger and attending to his bride constitutes the more proper sacrifice since with the stranger may come any number of undo temptations. I do not mean to sound wishy-washy on this issue. I only wish to underscore that I am no more certain of the correct resolution to this situation than is the bridegroom. That is the heart of the matter. Whichever choice to bridegroom makes, he will have to make a sacrifice which will carry with it unforeseen consequences. Making one choice or the other purely out of fear of consequences will not redeem him in any meaningful spiritual sense. In that regard, it is less important which choice he makes then that he does not waver once he makes his choice. He must commit to something wherever it leads him. I see strong parallels to

"The Road Not Taken" in this poem. However, in "Love and a Question" the bridegroom has much less assurance his choice will lead to a positive outcome. The stranger most likely will not be at his doorstep in the morning, so it is not as if he can tell the stranger what he learned by choosing to be with his wife. Also, his new bride certainly will be in no mood to hear about even positive escapades with the stranger. Thus, unlike the pre-Socratic travelers encountered in "The Road Not Taken" we ultimately find no apprentice philosopher left to influence others, but instead a young man on a purely internal journey to discover what he truly believes, and how best to present it for public consumption.

A Stranger came to the door at eve,
And he spoke the bridegroom fair. (Frost *CPPP* 17).

As I understand things, most strangers to medieval villages would come to an inn or tavern rather than going into town at first. That, by itself, would cause the bridegroom trepidation. Even discounting such an unusual move, the idea that a stranger would come to a honeymoon suite adds to the awkwardness of the situation. Frost wants the situation to feel as awkward as possible so that the reader along with the bridegroom has to ponder deeply what the proper etiquette for the situation actually is.

Frost struggled mightily over the idea of faith versus works. The struggle manifested itself particularly when it came to how much faith a person should have in Jesus Christ. We are told "he ranked Christ among all God's *suffering servants*" (Dorothy Judd Hall “An Old Testament Christian” 321). Christ, therefore, ended up no more worthy of God’s special love then, say, Abraham, John the Baptist, or even Moses. Remember that although God showed each of them favor, to one extent or another, he did not claim any of them as his son or as the indisputable means to eternal life. Frost struggled with the idea that God would mark out Christ in that way, or anyone else for

that matter. Pagels points out that “Thomas’s gospel encourages the hearer not so much to believe in Jesus, as John requires, as to seek to know God through one’s own, divinely given capacity, since all are created in the image of God” (Pagels *Beyond Belief The Secret Gospel of Thomas* 34).

He asked with the eyes more than the lips
For a shelter for the night,
And he turned and looked at the road afar
Without a window light. (Frost *CPPP* 17).

In a secular sense the stranger is pleading. He is not at the bridegroom's door by choice. He does not have anywhere else to go. He mirrors the exhausted speaker of Psalm 28.

1To you I call, O Lord my Rock; do not
turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain
silent, I will be like those who have gone
down to the pit. (Psalm 28:1 NIV)

I find it interesting that he looks at the road but does not leave to walk down it. A Pythagorean would do so. Therefore, Pythagorean exclusivity is not meant to apply here. It does not concern the stranger whether the bridegroom is pure according to the guidelines of the Pythagorean mysteries. It only concerns him that he might be able to get a room for the night. Spiritually speaking, remember that saying 49 in the gospel of Thomas says that only individuals can find their way to paradise. (Valantasis *The Gospel of Thomas* 125). Now, if we take the bridegroom to be Jesus Christ, then, the stranger must be someone who has worked hard to achieve salvation through faith and action Likewise, as Fison asserts “wisdom is something much more than just learning how to behave properly” (*Understanding the Old Testament* 171).

Here we see the difference between the various permutations of Pythagoreanism, and the religion of the Old Testament. While adherence to the Pythagorean mysteries might gain you a particular knowledge about how to help people better conduct their affairs and thereby become more connected to divinity, wisdom, in the Old Testament context, not only refers to doing what is right, but doing so because it is right, and having a clear understanding of why it is right in the first place. While some Pythagorean mysteries included explanations of why such and such was the case, most left themselves open to a good deal of interpretation. Not so with Old Testament wisdom, especially in the Psalms. They tell precisely what the author considers right and wrong in no uncertain terms. If any interpretation of the Psalms remains necessary, it only goes so far as to determine how to act righteously. The idea that the bridegroom would hesitate for even a moment in providing shelter, or worse yet be uncertain whether he should and could provide that shelter takes to task most of the divine power attributed to Jesus by traditional Christian faith. In either case, the bride starts feeling neglected

Her face rose-red with the glowing coal
And the thought of the heart's desire. (Frost *CPPP* 17).

Again, if we take the bride to be just one bride then we have a fresh faced girl just coming into bloom and feeling passion for the first time. No one could blame her for a little impatience considering what she believes her wedding night has in store for her. If we think of the bride, as the traditional bride of Christ, the church, we get a slightly different view. The red face then begins to look more like anger and impatience. We see then very much a repeat of the attitude of the faithful son in the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” with the idea that those who "keep the faith" through various rituals often believe themselves superior to new converts. The desire of the bride’s heart then becomes to

exclude any interlopers from the established status quo. The bridegroom also has no quarrel with the conventional state of affairs.

The bridegroom thought it little to give
A dole of bread, a purse, (Frost *CPPP* 18).

Our secular bridegroom has no problem helping others when it suits him. This is especially true when he only has to give of his resources, not of his time or energy. Granted, giving food or money to help those in need is laudable. However, in Frost's universe even that kind of generosity falls short of the level needed to have a realistic chance at salvation because the person doing the giving did not have to struggle to do it. The giver just handed over the needed resources and let somebody else take it from there.

But whether or not a man was asked
To mar the love of two
By harboring woe in the bridal house,
The bridegroom wished he knew. (Frost *CPPP* 18).

True salvation comes not just from paying to feed the needy but from helping to distribute the food, or even better helping to grow and harvest it first. Ultimately, the bridegroom does not do this because he does not know if he needs to. The secular bridegroom fails in the mission of self-sacrifice. He is left wondering what to do because he is not willing enough to sacrifice his own happiness for someone else's sake. Philip Larkin forces his speaker in "Mr. Bleaney" to think about the nature of man's obligation to others and himself. The speaker wonders if Mr. Bleaney ever realized:

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know. (*Collected Poems* 81)

Larkin knows, just as Frost knows. He used the earlier sections of the poem to work the matter out for himself. Neither Larkin nor Frost offers a definitive answer to their

question. Still, by leaving it as a question he forces each individual reader to confront the issues the question raises.

Taken the other way, Jesus, then, as bridegroom, comes across as rather inert. He does not know the full extent of what to do with his power, or at least it appears that way on the surface. As it turns out, Frost knows the answer, and he allows his bridegroom to know it. The very fact that the bridegroom puzzles over whether he has an obligation to others proves that he does. If he did not he would not hesitate to send a stranger away, and if he fully understood his obligation beyond just knowing it was an obligation, he would not hesitate to bring the stranger in from the cold. The bridegroom cannot make the sacrifice. He can only talk about it.

Frost admires Jesus Christ for doing instead of merely talking. “Christ didnt write any Gospel. Maybe he couldnt write. And that's why he made his mark with a cross” (The Notebooks of Robert Frost page 313: notebook 22 section 34r). He did not write because God intended Christ to leave people with one active example of how to earn salvation through self-sacrifice. God did not intend Christ to give everyone all the knowledge necessary to reach heaven. They would have to seek out the rest for themselves. Such is the case in “The Death of the Hired Man”.

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back." (Frost *CPPP* 40).

In this scene we have the beginning of a recasting of “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”. Mary, the kinder of the two is trying to figure out how to tell Warren about the return of their own prodigal son, Silas. Although the lamp flame is not covered in this

case, still, I am reminded of the idea of that which is hidden eventually coming to light. Mary is deeply worried about how Warren will receive Silas back into their home. As she goes out into the dark to greet Warren she brings the light of knowledge with her, in that she knows something he, as yet, does not. She goes along quietly both so she will not disturb Silas in his sleep, and also so she can head off any explosion of anger Warren might have displayed upon seeing Silas unexpectedly. She prepares Warren for what he will see. By meeting him in the doorway, she alerts him to the transition he will have to make in order to deal with the situation. In other words what awaits him inside of his home is not what Warren expected. The way he anticipated reacting to coming home will no longer suffice. In his re-envisioning of the parable, Frost gives us a much more close-up view of the emotions that go into forgiveness and reconciliation. He also reminds us that hard feelings do not disappear instantaneously no matter what literature may say. I find it interesting that in the poem, we never hear Silas give his side of the story. All we hear about him are the impressions of others. In effect, Silas is coincidental to the process. Frost's real concern in the poem is how people react to an interruption of their expected routine. The character coming home could have any name, and the idea would still hold, as would Mary's nervous, but kindly, reaction:

"Be kind," she said.
She took the market things will from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps. (Frost *CPPP* 40).

She urges him to be kind to Silas, and to overlook his past transgressions for the sake of future harmony. When she relieves Warren of what he is carrying she symbolically lifts the burden of tension from whatever work or shopping he had previously done. As Mary

gently makes him sit beside her, she tries to establish equality between them so that Warren will listen to her. Additionally, by having Warren sit down and listen hopefully he will calm down enough to treat Silas with compassion instead of contempt. His reaction reveals a lack of understanding of Mary's motives:

"When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said. (Frost *CPPP* 40).

Whether Warren was actually kind to Silas in the past we do not know, though Mary does not deny it. It is intriguing that Warren refers to Silas as 'the fellow'. Perhaps I am being too legalistic here, but, to me, simply leaving a job at an inconvenient time for your employer does not qualify as serious enough for criminal charges. That, however, is the point. We are not speaking in the conventional legal sense here. As far as Warren is concerned abandoning one's post is a serious crime because it adversely affects everyone else. New Testament style Christianity would demand forgiveness for Silas as long as he tried to make amends. However, Warren believes more in Old Testament justice where a person can only atone for past sins rather than expunging them. I do agree that Warren acts very much like the disappointed elder son. I have trouble, though, seeing Mary in the role of the kindly father. It is not that she lacks compassion. She merely comes across as powerless in the face of the situation in a way the father in the parable did not. That is part of what Frost is getting it. He is not heartless, and neither is the justice he admires in the Old Testament. The very strength and strictness of Old Testament style justice allows a person like Silas to earn kindness if he will strive actively to mend his ways and not expect at any time that forgiveness is assured.

What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.

'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.' (Frost *CPPP* 40).

Warren believes, as does Frost, that once you begin a task you must go through the struggle and self-sacrifice of completing the task regardless of unpleasant circumstances. Silas's unreliability bothers Warren the most. In his thinking that he ought, or rather should be easily able to earn subsistence money, it sounds as if Silas has entitlement issues. Of course, we must keep in mind we are only hearing one side of the story. We do not really know what sort of a taskmaster Warren has been in the past. As it is, the fact that Silas seems willing to work and not to beg stands to his credit, and possibly Warren's too.

I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. (Frost *CPPP* 41).

Here we have the root of Warren's current disdain for Silas. It is not just that he leaves. He does not spend his "off-season" working towards self-improvement as Warren and Saying 58 in the Gospel of Thomas would prescribe. In Saying 58 Jesus says: "Blessed is the person who has struggled. He has found life." (Valantasis *The Gospel of Thomas* 135) Again, we have the prospect of hard labor and sacrifice as key to redemption. Sitting back and passively waiting on God to swoop down and hand over the keys to everlasting life does no good. God is lackadaisical in his oversight of human affairs, and haphazard in doling out blessings. The only way to gain anything from him is to search for it constantly, and work at self-improvement along the way.

He who gathers crops in summer is a
wise son, but he who sleeps during
harvest is a disgraceful son. (Proverbs 10:5 NIV)

Warren obviously considers Silas such a son saying that he does what he does just to earn enough "so he won't have to beg." At his best though, Silas does what Warren and Mary ask him to do. He helps them harvest their crops, and, by all indications, does a fine job of it. As far as Silas "sleeping" during the harvest, when he is around, he does his work diligently. The trouble is Warren and Mary cannot always rely on him which leads to Warren's unhappiness when Silas returns at the beginning of the poem. He finally declares “In winter he comes back to us. I'm done." (Frost *CPPP* 41).

We are not shown any depiction of Silas wasting his time or not doing his work. However, the fact that he skips out on the hardest part of the work does not do him any credit. We must assume this scenario has played itself out several times previous to the events presented in the poem. More than likely every other time, Silas found at least a reasonably warm welcome in keeping with the Proverb:

Better a dry crust with peace and
quiet than a house full of feasting, with
strife. (Proverbs 17:1 NIV)

This time, however, makes one time too many as far as Warren is concerned. Here we have another fascinating reversal of the New Testament parable. In the biblical story the prodigal son comes back once, and only once. When he does and the more faithful son complains about the kindness lavished upon him, their father admonishes him and that is the end of it. The story is self-contained. We receive no indication of how the three characters interact with each other at any point in the future. Here, Frost gives us the impression that Silas's leaving and returning strikes Warren and Mary as all-too-familiar. For all we know, the first time he came back Silas received a greeting not unlike that in the biblical parable. However, each time the welcome has to be repeated it becomes less

joyous because Mary and Warren gradually begin to wonder how many times they will have to welcome Silas back. That, in turn, calls into question the Christian ideal that someone who repents of a sin must be forgiven every time simply because he repents. Warren, and by extension Frost, has no problem with forgiveness but it must be earned. Mind you, a little later on in the poem, Mary raises the possibility that Silas has returned in order to do just that.

Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect. (Frost *CPPP* 41-2).

When she tells Warren not to get in the way of Silas's attempt to save face and make good his previous missteps, Mary, in effect, tells Warren to practice what he preaches. In other words, if he thinks Silas should earn back the respect that he wants, then Warren should give him a chance to do it. Indeed, Warren, if he really feels that way, he should be glad to see Silas genuinely trying to do that consistently diligent work he should have done all along. Mary proves ineffective at doing this.

I sympathise. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late. (Frost *CPPP* 42).

Once again we have an intriguing twist on the biblical story. In the parable, the father says that the more faithful son should not be upset because the newly returned prodigal son will not receive any more of a reward then he will himself. The faithful son might not like that, but at least he does not argue. Mary does not have any such argument to make to Warren about Silas. Silas and Warren are not father and son, but rather employer and employee. Mary still does her best to make Warren think about Silas's redeeming qualities, particularly the meticulous way he goes about his work when he bothers to do it. Even Warren must begrudgingly acknowledge that argument.

"I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well. (Frost *CPPP* 43).

Silas, therefore, is not lazy in the sense of being unwilling to do anything. He just has a limited skill set, and a seemingly severe reluctance to go beyond it. He takes care in the bundling that others do not. The quality of the actual work he does suits Warren fairly well. The inconsistency Silas exhibits in working for a little while, then disappearing, then working again, and, so on and on exasperates Warren. The model of self-sacrifice as Frost understood Jesus presenting it to us does not allow for any sort of "stop and go driving" in terms of commitment to the task at hand. Warren believes that Silas should either stick to his work on their farm unceasingly, or just not bother with it. Mary, on the other hand, tries to see things from Silas's point of view.

Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different." (Frost *CPPP* 43).

On one hand, we could take Silas's interest in others as a commendable thing exemplifying the idea of putting the needs of the many ahead of the needs of one. Unfortunately, Mary could also mean that Silas cares more about people and places other than Warren's farm. Taking that a step further Silas thinks far too much about arguments, and ends up neglecting his harvest duties. He has no real accomplishments on which to reminisce because the only thing he can really do proficiently is transitory, easily forgettable, and something any other farmhand could be taught to duplicate. By the same token his single skill leaves him only a single pathway into the future, a future which ends up looking a lot like the past and present since he has no ability to change it.

"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time." (Frost *CPPP* 43).

These lines redirect the end of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son". In the biblical story, the son's return home is the harbinger of a new life for him. It also marks the end of a period of strife within his family. Admittedly, Silas's death does put an end to the anxiety Warren felt about his return home. Yet, no joy springs out of this homecoming. As it is with so many of Frost's best poems we do not get to see the aftermath of the main event presented. Once Silas dies the scene inevitably changes because every individual present added something to it by their individual efforts or lack thereof.

Death, and unsuccessful efforts to avert it, also provides the climax of "Out, Out". The speaker reveals the boy's acquiescence to death comes when "the doctor put him in the dark of ether" (Frost *CPPP* 131).

The blackness of unconciseness is here matched by the uncertainty of what might, or might not await the boy in the next world. The doctor placed the boy in that state by putting him "in the dark," that is, beyond the range of all known means of earthly communication. Still, the doctor is as much in the dark as is the boy because he is clueless about how to save the boy. Moreover, he is no more certain of his patient's ultimate fate than is anyone else in the room. If God had saved the boy, he thereby would have reinforced the significance of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross by giving the onlookers a testament of his power as undeniable as the nail holes.

24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when
Jesus came.
25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I
see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand
into his side, I will not believe it." (John 20:24-25 NIV)

Thomas wants to believe, but is skeptical because the evidence presented to him does not mesh with his view of God and the world. He needs the confirmation of his own senses and heart. The nail holes will also confirm that Jesus not only strove to make his sacrifice, but actually did it. They would prove beyond all doubt that Jesus had the power to do what he said he would. Moreover, seeing them will prove to Thomas that Jesus's death on the cross will have the effect of washing away sin that Jesus said it would. Every time I read these verses, I cannot help but picture Robert Frost in the place of doubting Thomas. He already believes, on some level. He simply wants confirmation that what he has believed in is profound enough and powerful enough to justify his believing in it.

Frost also wanted to believe in something beyond scientific rationality, but never found enough evidence about the true nature of God to bring himself to believe. He makes clear in his notebooks that "a rereading confirms me in the belief that the New Testament is the poor man's book and that Christ is the poor man's God" (Robert Frost *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* page 302: notebook 22 section 19r) Frost considers the New Testament inferior to the Old because it was written by common folk, like fishermen, not Moses or the great prophets. It is also second rate because of a lack of direct contact with the divine other than Jesus. God shows his power much more in the Old Testament. He does so by destroying cities, sending plagues, and granting victory in battle. In the New Testament we are only told what God and his kingdom of heaven will be like. Even the resurrection of Jesus comes across as more the work of God then of Jesus himself.

Christ, then, is a cut-rate divinity in one sense because he redeems sinners and tax collectors instead of punishing them. He is also inferior to God because in claiming he is

the way, the truth, and the light, he relieves people of the burden of seeking after their own personal salvation. Christ also does not appear to make any distinction between the deserving and the undeserving thereby denigrating the whole idea that salvation should belong only to those who have proven themselves worthy of it. Yet, at one point, in his journals, Frost concludes "We have our part in it through him alone" (The Notebooks of Robert Frost page 302: notebook 22 section 19r). Here we encounter an interesting point. After all, God created the balance between justice and mercy within which human beings have to live. In one sense Frost is complaining that it is all God's fault for getting us into this mess in the first place. However, he mostly refers to the idea that it is only through God that we have any chance of successfully navigating the contradiction between justice and mercy in order to achieve salvation. In other words, while God put us in a situation between these two extremes he also gives us the means of overcoming them by continual self-sacrifice. Christ can only bring the problem to a head. He can only show us what to do. He possesses no greater measure of God's divine power than any other believer. Therefore, he can only directly affect his own salvation, no one else's.

As a consequence, Christ resembles the wheel in “The Grindstone” in that he is not self-sufficient. Someone must turn the wheel in order to sharpen anything.

Having a wheel and four legs of its own
Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone
To get it anywhere that I can see. (Frost *CPPP* 176).

God must delegate a portion of his power in order for faith in Jesus to accomplish anything. The boy’s death in “Out, Out” gives God the chance to do what he claims he can do effortlessly. The onlookers hope to see the boy rescued from oblivion. I said they *hope* for it because they do not appear to *expect* it. They exude a weary “what will

happen, will happen" attitude exemplified by their collective sigh of relief that death passed them up for the moment. The tightlipped ones in "The Strong are Saying Nothing" undoubtedly also desire one particular outcome, but they withhold any speculation owing to lack of evidence. In both poems, death and unpredictable divine prerogative will bring the sought after answers to light. It is only then that they will discover if in fact:

He makes me lie down in green
pastures, he leads me beside quiet
waters, he restores my soul. (Psalm 23:2-3 NIV)

God may in fact have restored the boy's soul just before the climax of "Out, Out". However, he did not bolster the faith of the onlookers, as ultimately "no one believed" that the boy would survive his injury. He did not have quiet peace around him before he died, but rather a crowd of frightened onlookers. Add to that his own fear over the loss of his hand and the trouble that would cause if he lived, and a scenario emerges which casts doubt on the notion that:

Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me; your rod and your
staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4 NIV)

Neither the boy nor anyone around him receives any comfort from the rod and the staff. Instead everyone is left panicked and bewildered until the boy dies. After that, the onlookers immediately pick up where they left off as if nothing had happened.

An underlying lack of community undoubtedly pushed Frost down the road of his individualistic understanding of God. Theology like that in Saying 8 of the gospel of Thomas would have appealed to him in such case.

And he says: (1) "The person is like a sensible fisherman, who cast his net into the sea and drew it from the sea filled with little fish. (2) Among them the sensible fisherman

found a large, fine fish. (3) He threw all the little fish back into the sea, (and) he chose the large fish effortlessly. (4) Whoever has ears to hear should hear" (Valantasis *The Gospel of Thomas* 47).

Here we see the idea of the elect, those singled out for God's special love. All others are cast away. Now, the saying does not preclude the possibility that, at least, some of the small fish may eventually grow big and be chosen as well. The point is a hierarchy exists. Each individual fits into it at some level. Some rise to the top while others do not. Whether an individual ascends is ultimately out of their hands because God has the final word. The question is, to what extent, if at all, do humans have the ability to influence the structure of the hierarchy so as to increase their odds of being chosen? How could anyone know if his actions might be having an unintended negative effect on his chances for redemption? How could someone learn if he had unknowingly sabotaged himself by trying too hard like the man sharpening the axe in "The Grindstone"?

The thing that made me more and more afraid
Was that we'd ground it sharp and hadn't known,
And now were only wasting precious blade. (Frost *CPPP* 178).

Someone like Martin Luther who believed in justification by faith alone would argue human efforts have no appreciable effect. John Calvin, preeminent forefather of much of the theology Frost encountered in New England, went even further claiming that any good works humans try to do are inherently degraded by the lingering aftershock of the biblical fall from grace. Frost certainly believed that mankind carried inherited sin from Adam's disobedience; notwithstanding, he felt that God was enough of an absentee landlord so as not to see everything humans did, whether good or bad. However, he also knew about the idea that faith without works is dead. As he believed salvation came to humanity one at a time not en masse, it came naturally to him that an individual had to

earn even a chance at reclamation by hard physical labor and sacrifice. If an individual could sacrifice enough he could get and keep God's attention and, hopefully, become worthy of God's grace. The speaker of Psalm 28 has a direct line to God the likes of which Robert Frost can only envy when he asks:

2Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you
for help, as I lift up my hands toward
your Most Holy Place. (Psalm 28:2 NIV)

Frost seeks the purest sacrifice possible. It only comes through facing all challenges and never backing down. The rebel must not conform unless he personally agrees with the interpretation offered up by the group. Even then, he must make certain that he agrees because the potential outcome of his agreeing makes sense to him. He must not agree just for the sake of fitting in. Words have power, but inconsistent actions neutralize it. I can easily imagine Robert Frost in the place of doubting Thomas asking to see for himself the physical proof of the resurrection. He would not do this to mock Jesus Christ. Instead, as it was for Thomas, it would provide the most unassailable proof of the validity of everything Jesus and the other disciples claimed. As the speaker concludes in "The Grindstone"

What if it wasn't all it should be? I'd
Be satisfied if he'd be satisfied. (Frost *CPPP* 178)

CHAPTER FIVE

IF DESIGN GOVERN: ROBERT FROST, ORIGINAL SIN AND PREDESTINATION

The means by which Robert Frost coped with his uncertainty about spiritual matters continues to spark scholarly interest. Anna K. Juhnke asserts that Frost "plays" with religion. ("Religion in Robert Frost's Poetry" 36). While he has a sense of humor, he takes spirituality too seriously to frolic without examining what he finds. Thomas McClanahan views Frost as a "philosophical poet" ("Frost's Theodicy" 112). Perhaps, but, again, he did not want to simply speculate. Frost wanted to understand God as he would a close friend or colleague.

Although Robert Frost struggled to drive them away, the Puritan doctrines of Original Sin and Predestination clung to his mind. He possessed a natural inclination to accept both. Still, each grated on his fundamental belief that personal conduct pushes individuals toward their unknowable destinies by denying any agency to human efforts at self-sacrifice. Several key poems illuminate the effects of such haphazard authority both on those who wield it, and on those under its influence.

Initially, Puritan leaders saw their faith as anything other than constrictive. Concerning the future prospects of New World Puritans, Cotton Mather hopes that "He might there, To them first, and then By them, give a Specimen of many Good Things which He would have His Churches elsewhere aspire and arise unto" (*Magnalia Christi Americana* 260) For Frost, overblown ritual and ceremony cut off any hope of such an awakening. The very establishment of a puritanical orthodoxy where an individual had to

believe in principles like predestination regardless of personal feelings truncated any church's effectiveness in promoting God's justice. Frost's entrenched belief in the necessity for personal sacrifice in order to help increase the chances of earning salvation stood at odds with traditional ideas of predestination. All the same, Frost felt that almost no one actually possessed the strength of character to sacrifice enough in order to impress Almighty God to a sufficient degree to earn salvation if he was not already predestined to it.

The power to bless or to curse resides entirely with the Almighty. Calvin asserts "the endowments with which God had adorned them, they all ascribe to gratuitous love" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 569) "Gratuitous love" takes on an interesting tone in the poems of Robert Frost. No individual can earn this type of love through outward striving. The person or divinity giving such extra love either considers the individual in question worthy of surplus affection, or not. The person on the receiving end of such love never has a truly clear idea of why God chose him as opposed to anyone else. In "Stars" someone walking along the snowy ground cannot rest assured that the stars will continue to light his path for even another minute. If they do not, such a traveler would almost certainly find himself left exposed out in the open with no means of safely returning home through the blackness.

Such an arrangement makes God more praiseworthy. Individuals demonstrate sincerest thankfulness for blessings they believe they do not deserve. A traveler trekking across the landscape of "Stars" can do nothing to earn brighter starlight, or a clearer night by which to make use of it. Any such traveler can only content himself with the fact there is at least some light available where there might not be otherwise. All the same, the lack

of a discernible pattern in the distribution of such love causes God to appear haphazard. It also paints him as unconcerned with rewarding the type of continual self-improvement Frost believed brought salvation to worthy individuals. Calvin concludes that “all are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 568) Here we have the reason that the fortunate man in "The Fear of God" must do his best to exude humility around others. Although God smiled on him by granting him good luck, and probably eternal election, he must keep in mind that he did not receive either of these prizes due to any degree of personal virtue that humans can understand. He was, in effect, born under a "Lucky Star" of the variety we see in "Stars." The lights blankly peering down from heaven guide his path, though, at God's choosing they could have left him in eternal darkness, and instead illuminated the steps of another person. In "Design" the moth, did not intend to make a wrong turn into the spider's web. According to Calvin’s doctrine of Predestination, though, the moth’s fate was already sealed because “the covenant of life is not preached equally to all” (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 565).

Frost concurred with the idea that salvation did not cover everyone to the same degree. It fit with his notion that not just anyone could bring himself to make the daily sacrifices necessary to earn salvation. By the same token, putting predestination into the equation troubled Frost because a possibility emerged that someone who cared little or nothing for self-sacrifice might receive redemption for some inexplicable reason. Predestination also meant that someone who strove for self-sacrifice day in and day out had an unsettling chance of going to hell for some unknown cause.

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,

From being No one up to being Someone,
Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
You owe it to an arbitrary god (Frost *CPPP* 349).

Here we encounter the idea of the randomness of God. In this scenario, his "special love" is not so terribly special after all. Instead, it was doled out, if not randomly, at least, for reasons that would not make any sense if they were known to us. The notion of an arbitrary God also gets at one of the fundamental problems Robert Frost had with conventional Christianity. Arbitrariness flies in the face of the type of organized justice he admired in the Old Testament. It is also notable that God distributes mercy as opposed to blessings or anything else. Frost considered mercy inferior to justice even though he knew it had its place. As far as he was concerned self-sacrifice earned people the truest form of mercy, namely redemption. Even after receiving some undeserved blessing, a person should not think of himself as overly loved by God. Likewise, he should not think that just going through the ecclesiastical motions will, by itself, earn him another such blessing, since Edwards warns that "For being by nature in a lost and ruined state, in the highest sense, is not consistent with being by nature in a state of favor with God" ("Original Sin" 231).

The apparent randomness of God's redemption spurred Frost's mistrust of conventional religion. He grimaced at idea that "God saves whom he wills of his mere good pleasure" (Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 566) God almighty has complete sovereignty over salvation. He distributes it out according to his own formula following criteria and logic no human can begin to understand. The murky character of how God selects whom he will save, and whom he will not bothered Frost exceedingly because he reckoned that a divinity who so often proved indifferent to human suffering

had no legitimate right to nonchalantly overlook noble human struggles against that suffering. If human actions “merit” any divine response sits at the forefront when Mary and Warren discuss the concept of “Home” in “The Death of the Hired Man.” As Warren observes "home is the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in." (Frost *CPPP* 43)

Regarding original sin and predestination, these lines take on a couple of meanings. On the one hand, when someone in the "elect" dies, he receives a place in heaven even if his actions on earth did not appear to warrant one. That speaks to the unbridled power and sovereignty of God. If a person has to be welcome in his home regardless of how anyone else may feel about it then, as I understand Calvinism, certain people are, from birth, assured to return to heaven because God never meant for them to belong anywhere else. In such a scenario, what other humans think of an elected person's conduct carries no significance because God knows who belongs to him eternally, and who never did. In the poem, Warren makes the remark to underscore that he disapproves of sheltering Silas any longer, but would do so if necessary because hospitality and custom prescribe that he must do so. Warren's hard-working attitude, and Silas's penchant for skipping out when the work becomes most difficult exemplify Frost's own struggles with what mankind owes to God, and what God owes to man.

Frost yearned to feel that “God is not only transcendent but personal. He who framed the world communes with people. As a result, man may not only know about God but may actually know Him. This is not to say that God can be approached as equal, for this would violate reality and abort the valued relationship” (Inch 14). The personal aspect of God appealed to Frost much more than the transcendent. He wanted a close

relationship with God, but wanted that relationship to take on the qualities of human friendship such as mutual advising and even bickering. He saw such friendship not as transgressing reality, but fueling it by creating comradeship that would lead to each one looking out for the best interest of the other. Robert Browning brings up an even deeper uncertainty in "Fra Lippo Lippi" when the elder monks instruct Brother Lippo about what should be at the core of his paintings.

Your business is to paint the souls of men --
Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke... no, it's not...
It's vapour done up like a new-born babe --
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
It's... well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
Give us no more of body than shows soul! (Robert Browning *Selected Poems* 67).

Although Browning and Frost were not contemporaries, Browning meshes well with Frost because of Browning's use of dramatic monologue to reveal emotions in isolated characters and unfavorable situations. Modernists such as Frost and Pound incorporated the technique to explore the conflicting emotions present around them. Frost, unlike Pound, never comes across as fiery or ferocious. While Pound's monologues utilize the type of angry passion found in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," Frost's monologues employ the more subdued tones of "My Last Duchess". The understated nature of Browning's duke stems from his total monopolization of power and prestige in the poem. He need not fly into a blinding rage when those around him fail to bend to his will. He merely issues "commands" and any disobedience ceases. Frost's speakers, by contrast, owe their unobtrusive identities to their fundamental lack of privilege and notoriety. They stand apart from the poems in which they appear, impartially reporting the events they witness rather than influencing them. As opposed to the deeply troubled narrators of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "My Last Duchess," or "Porphyria's Lover" Frost's

speakers give off a quiet calm which makes even the death scene in “Out, Out” bearable. Their detachment turns them into impromptu philosophers. The events depicted in each poem test out the theories they espouse.

In the same vein, Browning uses Brother Lippo to examine the spiritual understanding of those around him. He paints realistic contemporary figures while attempting to capture the look of the soul because he pictures God in human terms. His God is a God that helped him survive the streets. The effervescent nature of what his fellow monks want him to paint does not mesh with what he has experienced. Their notion of the soul is not personal enough to him. It is also, apparently, not personal enough to them since they have such difficulty describing it to him. Frost often reflected in interviews on the need to personalize poetic and spiritual concepts.

He says that the poem’s meaning is as the individual reader interprets it. ‘it must be personal with you’ (John Sherrill “If You Would Have Out the Way a Man Feels About God, Watch His Life, Hear His Words” 149).

The important idea is to have each person drawing independent conclusions. They must have the ability to do so freely and without the peer pressure to conform to an approved viewpoint. It stems from Frost's desire not to discount any legitimate possibility when seeking truth.

Puritans like Cotton Mather also desired a more perfect connection with God. He writes “in short, The First Age was the Golden Age: To return unto That, will make a Man a Protestant, and I may add, a Puritan” (*Magnalia Christi Americana* 260). Frost certainly wants to return to a state of more complete union with God. He yearns to understand God on the sort of direct personal level that he believes Old Testament figures did. He also wants to go further in his connection with God by reconciling what part

Jesus actually plays in his individual salvation. In other words, Frost accepts that God Almighty gave Jesus Christ a degree of influence over the redemption of every believer. Frost does not know, however, what precisely that influence is, to what degree it is active at any time, or how to swing the balance in an individual's favor. Although Frost embraced the Puritan ideals of predestination and original sin, he nevertheless tangled with them endlessly because he could not come to terms with the notion that the guilty could seemingly go unmolested, while the innocent endured undeserved misery. In "The Fear of God" someone rising in the world can never tell when the wheel of fortune will bring him back down again. He can never tell if his newfound health, wealth, notoriety, or influence will be lost, and given over to someone else the next moment.

Hence, Frost's self-ascribed "Old Testament Christian" leanings begin to make more sense. Old Testament justice, with its ironclad laws filled with tangible punishments and rewards resonated much more deeply with him. He felt deeply that a just divinity would tailor the consequences of any actions, positive or negative, so as to ensure that no individual prospered or perished without cause. Of course, when it came to finding the cause for suffering Frost had no need to look any further than his personal belief in original sin. Since everyone invariably came into this world flawed to the core, everyone deserved severe correction to begin with. However, Frost believed that constant personal sacrifice could "work off" such initial inequity and eventually render individuals justified before God.

Frost felt profound confusion concerning the meaning and effectiveness of praying. He formulated various ideas to help him hash out the problem, as we might expect such a restless mind as his to do. He once said "my latest is that it might be an

expression of the hope I have that my offering of verse on the altar may be acceptable in His sight Whoever He is" (Hall *Robert Frost-Contours of Belief* 49). The idea comes across as counterintuitive, in a way. I would think that someone like Frost who held spirituality as such a personal matter would find it more uncomfortable to pray in public than in private. His feelings make sense, however, if we take prayer as a kind of double checking our work, that is, as a means of assessing if we are even close to emulating the proper sacrifice. Inch observes that "although man's knowledge of God may be accurate, it is never exhaustive" (*Psychology in the Psalms* 14). While people can have some conception of what they think God knows or has in mind they cannot really know because they cannot get inside God's head. Divinity and humanity operate on different levels. God will always know more than man because God set out the blueprint for man not the other way around. Although people can build things, I propose that man is, in fact, not limited so much to "creation" as investigation. Certainly, we formulate theories, but in all but certain laboratory situations we do not physically bring into being the objects about which we theorize. Astronomers do not build from scratch the stars which they ponder. Geologists do not cast the rocks they study in a giant mold.

Clearly, some endeavors defy all human classifications. To John Calvin, God and his will stood tallest among them. Since people could not comprehend God's grand plan, they could not hope to alter it. Calvin observes "it were most absurd to say, that he admits others fortuitously, or that they by their industry acquire what election alone confers on a few" (Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 582). Frost recoiled at the possibility that following the example of Jesus could, ultimately, still not gain a person entrance into paradise. It puzzled him why God would send the world a figure like Jesus, and then

flatly ignore, at least, some of those who strove every day to live the way Jesus had lived. Frost perceived no justice in that because to him only wrongdoing warranted punishment. Act of kindness and humility deserved praise and honor on earth, and salvation in heaven. Thus why he labels God the sort of divinity:

Whose mercy to you rather than to others
Won't bear too critical examination. (Frost *CPPP* 349).

He did not deny that God possesses incredible power. However, he could never reconcile the possibility that a being with unlimited power could act so irresponsibly as to punish the righteous, and reward the guilty. To that idea, Calvin retorts "the will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which he wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it." (Calvin *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 583).

Frost tangled with this principle of Calvinism repeatedly. He did so not because he did not wish to believe. Instead, he did so because he could never make peace with the idea of a righteous God acting in a way alien to all conventional human conceptions of justice. A truly righteous God would not force the innocent to suffer, or give the guilty one moment's peace. Again, Calvin extols trust in God's mysterious will. He writes "the gift of faith is rare" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 579). In other words, everyone gets to hear the good news, but only a certain segment of listeners will take the message to heart. Only so many will learn to live according to its precepts.

Through his notion of personal sacrifice in imitation of the life of Christ, Frost tangled with, and tried to subdue the apparent randomness of predestination as espoused by Calvin, Edwards, and others. How could it be, he puzzled, that an outwardly good

person could find himself, from birth, repulsive in the sight of heaven? How is it possible that an apparently wicked person could already enjoy the eternal security of an unshakable seat in God's kingdom? Frost could only reconcile the idea in that the results of the celestial election never became known to any human during this life, but some clue might become visible in an individual's happiness, and ability to help others. Original Sin, though always potentially deadly because it labeled an individual fundamentally unequal with God, could be mitigated by sacrifice. No individual had any guarantee that any such lessening of penalties would actually occur, however, since no individual ever knew if God kept close enough tabs on them to take notice of any good deeds, and factor them in to that person's odds for redemption.

Mary in "The Death of the Hired Man" sums up Frost's take on the situation nicely "I should have called it/Something you somehow haven't to deserve" (Frost *CPPP* 43). These lines bring the two sides of original sin and predestination into focus. None of the elect, even the most outwardly virtuous, "deserve" redemption based on their personal conduct alone. The sin of the fall makes individual efforts toward righteousness ineffective without the special favor of God's grace. When he comes back to Mary and Warren's farm to die, Silas does not "deserve" refuge based on his apparently checkered work history. All the same, they decide to give it to him because it feels like the right thing to do, and he would have nowhere else to go if they did not. Silas, then, is just like the prodigal son who receives a warm welcome from his father when he had no reason to expect anything other than contempt. Although he dies before receiving any welcome this time, Silas ends up with at least the possibility of a homecoming no one else would give him. That is why Frost contends in "The Fear of God" that the reasoning behind God's

mercy will not hold water when under any significant scrutiny. God does not act mindlessly, and people are not ignorant. Nevertheless, humans lack enough understanding of God to enable them to think along with him. Consequently, because humans do not know God's master plan, they do not know by which criteria they should judge in order to tell if the plan has gone off-track. In other words, Frost could accept the idea of some people earning election over others, except that he has no way to ascertain for himself whether those elected have completed the continual self-sacrifice he considers necessary for redemption.

Humans receive no blanket pardon, except through Christ. Still, vanity causes a great majority of people to delude themselves. “Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do.” (Edwards “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” 324). In "natural man" we find an intriguing idea. The man acts naturally because he operates according to his fundamental nature. That is to say he operates without the randomly distributed grace and knowledge of God that would cause him to perceive his own wretchedness. Such perception would, most likely, cause him to labor even more urgently to depart the way of sin and follow God's commands. Instead, he deceives himself into believing that his own righteousness and good deeds will somehow impress Almighty God. In so thinking, he grossly overvalues his virtuous actions. At the same time, he deliberately downplays his vices since he thinks of himself as “good at heart”. He does realize, or, more likely, cannot accept that God already has already decided his fate irrevocably. Frost’s conception of

continual self-sacrifice comes across as highly admirable. Nevertheless, it can no more save him from damnation than it could have saved the moth from the spider in “Design”.

Jonathan Edwards had no similar qualms about God punishing anyone not among the elect. He says of backsliders “they are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell.” (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” 321) Here we see original sin and predestination mixing into a Molotov cocktail to help seal the doom of those not elected to heaven. Predestination ensures that every person already carries a substantial burden of wrongdoing which only increases as the missteps anyone makes every day pile up. The idea of original sin dictates that someone striving to reach heaven must not only seek forgiveness for the various sins of his individual life but also for the innate desire to sin repeatedly hardwired into him by the fall from grace. God can, of course, forgive all of this. Indeed, he does for his elect. He has already determined for whom he will ignore the entire burden of sin in order to allow for everlasting life. However, since no human being can know the outcome of the election in this life, no one, even those who will end up numbering among the elect can be certain of who will receive God's pardon, and who will not. Therefore, everyone becomes driven in an attempt to follow God's will as closely as possible. They do this in hopes that the course of their lives will give some indication of whether or not they will eventually receive election. Edwards warns his congregation “your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a fallen rock.” (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” 326)

In "Design" we can easily understand how the moth had no intention of getting tangled up in the spider's web. In fact, he probably did everything he could to avoid such a predicament. The winds of fate, directed by the will of God, decreed that he must keep his appointment with his natural predator. "What brought him" into harm's way amounted to God placing in his path any number of obstacles, and letting fate take its course. A desire to avoid impediments led to the moth taking a particular flight path which finally caused him to fly into the spider's web. Granted, God could have directed the moth away from the spider at any moment in any number of ways. He chose not to because he does not become overly enthralled in earthly affairs. Additionally, the possibility exists that some remnant of Original Sin pervades the entire world to such an extent that even animals, like the moth, suffer just enough contamination that they can no longer escape retribution

Human effort cannot, by itself, soothe God's fury. The ever present stain of Original Sin constantly enflames his anger. Predestination dictates that God will randomly grant reprieve to some while condemning others. No individual can even begin to know what criteria God used to determine who to redeem. In "The Fear of God" someone rising in the world can never know why he has been pegged for bigger and better things. Additionally, in "Stars" a traveler through the snowy landscape enjoys no guarantee that clouds will not obscure the starlight leaving him in darkness. Each individual has either received election already or never will. No self-sacrifice will impress God Almighty enough to cause him to rethink any person's destiny. There is, then, only so much room in heaven at any particular time, and humans cannot impose upon God to create a place for them if none currently exists. Frost battled against the idea

that all human sacrifice carried no influence in determining who finally received salvation.

Predestination functioned, then, not as the purest expression of Almighty God's justice and mercy, but instead as the supreme illustration of divine apathy toward the sufferings and strivings of humanity. Moreover, if someone could do nothing to expunge Original Sin then Christ's sacrifice lost all power as an object of emulation. In "Design" Frost provides a moment by moment account of the moth's "descent" into oblivion. The moth could do nothing to avoid his gruesome fate. Frost also reinterprets the strength and utility of a spider web. While the web cannot hope to detain a stone plummeting earthward, a moth poses no appreciable challenge. Frost likewise reverses the role of web in damnation. For Jonathan Edwards, the web provides a feeble buffer against hell. For the moth the web comprises the means of torment since he cannot get loose, and escape the spider. Clearly, to the Puritans "wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend with great weight and pressure towards hell" (Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" 326) Already burdened, as they are, with the guilt of Original Sin, most people have little chance of reaching heaven. In the Puritan mind, only God's grace can alleviate that burden. He has already determined whose inequities he intends to forgive. Orthodox Puritan theology leaves no room for human initiative to influence his decisions in any way.

God's grace alone can erase such a fundamental inequity. An individual can do nothing to earn such grace if God has not already elected him to it. The social climber in "The Fear of God" must always keep in mind that his newfound affluence came his way via a divine whim he could neither understand, nor influence. Edwards makes clear 'there

is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell but the mere pleasure of God.' ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" 321). Therefore any good fortune a person enjoys has much less to do with his individual effort than with God's ethereal inclination toward seeing him prosper. While his own efforts may increase the degree of success he experiences, God can dash his hopes at any moment simply because to do so satisfies his will. Edwards cautions that "the manifold and continual experience of the world in all ages shows this is no evidence that a man is not on the very brink of eternity, and that the next step will not be into another world" ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" 323). Such experience speaks to the randomness of the events God places in front of us.

Frost felt that the dividing line between the "elect" and everyone else emanated from something other than a sort of random chance. Indeed, Frost believed that salvation did not come to everyone just by the asking. Every individual had to prove himself worthy of redemption by daily following the template of self-sacrifice exemplified by Jesus Christ. The concept of predestination derailed that idea because although salvation still only came to a small number of people, no one but God could know what sacrifices they made. In fact, only God had any idea if they had ever sacrificed at all. The idea that only an elite cast could achieve salvation suited Frost throughout his life. However, the notion that such an elite might contain an equal number of self-sacrificing and "self-centered" individuals did much to sour his attitude regarding organized religion. A lack of any eternal security prompts the rather somber advice from "The Fear of God."

Beware of coming too much to the surface,
And using for apparel what was meant
To be the curtain of the inmost soul. (Frost *CPPP* 349).

These lines speak to Frost's absolute hatred of those who perform religious ceremonies strictly for show. A person should not espouse his beliefs too fervently in front of others. What someone feels about God, personal success, and the like should permeate his actions. Thereby, he will not have to brag about what mercy has chosen to make out of him, He will not even have to claim he has gained more than he actually has. Instead, he will subtlety exude an aura of what he has now become. Hall speaks to the same notion as she reminds us that Frost remarked "I don't go to church, but I look in the window" ("An Old Testament Christian" 323). Moreover, Sherrill notes that Frost felt "there is a point beyond which the spiritual side of life must be protected, kept sacred as a personal experience" ("If You Would Have Out the Way a Man Feels About God, Watch His Life, Hear His Words" 150). He had no real problem with keeping religion hallowed so long as it stood apart from dogma. If faith became too ritualized it would die from lack of spontaneity. Just going through the motions necessary to demonstrate "devotion" publicly wasted time a person would be better served putting toward something for which they have a passion, like art or family.

Frost saw himself as an outside observer looking in on an alien and potentially hostile environment. Operating outside of formal church practice allowed him to take note of aspects of formal religion, ideas of faith and grace, forgiveness and retribution, and decide for himself what to accept or reject. Philip Larkin gives us a similar bird's eye view of church practice in "Church Going". His speaker reports that, shortly after entering, "Hatless, I take off /My cycle-clips in awkward reverence" (*Collected Poems* 58). Such an act could easily be construed as a parody of accepted forms of religious devotion. However, Larkin has his speaker sincerely trying his best to fit into an

unfamiliar and possibly threatening situation. If the speaker demeans the rituals at all, it is only because they are not tied to enough of his personal experience for him to know how to perform them correctly. All the same, the fact that he honestly attempts to do so makes his actions as likely to be holy as those of the well-practiced parishioners.

Regardless what someone focuses on, the apparent randomness of God's creation means surprises wait around every corner. Nature's unpredictability shines through in "Design."

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth – (Frost *CPPP* 275).

Perhaps I grew up watching too many westerns, but when I hear or see a reference to something white other than snow, I think goodness, innocence and benevolence. By which I mean things like cowboys in white hats and angels. Regardless how common white spiders are in any area of the world (I do not believe I have ever seen one) the idea of a white colored predator eating white colored prey throws the Saturday matinee paradigm into chaos. The randomness of nature without God taking an active role in how everything comes together leads to situations where good and evil become indistinguishable from pure blind natural instinct. The fact that the moth is held aloft like a piece of cloth makes me think of a flag of truce, or of surrender to survival of the fittest. By this juncture in the poem the reader at least hopes that there is something more behind the scene than random chance. The reader hopes to find some reason, some justice, for why the spider is about to devour the moth. Frost has his narrator wondering the same thing:

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small. (Frost *CPPP* 275).

The kindred nature ascribed to the spider is interesting. The spider and the moth are kin to the degree that they were both created by the same absentee divine figure. They are also both white suggesting they are fundamentally made of the same stuff. Therefore, God should care just as much about the one as about the other. As the poem displays it, he does so by showing no favor to either one. Randomness guided both the spider and the moth, or if it was something more it was not something which the speaker truly understands, or has any faith in. To Edwards, a combination of the Spider's being elected, and the moth's not explains it. He asserts "you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder" ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" 327-28). God decides whose lifeline will remain intact, and whose will not. God randomly chooses if the spider will snare the moth in "Design". His whims dictate if the 'the gossamer thread' of Whitman's "Noiseless Patient Spider" 'catch somewhere' (Whitman *Leaves of Grass* 584).

"Design of darkness" intrigues me greatly. On the one hand it points to a malevolent God out to make life difficult for animals just as much as humans. On the other hand, it could simply be that the physical darkness, the literal lack of light contrived to send the spider and the moth blindly groping around until they found each other. Although Frost does not have his narrator say, his own belief in God as indifferent to the world he created makes me put far more stock in the second scenario. Even more credence comes from Edwards' "The Spider Letter" in which he admires how the web comes "…of his tail with infinite ease by moving the air, to what length the spider pleases" (Edwards "The Spider Letter" 2) Much like the filaments released by Whitman's

noiseless patient spider, Edwards' arachnid ceaselessly sends out its thread. All the while the spider hopes to attach itself to a solid surface in order to build a web and, ideally, catch a meal. Edwards' assigns no malice to the spider he thusly observes. It is simply one of God's creatures going through its lifecycle. God will undoubtedly send the spider sufficient nourishment at the proper time. The spider in "Design" appears equally driven by instinct. Frost's spider harbors no cruelty toward the moth. Like the spiders portrayed by Edwards and Whitman, the arachnid in "Design" merely seeks to satiate its natural drive to feed. Any insect caught in its web at that moment would suffer the same unappetizing fate as the moth. The moth did not deserve its doom any more than it would have deserved a chance to escape it. God favors or abuses whomever he seemingly favors at that specific instant. For instance, "The web and the spider taken together shall be lighter than such a quantity of air as takes up equal space, then according to the universally acknowledged laws of nature the web and the spider together will ascend and not descend in the air" (Edwards "The Spider Letter" 4) Edwards provides us with another side of the precariously strained spider web featured in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God". In this depiction, we do not encounter a tattered strand of silk constantly at risk of disintegrating under the bulk of human depravity. Instead, we find a strong cord not facing undue stress. The spider rises on the breeze precisely because none of humanity's wickedness weighs it down. In fact, "if there be not web more than enough just to equal with its levity the gravity of the spider, the spider together with the web will hang *in equilibrio,* neither ascending nor descending" (Edwards "The Spider Letter" 4) When Edwards describes the spider in such a balanced state, he gives no indication that the spider betrays any trepidation about doing so. He gives no report of any of the

spider’s natural predators lurking about. The spider need fear nothing because he bears none of the guilt of the fall. Although Whitman's spider remains relatively stationary, it never halts spinning out its web. “It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;/ Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them. (Whitman *Leaves of Grass* 584) Whitman’s arachnid, like that of Edwards in "The Spider Letter" wishes to explore its local environment. It intends to use the web it will spin from its extruded silk as a base of operations not only for obtaining its next meal, but also for discovering what other sorts of stimuli, friendly, or unfriendly, await it in this area. Whitman gives us no indication that his spider faces any clear and present danger. No predatory animals inhabit the scene, as far as the reader can tell. The tranquility of the scene Whitman paints with his words affords the spider the luxury of showing patience in his enterprise. The reader may also wonder as to the spider's precise goal in tossing out his silk as he does. What I mean is this, we have here a definite possibility that we have caught Whitman's spider in the midst of preparations to catch a moth in the same way we see in "Design". His spider, like the one in "Design" does not slink around trying to ambush its prey. It waits calmly. It goes through only the most necessary motions, allowing the randomness of events in nature to guide its quarry onward to their inevitable rendezvous. Then again, perhaps no such meeting will occur. As past results are no guarantee of future returns, so to the success of the spider in "Design" is not necessarily a harbinger of good luck. Stopping would forfeit any chance of making a worthwhile connection. Frost's spider in "Design" possesses a similarly clear conscience. Remember, the supposed "cruelty" of the spider’s actions gets relayed to the reader through the observations of a rather squeamish narrator. The spider did not dispatch its prey with any sort of ghoulish delight

just because an observer happened to take notice of the unfolding drama. Nature's ambivalence continues in "Stars" where:

How countlessly they congregate
O'er our tumultuous snow, (Frost *CPPP* 19).

The innumerable stars evoke the vastness of the universe and man's relative smallness within it. The snow, in this case, is less the literal frozen water, as it is the cares and troubles of human life. They pile up like snow because most of the time we do not know how to deal with them. Even when we do, we often lack resources to combat them effectively.

As if with keenness for our fate,
Our faltering few steps on
To white rest, and a place of rest
Invisible at dawn,--- (Frost *CPPP* 19).

'As if' reveals a great deal about Frost's view of the situation here. The stars do not care about our fate they simply look like they do. In that way they function like lifelike dolls sitting in the front of a toy store. They have the illusion of possessing the ability to take action, and that illusion serves to entertain or comfort passersby. We need comfort because our steps are tired and unsteady. We, as a species, do not know how to overcome the aggravations and troubles of the day. We can only struggle on toward some safe haven elusive as the horizon. Spirituality fills in the gaps and makes the journey easier for many people. Frost desires that kind of deliverance for himself and his characters, but believes that it does not come easy. Moreover, who receives it and who does not proves entirely unpredictable, as the stars regard humanity "with neither love nor hate". Since the stars have no real stake in humanity's final destiny, it should come as no surprise that they harbor no special favor for us, or any ill will against us. They simply go on

twinkling night after night after night. God, in exerting his power, caused them to do so long before we knew to look up at them, and will allow them to go on doing so long after we cannot look up at them anymore. Since God is largely indifferent to our fate, why should any of his creations be any less indifferent about it? The sinner in Psalm 1, by contrast, takes such indifference as a protective mechanism allowing him to perpetrate his crimes in safety.

He says to himself, "God has
forgotten; he covers his face and never
sees." (Psalms 10:11 NIV)

In "Stars," the speaker does not ponder whether God remembers him or not. The speaker concerns himself with whether God, as revealed through stars, has the ability to comprehend anything about him in the first place. Thus, Frost challenges the notion that:

Blessed is the man who does not walk
in the counsel of the wicked or stand in
the way of sinners or sit in the seat of
mockers. (Psalms 1:1 NIV)

From Frost's perspective, the righteous receive no more of a guarantee of blessings than the wicked. We are not told that the boy in "Out, Out" did anything to deserve his fate. Still, he dies just the same. Now, someone could argue that going to heaven comprises the greatest blessing of all. I would not argue, and I do not believe Robert Frost would either. However, the apparent injustice of an innocent boy dying for no discernible reason raises questions over to what extent people can rely upon God to guide them through life, or rely on Jesus to save them from death. Frost remains deeply skeptical that:

The days of the blameless are known
to the Lord , and their inheritance will
endure forever. (Psalms 37:18 NIV)

Whether human actions warrant God's notice resonates in "Stars". The landscape fills up with snow just as it would do if there were no God. It is worthwhile to consider the word "blameless" in this context. In the New Testament, Jesus says that none are blameless, but that all will be forgiven. In the Psalms of David, the righteous can become blameless, but forgiveness is not guaranteed to those who do not mend their ways. By his reference to the pre-Christian goddess Minerva's inability to see Frost asserts that even though he loves Greco-Roman culture its belief system no better tackles the issues of human misery and justice than does Christianity. He still wonders if it is true that "the Lord watches over the way of/the righteous, but the way of the wicked/will perish." (Psalms 1:6 NIV). Frost would not deny that he *can* do so. Whether he chooses to oversee the affairs of the righteous, or whether his intervention has any appreciable effect comprise another matter. The causes of our sufferings often go unpunished because no means exist to extract punishment. I do not know of any means of seeking restitution from a spider short of splattering it all over a wall. Similarly, the only way I know of to punish a saw is to unplug it and put it in a drawer. Frost cannot easily understand if God readily "guards the course of the just and/protects the way of his faithful ones" (Proverbs 2:8 NIV).

In "Stars" any vestige of divinity appears frozen stiff and entirely powerless. Even if God can see what is going on, the poem does not grant him the ability to interject himself into the scene in any meaningful way. By contrast, in "The Fear of God" Frost concedes God has the power to influence human destiny. The unpredictability of whether God will use his power to bless, curse, or remain uninvolved, makes that power absolute. Using such authority in a way that lacks any discernible pattern calls into question God's own moral compass. Such questioning arises because even someone following his edicts

cannot necessarily count on earning benevolence all the time. In the scheme of things humans finds themselves as much at the mercy of the winds of fate as do any other creatures inhabiting God's haphazard universe

CHAPTER SIX

FOR A FRIENDLY VISIT: ROBERT FROST, ERASMUS, AND COMMON FOLK WISDOM

An unmistakable shared desire to articulate the chthonic wisdom of the common people binds Robert Frost and the Dutch Humanist Desiderius Erasmus. Robert Frost's poems provide the soundtrack for the everyday American experience. Each line reverberates with the sound of common hopes, and common hardships. Frost goes beyond what Erasmus could ever hope to accomplish. Erasmus' *Adages* and *The Praise of Folly* gave a voice to the emerging "average person" in an age of princes. Frost did not simply record for posterity the folk wisdom his characters relate. He expertly saturated every poem with demonstrations of overheard adages put into practice. Through his melding of Erasmus' ideas to his own observations of human nature, Frost provides us an entirely new lens with which to examine the ordinary human mind.

Frost's conviction that a poem must unfold organically like ice melting guarantees a unique resolution to every conflict encountered in the poems. Frost's means of settling such conflict follow no set pattern. In a 1931 interview he observed "a poet's mind need not be ordered. It is not like the scientific mind. My mind has always been filled with a jumble of things. The art is in the communication of them" ("Rocky Mountain News interview" 80) Here Frost deals with an idea that he will bring to fruition in "The Figure a Poem Makes" (1939). That is his belief that a poet must not think too hard and force a poem into a particular construction regarding content, stanzas, or the like. Poems must

ride on their own momentum. They must happen naturally in order to fully express what the poet has in mind. Even the poet cannot know completely until the poem reaches its end because he simply let the idea go wherever it would take him. In the same way, Erasmus has Folly talk about "whatever pops into my head" (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 9).

In order for poetry to give voice to common concerns, poets should not feel that they must or must not write at any time. Moreover, Frost advises young poets that “they shouldn't write poetry if they can help it. In fact, they shouldn't do anything if they can help it. People should learn to take advantage of their natural laziness.” (“Denver Post interview dated July 17, 1931” 80). William Wordsworth's idea that poetry's true subject matter comes from "strong emotions recollected in tranquility" resonates here. The poet cannot force a poem to materialize if the inspiration is not there. Any attempt to do so will lead to artificial sounding, imitative poems that bear no resemblance to the life of the poet that composed them. Consequently, any such poems intrinsically lack any lasting significance to readers, or, indeed, to the poet himself. Also, we encounter Oscar Wilde's idea that "no poet sings because he must sing, at least no great poet does" (Wilde *Complete Works* 1020). In other words, Wordsworth, Wilde, and Frost all agree that a worthwhile poem cannot be wrought too vigorously.

Such a philosophy has its detractors however. Yvor Winters, for example, connects Frost and Emerson, noting especially a distrust of reason in Frost and the Transcendentalists and making this connection to Frost's detriment, claiming that Frost believes ‘that impulse is trustworthy and reason contemptible (Pellegrino “Philosophy” 272). Winters clearly goes too far with his assertion. However, he does not leave the

realm of sanity behind by any stretch of the imagination. Frost never gives any indication he despises conventional logical reasoning. The speaker in "After Apple Picking" reasoned the situation out carefully, or else the bounty of apples, about which he wearily complains, would still occupy more space in his dreams than in his cellar. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" the old man came down into the cellar with a definite purpose in mind. His inability to recall that purpose once he got to the appointed place in no way negates the fact that he had a purpose for going there at some point. His mental lapse makes him more accessible and endearing since “who could bear to converse or transact business with an old man who should join to his long experience of things, an equal vigor of mind and sharpness of judgment?” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 17). Tennyson weaves that concept into his poem “Tithonus”. The title character possesses vast knowledge gained over countless eons. He lives in misery due to his crisp memory by which he recalls the missteps which unwittingly trapped him in everlasting decrepitude. He attempts to ease his suffering the only way he knows how, by transferring it to the reader from his continual complaining. His memory of events remains fresh enough that, in the end, his narrative lacks any of the charm I associate with those long, rambling stories old people love to tell that start out something like "you kids have it easy, back in my day…"

Tennyson and Frost did not write in the same era. However, their poetry meshes well together because of the melancholy tone they each bring to their speakers. In poems such as "Ulysses," "Tithonus," and "the Lotos Eaters" Tennyson's speakers function as philosopher chroniclers. They lament the passage of former times when life happened on a grander, more carefree scale. In doing so they seek to hold on to any remnants of that

life they can. At the same time they ponder what this new world order has in store for them and those they love. Ulysses longs for the adventure he had in his youth. So much so he seeks to continue it in old age. Tithonus yearns for the happiness he and Aurora once shared. Unfortunately, he perceives no viable way to reclaim it, even as Aurora stands close at hand ready to comfort him. The Lotos Eaters desire the relative peace and comfort they had before setting out with Odysseus. However, they, unlike Tithonus, actually know of a way to reclaim it. All they must do is go home. Still, by the time we meet them the Lotos flower's magic so clouds their minds they scarcely remember where home is. Robert Frost also turned his speakers into philosopher chroniclers. They do not have the power and position of Ulysses. They do not have direct access to divinity in the same way as Tithonus. They are not searching out indefinite refuge from superhuman toil like the Lotos Eaters. Instead, they are common working people seeking to find their way in a world rapidly changing around them. They have no kingdom to sail back to or away from. They have received no magical gifts, whether ill-conceived or otherwise. Theirs are not the earthshaking lamentations of the mighty. Instead they are the soft sighs of a farmer needing a break from harvesting or craving a bit more time to spend with a friend. As we are reminded "old-age would not be tolerable to any mortal at all, were it not that I, out of pity for its troubles, stand once more it its right hand" (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 17).

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms, (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 296).

Tithonus endures the horrors of old age in the absence of Erasmus's notion of Folly. He feels every pain distinctly. Worse yet, he still possesses his full mental faculties. Thus, he cannot daydream of his younger, healthier days. Such a diversion would ease his suffering at least in the short term. It is not that he lacks access to Folly, in fact a measure of it holds him close. His eternally young wife Aurora, goddess of the dawn, certainly possesses the power to lift his spirits. Whether she actively chooses not to do so for some reason, or whether his old age has advanced so far her powers no longer have any effect on him is unclear. In either case, he sees no means to overcome ever encroaching decrepitude.

A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 296).

The old man in "An Old Man's Winter Night" holds a distinct advantage over Tithonus in that at least when he fumbles around in his cellar he thinks he has a reason for being there. Also, upon not finding the object of the search he goes back to bed and sleeps in relative peace. We get no indication he is unduly troubled by his advancing age. Then again, regardless of his previous life experience he never tasted the joy of being an immortal young man, and then had to watch helplessly as his youth and strength faded away leaving only a worn-out husk

Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?
'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.' (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 297).

Granting Tithonus immortality without considering the consequences amounted to pure folly. Neither Tithonus nor Aurora realized that eternal life without eternal youth could never satisfy either one of them. The very exuberance of Folly made them overlook the

one thing that would have granted them the eternal happiness they craved. Moreover, apparently, even the goddess Aurora lacks the power to undo or amend Tithonus's immortality. I would think someone who could grant immortality once could grant it a second time and this time work out all the bugs.

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine? (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 298).

Tithonus fails to understand that Folly keeps relationships together. If he still felt the Folly of love for Aurora their natures would mix naturally. The very fact of their being in love would help maintain their feelings even as Tithonus became more enfeebled.

In "An Old Man's Winter Night" we see the old man in a childlike state of innocence. For the life of him he cannot remember why he came down to the cellar. Odds are he came down to check on stored provisions or do some other chores. However, doing so might have left him with an aching back, or stiff joints. Momentarily allowing for that possibility, Folly did him a favor by making him draw a blank. When he wakes in the morning he can complete the chores, if he remembers them, without having to deal with excessive pain right off the bat. Along the same line, the young bridegroom in "Love and a Question" overthinks what he should do to the point where the poem ends before he actually attends either to the stranger or to his bride. Still, acting on a whim does not entail the whole of Robert Frost's poetic mission either. The easily distracted speaker's speculation about the character of the unseen woodcutter in "The Wood-Pile" keeps him from following the bird that originally caught his interest. By stopping when and where he does he cut himself off from a new set of potential insights. Also in "For Once, Then Something" the speaker's irritation at the ripple that turned clear water, into an Etch-a-Sketch drawing gone bad keeps him from noticing anything else going on around him. Of

course, in each of these cases the speakers leave behind their former course to pursue an unexpected form of folly that entertains and fascinates them for a certain length of time. The unanticipated nature of the stacked wood, and the sudden disturbance of the "picture" in the well water illuminate Frost's idea that poems should unfold unpredictably on their own momentum surprising even the poet at the end. I see that idea as uniting in Frost an equal respect for both impulse and reason. Both contribute to the ever-inquisitive atmosphere in the poems. For example, Pellegrino asserts that "poems such as 'Fire and Ice' ending in a paradox that cannot be rationally resolved" ("Philosophy" 274).

But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice. (Frost *CPPP* 204).

With his need to have every situation accommodate as many alternatives as possible, I can easily see why Frost conceived this poem. The bringing together of two opposites saturates everything he wrote. Chaos and discipline grapple furiously for the upper hand as each of his poems unfolds from one stanza to the next. To my mind, working to reconcile such polar opposites amounts to an intellectual folly meant to temporarily occupy the mind and lift the spirit. Of course no human wisdom can easily come to terms with the presented paradox. Human knowledge and wisdom falls woefully short of conclusively solving such a conundrum because we can never possess all the facts that either the natural world or divinity keeps hidden

By seeking to exemplify no one but himself, Frost exemplified the nation. Every American fancies himself a one-of-a-kind individual made up of numerous contrasting tastes and beliefs. Parini observes that Frost "was a loner who liked company; a poet of

isolation who sought a mass audience; a rebel who sought to fit in" (*Robert Frost-A Life* 446)

This idea also infuses Frost's poetry with an underlying friction. Such friction arises from his desire to push all boundaries to their limits, while simultaneously respecting the integrity of whatever new boundaries resulted from his excursions into extravagance. When one of his characters goes for a walk on the road, or in a forest, that character feels an unrelenting desire to come back in again. That is to say, the lone traveler must find someone else with whom to converse, or at least share the wisdom gained outdoors. While in the woods, in the fields, or on the road, Frost's travelers commune only with themselves and their immediate surroundings. Whether, at any particular moment, they ponder overarching questions of the universe, or engage in folly is a function of whether a traveler is meant to understand the guiding aphorism of the poem during or after it unfolds. "All out of doors looked darkly in at him" (Frost *CPPP* 105).

Here, Frost sets up the perfect conditions for a case study centering on Erasmus's adage "to be afraid of one's own shadow" (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 94). After all, the poem contains nothing but shadow, at this point. The uncertainty of what could be lurking in the blackness ready to pounce on whatever unlucky character Frost decided to plop down in the middle of this mess builds the creepiness to a crescendo. Or, at least it would. What spoils the whole effect is that the poor little old man at the center of the scene lacks, as far as I can tell, enough awareness about his situation to even realize the potential pickle he's in.

What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.

He stood with barrels round him-at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping there, he scared it once again
In clomping off;---and scared the outer night, (Frost *CPPP* 105-106)

Granted, even through the fog of his senior moment, he still recognizes at least some potential for trouble. The reader must assume that an inkling of something amiss brought him down into the cellar in the first place. The trouble is he can't recall what it was that set him to thinking that way. Now, I admit, it's awful damned tempting to laugh at the little old man standing there without a clue in the world how he got himself into that situation. Moreover, I am not saying that I did not laugh like hell when I first read this poem as a young boy. Trust me, by God I did. Yet, having now grown a little older, and, I can only hope, a little wiser, I feel strongly that it is not the old man who Frost means to make fear the shadows, but instead the reader. The reader possesses no more specific knowledge about what may lie in wait in the cellar than does the old man himself. The reader, however, can perceive enough to infer that whatever drew the old man into the cellar might be something dreadful. We get no indication of excessive fear or uneasiness on the part of the old man as he lumbers around the cellar. If anything, he gives the impression of mild annoyance over his momentary memory lapse. In this case Folly has made good on her promise to ease the troubles of old age by shifting the worry over what triggered this scenario from the main character to the reader.

And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept. (Frost *CPPP* 106).

By this point the action is complete so far as the old man is concerned. Since he cannot remember why he went down to the cellar he finally concedes that if it really mattered he would not have forgotten it. As he returns to bed the reader is left to wonder what it was

that brought about the fear which permeates the poem, or if there was anything at all. We encounter a similar situation in "Tree at My Window."

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me. (Frost *CPPP* 230).

These lines put an interesting twist on Erasmus's adage "Between Friends All Is Common" (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 28). The speaker creates a personal space by drawing his bedroom curtains. All the same he yearns for unfettered closeness to the tree. In his mind they share a connection born of mutual experience. A few lines later we find out what he means.

But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept (Frost *CPPP* 230).

He feels a kinship with the tree owing to what he perceives as similar emotional struggles. Unlike in "An Old Man's Winter Night", the speaker of "Tree at My Window" thinks he understands that which makes him afraid of his own shadow. It is something not external, but internal. In this case the foreboding darkness does not look in on him from the outside world. Instead it emanates outward from him for some reason never fully revealed. While the old man had forgetfulness and folly to protect him from a heartless world, the speaker lacks even the basic comfort of sleep to help ease his mind. In that sense, he is kin to the tree in that neither one possesses any viable protection from damaging elements.

Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather. (Frost *CPPP* 231).

We can easily replace Fate with Folly here due to the unpredictability of their natures. Folly paired them up so that the speaker might have some distraction from whatever troubles him. Focusing on the struggles of the tree in a storm allows him, for a moment at least, to put his own concerns into perspective. As it is, through this scene Frost "suggests the potentially pathological tendencies of extreme individuality-of eccentricity and willfulness." (Richardson *The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics* 13). Mind you, he certainly does not do so by showing us raving madmen robbed of their senses by being marooned on a desert island or anything like that. Instead, Frost shows us the negative side of isolation through the fact that his poetry frames isolation as an episodic condition. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" any isolation the old man feels derives strictly from his inability to remember what in the name of all that is reasonable brought him into the cellar at that moment. For all we know, the old man possesses a large close-knit family. In "After Apple Picking" the speaker's isolation stems not from loneliness but from feeling forlorn after wearing himself out trying to gather an abundant harvest. In "For Once, Then Something" the isolation the speaker feels comes from not having anyone else there to tell him what exactly he saw in the well before the water got all stirred up.

When Frost's characters go on long walks they never walk too far. That is to say, they never go so far from home that they cannot eventually return. They also do not commit any significant mischief while out and about. In "the Wood-Pile" the speaker does not desecrate or damage the scene he comes across in any way. In "An Old Man's Winter Night" the hapless old man does not become enraged and begin vandalizing his cellar. The speaker of "Acquainted with the Night" keeps his head down to avoid any

unpleasantness with the police. All the same, I cannot see one of Frost's speakers doing something egregious enough to cause him legal difficulties. Frost's speakers are only out looking for the harmless folly of friendly conversation. Such is precisely the case in “A Time to Talk.”

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed, (Frost *CPPP* 120).

To my mind, these lines set forth the culmination of the journey begun in "Stopping by Woods." The friend and his horse have finished their journey successfully. Their appearance fulfills the "promises" that had to be kept. The fact the horse now decreases his pace significantly indicates his owners’ impatience to get to this point. The speaker tells us that he wastes no time obsessing over as yet uncompleted work. He knows that because "well begun is half done" (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 51) the work he has already concluded means that he can spend some time talking and still get more done later. “No, not as there is a time to talk.” (Frost *CPPP* 120).

Through his speaker, Frost illustrates the notion that actions performed must fit with situations presented. If the narrator desires to talk with his friend he must do so now. No one can tell for certain when this opportunity for conversation will present itself again. Also, it is the right "time to talk". We receive no indication of the time of day within the poem. Nevertheless, we can infer that whatever hour it is finds the speaker at a point where he can stop and take a break. The fact he makes no attempt to signal to his friend reveals both that the friend knows he heard him, and that he feels no agitation at pausing his work to have a chat. The speaker does not give the impression of someone desperately struggling to meet a deadline. His work is off to a successful enough start that

a few minutes will not make a difference. There exists also, in this line, the notion that "between friends all is common"(Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 28). I imagine that most readers, like Erasmus himself, will conceptualize this adage in terms of communal property. However, Frost moves the idea of commonality out of the realm of physical possessions, and into the realm of shared experience. In other words that is common between friends which is revealed openly and not held back as a jealous secret. What news they will share between them I cannot say. The poem ends before the reader gets to know that answer. Still, the speaker and his friend will hide nothing from each other. “And plod: I go up to the stone wall/For a friendly visit” (Frost *CPPP* 120). The speaker's slow pace in heading over towards his friend again reveals no anguish on his part. He need not hunt his friend down and intimidate him to find out what news he brings. His friend is not going anywhere. We see no image of his friend tapping his foot or repeatedly checking his watch. Instead, he waits patiently to deliver his news, and quite possibly hear some from the speaker. Both men understand the need for such fraternizing even though it amounts to “triple and quadruple foolishness! Yet this same foolishness both joins friends and, after joining them, keeps their friendship alive” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 26).

"A Time to Talk" concludes before the "friendly visit" even begins. The reader never gets to hear the content of the conversation. All the same, we can infer by the description that nothing too heavy will rear its head in the discussion. Neither the speaker nor his neighbor will bring up anything overly depressing. Neither one is likely to admonish the other since we receive no indication of any strife between them. The speaker's characterizing of the encounter as "friendly", paints a portrait of two people

with more in common than just the shared drudgery of seasonal chores. Moreover, whatever level of affinity the speaker and his neighbor feel for each other at least they have not run out of things to say. Contrast that with the speaker and his neighbor in "Mending Wall". Those two can offer no fresh insights on their situation. The neighbor, particularly, wants no part of anything like the type of Folly Erasmus illustrates. When the speaker attempts to lighten the mood by asking about elves and so on, the neighbor quickly shut him down with his father's aphorism. Looking at such a scenario from the point of view of Erasmus's character Folly we can conclude that the very compact, distilled nature of the knowledge contained in an aphorism precludes any kind of folly. Thus, the aphorism also cuts off the possibility of innovative thought because folly provides enough of a break to the daily grind to allow for new ideas to blossom. The presence of physical and social walls in “Mending Wall” and “A Time to Talk” reveals the limits of just how much Robert Frost believes is common among friends. News, shared gossip, and even profound philosophy are all acceptable commodities suitable for distribution among close friends. Personal space proves another matter entirely. A person's innermost self constitutes a private, sacred sancuary deserving of round-the-clock protection no matter the cost. Still, as Richardson asserts “cultural acquiescence should instead be regarded as a fortunate reconciliation of an artist sense of personal ‘difference’ to larger social constraints and ‘correspondence’” (*The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics* 4) The entire creative process, then, functions as an overarching Folly. It allows the artist to express more readily the experiences and emotions propelling his art to the wider world that otherwise would regard him simply as an oddball. For Robert Frost, an artist can only be a product of his times because he only

inhabits his times. No matter how much an artist strives to keep the outside world away, it will surround him and penetrate him to a large extent. When he returned to the farm to recharge, Robert Frost could not erase whatever events he witnessed while in the city. He retained them in his memory and they influenced him. That influence, though, does not make him an urban poet akin to Carl Sandburg. Where the city serves as a fountain of inspiration for poets like Sandburg, Whitman, or Baudelaire, for Frost it provides a foil. In it, he can see an image of life just distorted enough from his own personal ideal to make the rural life offered by a farmhouse or a forest that much more attractive and invigorating by comparison. He advises readers to “fill your cellar and fill your larder so that you can go into the siege of winter with zest. Go to the cellar stairs; look at the preparations for winter. Smell the apples. Have a good cellar. That is a part of the good life” (Landis “Poetry and Rural Life” 77). I cannot help thinking that the poor little old man in "An Old Man's Winter Night" intended to do just that, but then forgot what he was doing. Some other noise or sight probably caught his attention just long enough to derail his train of thought indefinitely. Even when one of Frost's characters manages to store his provisions properly, he still must deal with his own set of challenges. The speaker in "After Apple Picking" fills his stores to bursting, but then has to concern himself with what on earth to do with the overflow. To top it off his strength gradually wanes as drowsiness overtakes him coupled with an increasing irritation at the unimagined bulk of the "harvest I myself desired". Such momentary frustrations notwithstanding, Frost sincerely believed that “the farm is a base of operations-a stronghold. You can withdraw into yourself there” (Landis “Poetry and Rural Life” 76). In such a citadel a person can engage in as much introspection as he chooses. He can get

to know himself as well as he dares. He can also draw inspiration from objects around him. Pondering such objects inevitably leads him to folly. For instance, in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" we witness an active depiction of Erasmus' adage "you are counting the waves" (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 78).

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be--
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea. (Frost *CPPP* 274).

The key phrase in the stanza is "may vary more". It lends a sense of mystery to the sea that the land, as presented, does not possess. The land can boast not only beaches, but plains, forests, deserts, and any number of other environments. However, no matter how breathtaking those environments may prove they are relatively accessible and well known in comparison to the sea. In no way do I mean to imply that everyone can reach the top of Mount Everest, or trek through the Amazon jungle. Still, past explorers and modern media have made us familiar enough with the great wonders of the land surface that many people no longer look on them with a sense of awe and wonder. Not so for the sea, especially the deep sea about which we know so little. The people turn away from the land because for them it has become little more than mobile wall art. In truth, they hardly notice it anymore. The sea, on the other hand, still maintains an aura of strangeness. Even the best deep-sea divers cannot penetrate terribly far into the blackness of the deep ocean. So much about the water remains unknown and unknowable. The fact that anyone observing the water cannot see down to the bottom is no deterrent to trying to see what may be down there, because any observer can imagine any sort of "sunken treasure" he likes. The same phenomenon occurs in "For Once, Then, Something"

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it. (Frost *CPPP* 208).

To me, these lines exemplify an understandable almost inevitable of trying to "count the waves." The speaker wants to know what lies below the surface. In fact, he wants to know himself. Whatever the whiteness is that catches his interest is distinct from the idealized picture the water presents to him. The trouble is he cannot access any means by which to get close enough to whatever he thinks he saw to obtain any more evidence in order to ascertain what it really was. What information he gathered at that moment is all the more he's ever going to be able to gather. Not surprisingly, he finds this prospect disheartening. Naturally he tries to fill in the gaps between what he knows and what he wants to know by speculating.

Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. (Frost *CPPP* 208).

I do not claim to have any more of an idea of what the whiteness was then does the speaker. All I know is just like the wave watchers in "Neither out Far nor in Deep" the speaker gets more pleasure from his conjecture over what the whiteness *might have been* than he would from actually knowing what it was. After offering up such a lofty ideal as truth to be the source of the whiteness the speaker would be awfully disappointed if it turned out to be nothing more than the tip of a chicken feather, or something like that.

"Mowing" provides another similar example in the whispering of the scythe. Now, I admit, in an area devoid of noises, like traffic or roadwork, many noises that normally go unheard become easily perceptible. However, to specifically hear a whisper from something that cannot talk moves firmly into the category of folly used to entertain

oneself along the lines of "whistle while you work". Nonetheless, Robert Frost drew heavily on such rural inspiration. He leaves no doubt of his belief that “Poetry is more often of the country than of the city. Poetry is very, very rural-rustic. It stands as a reminder of rural life-as a resource, as a recourse” (Landis “Poetry and Rural Life” 75).

Whereas for Erasmus the burgeoning cities of the emerging modern world brought an explosion of ideas that drove poetry and literature to new heights, for Robert Frost the city muted poetic impulse by denying the poet required access to the natural world and the experiences from which poetry inevitably resulted. Frost reveals his strong ties to the poetry of William Wordsworth in that on those rare occasions when he portrays "the city" his rendering comes across as not a city at all. Like Wordsworth’s depiction of London, Frost's "city" lacks any of the hustle and bustle readers expect of an urban setting. For myself, I am never certain which "city" Frost has in mind. I suppose it could be Boston, but who knows? That is the heart of the matter. The "city" is just a place, a haphazard conglomeration of people who only tolerate each other through engaging in a myriad of follies.

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain --and back in rain. (Frost *CPPP* 234).

In contrast to "The Road Not Taken" and "The Wood-Pile" whose speakers happily get lost in solitary places, the speaker of "Acquainted with the Night" embodies Erasmus's adage "to be afraid of one's own shadow". Now, of course, his urban environment means that his actions will face scrutiny theirs did not. However, he still acts more hesitant than he should.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (Frost *CPPP* 234).

The speaker leaves the reader to wonder what he saw in the lane that he found so depressing. Also, we have the interesting question of what it is he does not want to go into detail about with the police. What sort of folly has he participated in? He provides no concrete answer. Still the title of the poem speaks to the idea he has at least glimpsed things he would rather not disclose. I find it interesting that throughout this poem the speaker tells us with what he is acquainted but not why or how. The "shadow" the speaker fears amounts to the disclosure of the true nature of that with which he is "acquainted."

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,
But not to call me back or say good-bye; (Frost *CPPP* 234).

In many of Frost's poems standing still leads to unhurried contemplation. It tries to do so here, but the noise of the world prevents it. It is just noise because the sounds and cries do not concern themselves with the speaker. They would go on even if the poem did not exist. I see here a distinct connection to Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California." “Will we stroll dreaming/of the lost America of love past blue automo- biles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136).

It may appear strange to connect the work of Robert Frost, who despised free verse, which the poet of the Beat Generation. However, Ginsberg's poem is rhythmical enough, particularly iambic enough, to silence that complaint for the moment. More importantly both of them comment on the America of their time as they saw it. Both used their poetry to try to recapture a vision of a simpler time in America. The difference lay only in their methods. Frost sought to reclaim the values of rural America from the

expanding cities. Ginsberg sought to recapture what he saw as the democratizing ideals of early cities from the megalopolises emerging out of the Cold War. Concerning city life, Frost asserts “whenever I am in the city I hear people say they want to go to the country-to the open places. People are sick of each other. They have no reserves; the beat, beat of their many contacts wears them down. There are too many late nights.” (Landis “Poetry and Rural Life”78). The continual pounding people take in social interactions corresponds directly to the follies Erasmus asserts we have to go through just to stomach dealing with our fellow human beings.

The idea of keeping late hours refers not only to the 24-hour way of life in a modern metropolis, but also to the plethora of trouble someone can get into late at night. In "Acquainted with the Night" the speaker does not tell us why precisely he does not want to make eye contact with the cop. However, anyone with a little imagination can come up with at least a few highly entertaining possibilities. To remove that kind of speculation saps the life right out of the poem. As Folly herself concludes “no society, no union in life, could be either pleasant or lasting without me”. (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 28).

People have to break the monotony of everyday life somehow. That may involve pausing work to talk to a neighbor as in "A Time to Talk", or keying in on the sound a tool makes like in "Mowing".

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, (Frost *CPPP* 26).

A desire to escape everyday aggravations leads to all manner of little daydreams. Everything from wondering if elves are knocking down the wall in "Mending Wall" to

imagining letting farmland degenerate back into virgin timber can serve as a means of maintaining folly which in the tense, worrisome world of Robert Frost easily equates to simple sanity. “Folly is the one thing that makes fleeting youth linger and keeps ugly old-age away” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 19).

The Folly of listening to the sound of the cutting blade makes the speaker's tedious work in "Mowing" infinitely more tolerable then the reader could otherwise reasonably expect. The act of cutting grass or grain entails difficult backbreaking work, especially when labor saving technology is hard to come by. Such work, done repeatedly over a long period of time, makes a person prematurely old and gray. Finding even simple pastimes helps to give a person the will to carry on anyway

It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows, (Frost *CPPP* 26).

In other words, he just needed a little Folly in order to refocus his mind on the task at hand. That Folly served not to pull him away from his work, but instead to remind him why he decided to do it in the first place. The hard work is what matters in the poem not how the speaker made it more palatable. The mowing was a labor of love, born out of a love of labor. This is not the same speaker who wanted to know what he was walling in or out in "Mending Wall". The speaker of "Mowing" required no further motivation to get on with the task than the knowledge that it needed doing. He concludes “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows”. (Frost *CPPP* 26). I take this to mean that once a person completes a difficult task he will not need to make up stories to entertain himself or others. He will already have on hand a number of interesting anecdotes born out of the work itself. They will require no embellishment, but instead will stand on their own

merits. Frost provides another perspective on “well begun is half done” (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 51) in “Something for Hope”.

A cycle we’ll say of a hundred years.
Thus foresight does it and laissez-faire…
Patience and looking away ahead,
And leaving some things to take their course. (Frost *CPPP* 340).

Where does the process begin, and where does it end? For myself I cannot tell. Is the well-done first half supposed to be letting the land become forest again, or chopping the new trees down once it has done so? The very circular nature of the idea drives home the fact that just doing a job halfway will prove insufficient every time no matter how well the first half came together.

Luckily Frost supplies the rest of his speakers with the drive to complete their tasks, and a means of breaking the mood. The frigid isolation presented in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” would quickly transmute from the serene to the macabre if Frost's speaker gave us his thoughts purely on the situation at hand. The poem would become unbearable if the speaker dwelt only on the darkness and the cold, and the daunting nature of the long journey still ahead of him. The opening depiction of the absentee owner would be creepy in the extreme except that he is not there and the reader knows he is not there. The speaker mentions him merely to pass the time and temporarily avoid thinking about what he must do. As Folly points out “what part of life is not sad, unpleasant, graceless, flat, and burdensome, unless you have pleasure added to it that is, a seasoning of folly?” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 16).

I imagine the owner of the Woodland through which the speaker passes whose "house is in the village" hardly cares about him, or his obligations. Yet, the long-distance he needs to travel also becomes more bearable because he can ponder what the owner

cannot see him doing. As it is, how else could the speaker summon up the will to keep his mysterious "promises" if not for the occasional respite provided him by the Folly of wondering what his horse must think of the whole affair. A man 100% focused on completing his task, would have no need to speculate on his horse's appraisal of the situation. He ponders his horse's take on things precisely because the task ahead of him does not fire him up. He has "promises to keep". What those promises are the reader does not know. Thus, the nature of those promises and the circumstances which prompted them will always remain open to debate. For all we know making those promises, and thereafter taking the journey they prompted, amounts to the last thing the speaker desired to do. The necessity of finishing a job makes engaging in some sort of Folly all but inevitable if the person hopes to "come out the other side" in any kind of recognizable condition psychologically. That explains much of the trouble in "After Apple Picking". The speaker sets up optimum conditions to reap the bountiful harvest he had hoped for, but forgets that actually reaping it will take a substantial amount of hard work. Moreover, he fails to realize until he is "overtired" that a smidgen of Folly, in the form of a joke, a chat with the neighbor, or a song would have kept him from wearing out so quickly.

Folly creates a livable environment for all involved. She attests to her own power asserting “the instant I stepped up to speak to this crowded assembly, all faces at once brightened with a fresh and unwonted cheerfulness” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 7). Frost's speakers easily cheer up in the face of Folly. In "A Time to Talk" the speaker takes a break from his chores to engage in "a friendly visit." He reveals no misgivings about doing so. The poem does not end with his grumbling about how he will need to work harder later on to make up for lost time. Likewise, in "Neither out Far nor in Deep"

the limited field of vision available to them fails to dissuade potential onlookers because they enter into the activity without a "shopping list" of preconceptions concerning what they expect to find. Similarly, the speaker of “Dust of Snow” carried with him no discernible preconceived notions to speak of.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree (Frost *CPPP* 205).

From the first line of the poem we come to understand that the snow itself does not matter. It could have been any other similar substance. Sand or sugar, could have, in theory, created the same reaction. It was the "way" that the crow brought down the snow on the speaker's head that made the difference. It obviously shook off the snow in a way where it fell heavily enough upon the speaker to draw his notice. At the same time, it fell lightly enough not to annoy him. The manner in which the crow delivered his wintry payload made the difference in brightening the speaker's day. We are not provided with a sort of play-by-play of events. The reader can only guess what the speaker was doing when the crow flew by, or why the crow shook off the snow when he did. Whatever the truth behind the scene, the point is it lifted the spirits of a speaker experiencing an otherwise miserable day. What was so bad about it? The reader will never know because to Frost the unpleasantness of the day pales in importance to the improvement experienced in that one instant. The entire incident must have caught the speaker completely off guard in order to solicit such an attitude adjustment. It falls into the same category as when Folly enters the room full of gloomy people all moping around. They cheer up the moment they realize she has joined them.

Aphoristic wisdom can only take a person so far. Aphorisms crystallize generally accepted ideas about how the world works in certain situations under ideal conditions. Yet, as perceptive people throughout history can attest human life rarely operates under ideal conditions. Thus why Folly laments “How ineffective these philosophers are for the work of real life” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 31). In "For Once, Then Something" the speaker sees something flash momentarily in the waters of the well. It could be something profound like the ideal personification of peace and justice. On the other hand, it could just amount to the reflection of the last spark from a dying disposable cigarette lighter. Who knows which one it is? Now, of course, given the philosophical character of Frost's speakers, the narrator of "For Once, Then Something" will probably develop some aphorism to account for the "profundity" of what he thinks he saw. At the same time when he tells any of his friends about the experience they will likely put it down to Folly on his part, a necessary break during the day.

For well or ill, people can only tolerate so much stark truth at one time. “Finally, the mind of man is so constructed that it is taken far more with disguises than with realities” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 63). In “Out, Out” the ill-fated boy only ends up in his deadly predicament because his sister told him that supper was ready at just the wrong moment. That is to say the precise instant when he, already looking forward to quitting time, did not need a dose of Folly to further dilute his attentiveness. He perked up at the news of an impending meal precisely because it provided a change of pace. Frost illuminates the same idea in a less hazardous context in "Mending Wall" when the speaker jokingly tries to attribute the gaps in the wall to elves. I exceedingly doubt that the speaker seriously thought magical creatures tore breaches in the wall. All the same, it

supplies a much more entertaining explanation than anything I could devise. Had the speaker been conversing with anyone other than his Pythagorean neighbor the assertion would have elicited laughter and a lighthearted turn in the conversation. Here we see another connection between Robert Frost, Erasmus, and more ancient wisdom. Any such wisdom is dry, that is, not terribly pulse pounding. It takes effort to be interested in it and to get anything out of it. Idle speculation over what made a hole in a wall intrigues a wider audience much more easily. Even royalty tires of official duties if Folly is absent for too long, as we see in "How Hard It Is to Keep From Being King When It Is In You And In The Situation"

The King said to his son: "Enough of this!
The Kingdom's yours to finish as you please.
I'm getting out tonight. Here, take the crown." (Frost *CPPP* 463).

Here I can see Frost's King in the shoes of Tennyson's Ulysses. He no longer wants the burden of ruling his people. More importantly, he feels more adventures lay ahead of him.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 94).

Nothing Ulysses does is ordinary. His pleasures and his problems have all taken place on an extraordinary scale. He cannot bring himself to relax with a steak and a cold beer, unless he personally cut that steak out of the Cyclops and brewed the beer from Circe's blood. Whatever he undertakes in the future must be colossal in order to stand up to what he already achieved. The difference between Ulysses and the King Frost presents us stems from Ulysses's self-knowledge about what makes him happy and unhappy. Ulysses personifies Erasmus's adage "know thyself" (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus*

96). He cannot stomach denying his natural wanderlust for long. He knows who he is, fundamentally. That knowledge means he possesses a drive compelling him to live strictly according to his own expectations not those of others. Frost, by contrast, spotlights a King who initially denies his instinctual knowledge of himself. He does this due to his unhappiness with the life his royal nature grants him. When this King sets out on his odyssey, he does so to escape his heritage not to reclaim it. Erasmus speaks directly to the King's discontent "for let a person weigh in his mind how heavy a burden rests on the shoulders of anyone wishing to act the true Prince, and he will not conclude that sovereignty is a thing worth using perjury and parricide to gain" (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* 93-94). The abdicating King and reluctant Crown Prince in "How Hard It Is to Keep From Being King When It Is In You And In The Situation" embody this notion perfectly. They can no longer stomach the rigmarole that comes along with their high offices. They understand perfectly well the prestige and privilege they intend to give up. They each engaged in soul-searching before deciding to abandon their respective dominions. Each one, in effect, did a cost-benefit analysis of his relative position in the hierarchy and concluded that the adulation of the masses did not outweigh the aggravation of the machinery involved in ruling.

But the Prince drew away his hand in time
To avoid what he wasn't sure he wanted. (Frost *CPPP* 463).

In Tennyson's poem, Ulysses bequeaths his crown to his son Telemachus who, by all indications, accepts it gladly. Tennyson tells us that ruling the people of Ithaca suits Telemachus at least as much as it troubles his father.

This my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil

This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 95).

In "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King" I see the former king more in the mold of Telemachus than of Ulysses. Certainly he tries to take off for parts unknown. However, he knows that the universe will not let him shirk his obligations without negative consequences for everyone involved. In leaving Telemachus in charge of Ithaca, Ulysses concludes that he has accounted for every contingency. Thereafter, he only concerns himself with his own insatiable restlessness. The former King cannot do that partly because his own son matches him step for step in skipping out on the kingdom. The former King fills the role of Telemachus when he counsels his new sovereign on how best to rule the people of Xanadu. This, of course, follows his willing entry into slavery for the sake of his son's future prosperity.

Now, the question will arise if sacrificing for the sake of his son in fact makes the former King more like Ulysses? I would argue no because Ulysses is trying to embrace his nature through future struggles not escape it through common toil. Moreover, the King’s son does little to improve himself or those around him following his father's enslavement. Mind you, I see nothing wrong with being a poet. Still, if my father had given up his freedom to help me get a good start in life I would hope I could repay his kindness by at least achieving financial independence. Yet, the Prince's appearance late in the poem as a poet signals that he is striving to follow his own nature rather than suppress it. He knows in his heart that is not a ruler. He is, then, a modern-day Ulysses eager for

great and unusual accomplishments not on the battlefield but in language. Robert Frost would find that admirable except the former Prince shows too much interest in free verse. That notwithstanding, Frost refuses to turn the former Prince into a comic character. He treats him with respect even though he supposedly writes a different kind of poetry then does Frost himself. He lets the former Prince be true to his nature because any well-adjusted individual cannot act any other way. Frost puts a twist on Tennyson's version of events because his Prince refuses to accept the crown. In fact, no sooner does he do this, then he resolves to hit the hobo trail like his father. I realize Julius Caesar was a famous general and not a Crown Prince. All the same, I cannot help thinking that in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* Caesar refuses the crown three times, but later becomes dictator of Rome anyway. Therein lies another difference between Frost's depiction of Royal power and some other famous examples. His Prince refuses the crown once and never mentions it again.

So the two making good their abdication
Fled from the palace in the guise of men. (Frost *CPPP* 463).

The King and the Prince must put on false pretensions in order to exit the palace. They begin behaving in ways contrary to their own natures. They are not commoners, and yet they play the parts enthusiastically at the outset. Their dissatisfaction with their former lives runs *that* deep. They know they belong in a palace. Even so, they deny their natural instincts because they find life in the royal court unfulfilling. Still, the former King predicts that “my crown shall overtake me, you will see” (Frost *CPPP* 463).

Here, the King shows that he understands himself and the world around him. He knows, as Frost knows, no person can escape his fundamental self for long. Nevertheless, he tries to do so as best he can.

How would it be for you to take your father
To the slave auction in some market place
And sell him into slavery? My price
Should be enough to set you up in business—
Or making verse if that is what you're bent on.
Don't let your father tell you what to be." (Frost *CPPP* 463-464).

I would be tempted to call the former King incredibly selfless were he allowing his enslavement for the betterment of his people. I cannot do so, however, since his reasons for doing so center on allowing himself and his son to escape their fundamental natures as thoroughly as possible. He understands freedom to a certain extent in that he will not force his son to follow in his footsteps. However, for Robert Frost, unstructured freedom brought with it dangers. The most prevalent of these involved the abandonment of tradition. Such traditions might be cultural or poetic or both.

You're off to Xanadu to help the cook.
I'll try you in the kitchen first on food
Since you put food first in your repertory. (Frost *CPPP* 464).

The former King's new master thinks he can tell everything about him from first impressions. His inability to look beyond the surface of the King's words means he badly misjudges him. He thinks the fugitive King is nothing more than a loudmouth braggart with a taste for sumptuous living. He cannot grasp the wisdom the fugitive King already possesses. The destination Frost chooses for the fugitive king serves as a clever play on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan".

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (Coleridge *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 347-48).

Coleridge and Frost work together and contrast each other well, because of the powerful lessons which their characters learn and must thereafter convey to others. In

"Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the title character cannot escape his fate. He must travel all over the world telling people of his experience.

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all" (Coleridge *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 346).

In doing so, he tries to redeem himself by helping them to avoid his mistakes. In "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King" Frost has his former king also pass on the lessons he has learned. The difference being Frost's fugitive did not, as far as we know, gravely injure anyone while abdicating. All the same, he cannot avoid his fate and must pass on his royal wisdom to the ruler of his new homeland who needs it desperately.

Frost puts his own spin on a well-known scene from the past. He places the former king in the most sumptuous realm most anyone could devise precisely because the former king wanted no part of any such splendor anymore. The former king predicted his own inability to escape his high office. Frost, like a demented genie, grants him precisely what he no longer wanted, a roundabout return to the very lifestyle he had grown to despise. The former king fervently wanted to live as a commoner. Early on he even wished he had pawned his crown. He lets himself be sold into slavery in an attempt to build a new life outside the public eye. Yet, after doing all this he eventually returns to prominence by the sheer chance of ending up in the one kingdom ruled by a sovereign more unhappy than he had been.

"You're not where you belong. You're not a King
Of royal blood. Your father was a cook." (Frost *CPPP* 466).

Just by looking at him, the fugitive King can perceive that the sovereign of his new homeland is entirely unsuited for Royal power. He knows what a real King should look like, and act like, and be like. His years of experience leave no doubt in his mind. Moreover, he also understands how each kind of servant should behave. In effect, he knows his new sovereign better than his new sovereign knows himself. The former King also sees in his unhappy new sovereign the damaging effects of even unwittingly going against one's own nature. That is also why Macbeth at first wants to know why the witches "dress me in borrowed robes". At that moment, he believes he knows what belongs to him both by right of legal possession and personal temperament. In other words, he does not think he has either the legitimate right, or the capability to ascend to the heights the witches claim he will reach. He understands that not just anyone can properly exercise regal authority.

> But the prince must never be young, even if he is young in years. Any prudence which is won from experience is of a sorry kind, and sorriest of all in a prince. (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 61).

The new King in "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King" exudes a lack of experience in royal duties. All he can think to do regardless of the situation is stuff his people full of as much food as they can hold. He gives off the vibe less of an all-powerful sovereign guiding his subjects, and more of and all obsessed grandmother entertaining her relatives during the holidays. The former king counsels him as best he can though we see scarcely any of the results.

> "Make them as happy as is good for them.
> But that's a hard one, for I have to add:
> Not without consultation with their wishes;
> Which is the crevice that lets Progress in (Frost *CPPP* 467).

This new King, like Tennyson's Telemachus, must try to guide his people toward what is best for them without listening to too many opinions. The "progress" the former King disparages easily refers both to overly liberal constitutional democracy and to literal mob rule where the breaking down of societal norms tacitly enforced by the King leads to cutthroat competition for political power and resources to the point where anarchy results.

The only worse situation would be the sloth of "The Lotos Eaters" when they encounter "A land where all things always seem'd the same!" (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 58). Here we glimpse the fortunate Isles Folly holds in such high esteem. Throughout the rest of the poem we never hear of any of Odysseus's men engaging in any work in order to provide for themselves. The land grants them everything they could hope for, aside from their families. Then again, once the magic of the Lotos takes over that becomes essentially a nonissue for them anyway. The island presents them with a seeming paradise on earth. Yet, such a landscape also signifies stasis. Erasmus's rendition of Folly would admit that after a while even Folly becomes repetitive. In such a scenario hard work and diligence become Folly in and of themselves because they function as a change of pace.

To each, but whoso did receive of them,
And taste, to him the gushing of the wave
Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;
And deep-asleep he seem'd, yet all awake,
And music in his ears his beating heart did make (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 58).

The men cheer up instantly upon ingesting the fruit. Their mood brightens in just the same way as that of the grumpy men when Folly entered the room. The sailors do not

even care about the way the fruit came to them. They do not itemize their change of mood in the manner of the speaker of "Dust of Snow." They only want to avoid their previous obligations and continually “steep our brows in slumber's holy balm;” (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 59).

Odysseus's former crewmen crave rest from toil. Their endeavors gradually drained their strength until they feel they cannot go on. The speaker of "after Apple Picking" shares their exhaustion. Even so he continues on in his work as best he can. He remembers, however begrudgingly, that while "well begun is half done," (Erasmus *The Adages of Erasmus* 51) it is *only* half done. The rest of the work still remains. The second half of such a task poses a far greater challenge than did the first half simply because of how much energy went into completing the first half of the task. The true test of workmanship comes with completing a task so that the quality of the second half equals or exceeds that of the first part. Granted, the reader is not privy to the entire harvest process in "After Apple Picking". Regardless, the careful handling of the bounty the speaker describes indicates a dedication to maximum quality from start to finish. Tennyson gives us no reason to fault Odysseus's former crewmen for their actions before reaching the island of the Lotos Eaters. The reader can feel confident these men previously proved every bit as heroic as Homer claims they were. They completed the first half of their journey splendidly. The second half, which should provide ultimate closure to the saga, has morphed into something else completely.

Nor harken what the inner spirit sings,
"There is no joy but calm!" (Tennyson *Selected Poems* 59).

Thus we encounter the fundamental difference between Odysseus's former crewmen and the hero himself. Moreover, we see the contrast between them and the speaker of

"Mowing". These men now yearn for nothing but leisure. In effect they hope for nothing other than nothing since their island home remains perpetually the same. By contrast, for the legendary Ulysses, joy proceeds not from calm, but from noise as in the clamor of battle, or the hustle and bustle of newly discovered lands and cities. New adventures soothe the mighty Ulysses.

Frost's humble speakers do not seek only calm. They would equate such stasis with idleness. Instead they desire the satisfaction of a well-tended field mustered into shape by the sweat of their brows and the sharpness of their blade. The only dream their labor wants is the fact of a job well done.

Although Robert Frost greatly preferred the wisdom and culture of ancient Greece to their Roman counterparts, he certainly absorbed ideas of style from Roman writers such as Horace, Cicero, and Virgil. His enduring belief in Western civilization as the height of humanity, and in the classical world as the height of Western civilization meant he strove to embrace the whole of Greco-Roman thought. However, unlike Erasmus and his cohorts, Frost sought not only to recapture ancient wisdom and techniques but to lay claim to them as the rightful inheritance of his America.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MY OWN DESERT PLACES: FROST, PASCAL, AND THE IMAGINATION

A mutual need to explore what is real and knowable draws Robert Frost together with the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. The equivocal Frost could not accept many of Pascal's ideas. Still, Pascal's thirst to break free of heavy-handed dogma, as revealed in his *Pensées* and other writings, connects them as "rebel psychologists" of their times especially concerning the limits and influence of imagination. They seek to understand why we imagine what we do, and why we react to our imaginings in the ways we do. Frost fills his poems with a suffocating uneasiness based on characters' perceptions of reality. Some of these prove accurate, while others do not. Yet, all the characters treat their personal viewpoints as reliable. Even so, none can "relax" due to not knowing how their actions influence their destiny. Frost's poems, take the inquiries raised in Pascal's *Pensées* and other writings out of the realm of the spiritual. Again and again, Frost puts the *Pensées* into practice, and not always with characters left undamaged in the process. Above all, Frost turns each poem into a crucible within which he tests how well Pascal's wisdom, and those espousing it, can endure in the secular modern world.

Their different perspectives on otherworldly matters molded their ideas of imagination. "In comparing Frost and Pascal, it is noteworthy that both men put a premium upon the creative and spiritual dimensions in human nature, while respecting the scientific, material, and deterministic elements in man as a biological animal" (Stanlis

Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher 74). By following that same line of reasoning, we also find an interesting difference. They clearly struck the balances between the religious and secular that they did in an effort to find something. However, they sought to find different things. For Pascal, the point in juggling the mortal and the immortal lay in finding some way to regain permanent unity with God which had been lost through Adam's fall. By contrast, Frost viewed the same idea as more of an internal wrestling match in which every person had to engage in order to hammer out what sort of sacrifice it would take to impress God and earn salvation. No yearning for reunion comes through in Frost's poetry as he instills in his characters no overriding certainty that they ever had such unity in the first place. The clouding of human judgment which for Pascal led humans away from God and into sin, led Robert Frost's characters into often frightening flights of fancy as a means of coping with a callous, confusing world.

Both Frost and Pascal seek to carve out a place for humanity in the physical world around them. "Pascal defines man as an isolated, though contingent, unit whose only necessity is that of choosing to identify itself with finitude or with the infinite" (Law and Law *Reason to Romanticism* 16). Frost takes this isolation not as something with which to identify but as something against which to struggle in the hope of overcoming it. He puts this idea into practice in "West Running Brook". Fred, and, especially, his wife initially perceive themselves as cut off from the brook. 'Fred, where is north?' (Frost *CPPP* 236).

In asking such a question, Fred's wife reveals not only her physical disorientation, but also her mental confusion. She does not know which end is up. She seeks more than physical directions, here. She needs a psychological handrail on which to steady herself

as she proceeds through the remainder of the poem. She requires a kind of reference point which no GPS unit can provide. In that simple inquiry, she demonstrates Pascal's pensée "man's condition. Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety" (Pascal *Pensées* 6). Granted, she gives no indication of boredom, and yet, her desire to know where she is in relationship to her surroundings reveals more than a little uneasiness about the situation. In this case, the inconstancy comes not from Fred's wife, but instead from the unfamiliar natural environment with which she is attempting to cope. Her question also presents us with a reminder that "man's condition" is quite often not of his own choosing. Fred's wife did not ask to wind up someplace where she cannot find her bearings. A whole series of events to which we are not privy came together to place her there. Such unknown and unknowable circumstances also reinforce Pascal's idea that the powerful should always remember that their privilege came to them by virtue of forces beyond their control. Fred's wife understands that, apparently, through no fault of her own, she has ended up in a situation to which she is not accustomed. She naturally feels significant apprehension over the idea. However, unlike when Pascal allowed himself to become "terrified" by the unfamiliar terrain of new astronomical discoveries, Fred's wife seeks to end her anxiety through asking for clarification.

The situation changes when they take the waves as a signal that the brook yearns for communion with them as much as they do with it. “Look, look, it’s waving to us with a wave/

To let us know it hears me.” (Frost *CPPP* 236). In this instance, Fred's wife not only lets the trifle that upset her comfort her, but she also embodies another of Pascal's Pensées "being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance men have decided, in order to

be happy, not to think about such things" (Pascal *Pensées* 37). Thinking that the wave has acknowledged her allows Fred's wife to take her mind off any number of current or potential troubles she may face. She simultaneously demonstrates Pascal's notion that imagination sees what he wants to see, in whatever proportions it wants to see it. Additionally, Erasmus's adage "you are counting the waves" applies here as well. (Erasmus *Adages* 78). Not only is a literal, physical wave the object of her current fascination, but, moreover, her imagination can "produce" any "feedback" from the wave that she desires. When Fred dismisses the idea of the wave having any interest in them, his wife retorts "It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you/It was to me — in an annunciation" (Frost *CPPP* 237). This may sound like backpedaling on the part of Fred's wife, but it is not. In effect, she says the brook acknowledged me rather than you because I have taken the time to understand it as more than just a natural phenomenon. In that moment, she takes ownership of the brook and the scene for the first time. She is no longer groping around trying to find the necessary direction. She has found what she needed to get out of the experience. The questions that Fred's wife poses about the brook have their roots in a need to connect with the nonhuman cosmos on human terms. Fred and his wife want to combine what they see as the infinite nature of the brook with their own strictly finite human nature. They do not wish to choose between the two anymore than does Frost himself.

In "A Brook in the City" the speaker feels compelled to remind us that nature's energy still flows under the new veneer of civilization. He regards it as his duty to do this precisely because he cannot conceive of a world which privileges either the finite, or the infinite, as Pascal understood them.

I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength
And impulse, having dipped a finger length
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed
A flower to try its currents where they crossed. (Frost *CPPP* 213).

Readers should always remember that in the universe of Robert Frost memory blends so completely with imagination as to become synonymous. That is to say, I assume that the brook possessed great strength and power at one time. However, it is just as likely that the speaker imparts such qualities to the brook because he *wishes they had been* there when he desired to take advantage of them. Frost's idea that a poem's meaning must be personal to the individual reader means that his speakers never stated anything too emphatically. The spontaneity of the water flowing along belongs as much to the speaker's imagination as to the current itself. The reader possesses no other means by which to judge. Frost's insistence on the "impulse" formerly possessed by the brook squares easily with Pascal's idea of "inconsistency, boredom, anxiety" existing as hallmarks of the human condition. The brook possessed the power to overflow its banks whenever it desired. It could deepen its channel, or deposit silt at will. It was not confined to any inescapable pattern. Thus, the speaker mourns the loss of the brook's freedom not only for the sake of the brook, but for his own. Throughout the poem he imagines what it must have been like to possess that type of freedom. The speaker gives us a tribute, yes, but it is, at heart, a jealous tribute along the lines of "some guys have all the luck." When the speaker had the water overtake his knuckle, or chucked in a blossom, it took his mind off the fact that, so far as he knew at the time, the brook would outlast him. He memorializes the brook both to preserve its characteristics for future generations, and to remind himself of a now lost means of diverting himself from pondering "death, wretchedness, and ignorance."

In fetid darkness still to live and run -
And all for nothing it had ever done
Except forget to go in fear perhaps. (Frost *CPPP* 214).

The brook is "incarcerated" for the "crime" of being out of step with modern society. The brook could not to keep up with and expanding dynamic population wishing to control and classify everything. The brook constitutes the sort of thing to which Pascal refers, in pensée 188, when he observes that "reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it". (Pascal *Pensées* 56). To Frost, as to Pascal, modern man cannot stand for long to think that there could be things which he will never understand. He corrals nature because he cannot understand it in the neat, mathematical sense he craves. Through no fault of its own the brook has become a relic of the bygone age when men did not need to classify and consume everything. It was not that the brook "forgot to go in fear" as much as it never learned how to subjugate itself to the whims of man. Eventually, such a failure led to the brook seeming monstrous to the inhabitants nearby. They locked it away in plumbing pipes underground just like the inhabitants of the island of Crete did the Minotaur in the labyrinth. “How else dispose of an immortal force/No longer needed? Staunch it at its source” (Frost *CPPP* 213).

The poem itself invites the reader to imagine its true purpose. For instance Lentricchia feels “‘A Brook in the City’ is a brooding and troubled meditation which darkens the meaning of an obsessive image” (*Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* 53). "Obsessive," is not the right adjective for the image presented in "A Brook in the City." I nominate "unsettling" in its place. If the image of the Brook were obsessive the reader would perceive the Brook as overpowering its civilized restraints. The speaker’s need to memorialize the former waterway proves it cannot do this on its

own. The new urban sprawl covers over the Brook precisely because people *do not* wish to obsess over it any longer. The expanding city would just as soon forget there ever was any free-flowing water in the area. The water now flows underneath as a heartbeat reminiscent of the one encountered in "The Telltale Heart." However, this "pulse" fails to drive anybody mad since nobody other than the speaker feels any guilt for "murdering" the Brook.

No trifle will console the speaker of "A Brook in the City" since he suffers the loss of something which meant much more to him than a simple trifle. He lost a part of himself when the city closed off the Brook. Admittedly, Allen Ginsberg wrote in a highly different style than did Robert Frost. All the same, every time I read "A Brook in the City" I am reminded of the descriptions of Moloch in Ginsberg's "Howl".

> Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!
> (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131).

In the sinister rendering of Moloch we see what the modern world so dreaded in "A Brook in the City" has given birth to. I find it exceedingly interesting that although Robert Frost dismissed "Howl" as "just a pouring out, anyone can do it" (Myers *Robert Frost: A Biography* 297) his speaker of "A Brook in the City" similarly holds nothing back in his remembrance of the Brook. Then again, what we get from the poem is less his actual memories of the Brook as much as images that he hopes will shape its reputation in posterity.

In claiming immortality for the brook, the speaker again moves into the realm of imagination. Waterways can, and often do, run dry. The everlasting "force" extolled in these lines amounts to psychological attachment maintained through continual

remembrance and imagining what the brook would still be like if change had not come. The spiritual power contained in the brook is still needed by the speaker, and by the city itself, whether or not the city knows it. The water in the brook holds the same symbolic value for Frost as did the urn in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
(Keats *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 792-793).

In each case the lack of any direct testimony from the object itself allows the speaker to put forth any scenario he pleases. Regarding America, the water in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" accomplishes the same goal.

The similitudes of the past and those of the future, The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river, The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away, (*Leaves of Grass* 316).

Whitman's rendition of the ferry on the river, with the water running free embodies his view of the America of his time. Frost's sees his America as much too altered to sustain such a waterway or the thinking that produced it. Nevertheless, the speaker must cope with the change somehow.

Imagination supplies the required coping mechanism. The speaker of "The Census Taker" goes about "counting" the insubstantial "occupants" of the house before entering because the unapproachable emptiness within it "Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses/Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years" (*CPPP* 165). The human mind can only bear the full weight of the infinite in light of the contrast offered by the finite. For the same reason the speakers of "Good Hours," and "The Vantage Point" must occasionally reemerge in civil society. Just as the vastness of the universe terrified Pascal, the

diminutive nature of humanity set against the backdrop of the universe unnerves even the staunchest loners after a while. In "Good Hours" the speaker pines for company precisely because he cannot bear to choose to be forever alone in the universe. The speaker of "The Vantage Point" tries to observe the ant since doing so will give him a glimpse of something else mortal thereby reminding him that he is not the only finite creature left on earth.

The lack of any fixed reference point in Frost and Pascal forces imagination to pick up the slack. “The *Pensée*s throw the readers out of the security of a text with a God-like narrator…” (Melzer *Discourses of the Fall: A Study of Pascal's Pensées* 109). Pascal dispenses with such a narrator not out of any distaste for the idea, but instead out of uncertainty over how to shape an infallible voice in a world that fundamentally fallible by original sin. Frost’s speakers take the idea further. His severe allergy to any kind of dogma meant he could not bring himself to populate his poems with overbearing narrators who left nothing to the reader’s own perceptions. He himself felt that political meanings had to be deeply experienced by each individual without outside interference. An all-powerful, all-knowing narrator would constitute the embodiment of such interference. A "narrator," as I understand the term, acts rather like a tour guide through a work of literature bringing the reader to specific places for specific reasons, while always possessing an unshakable notion of where the journey will end. Frost's speakers lack any such certainty. They work their way through poems one step, or misstep, at a time. They scarcely know more throughout the course of the poem then do their readers.

Pascal exerts an overarching influence on Frost’s thinking in regards to imagination. Pascal also received similar “mentoring” from his philosophical predecessor, Michel De

Montaigne. “Montaigne's frequent references to the changeability of man, to his inconsistency and the contradictions inherent in his behavior, to the diversity and variety in reason and experience manifest in the diversity of solutions among philosophers, all find textural echoes in the *Pensées*” (Phillips “Pascal's reading and the inheritance of Montaigne and Descartes” 26). They likewise resound in the works of Robert Frost. Imaginings and daydreams bring many emotions to the speakers of individual poems. Sometimes the imagination provides joy and recreation as in "West Running Brook.” "The Vantage Point" makes the point even more directly:

And if by noon I have too much of these,
I have but to turn on my arm, and lo, (Frost *CPPP* 26).

In this scene, we encounter not only Pascal's idea that we divert ourselves from thinking about unpleasant things like death, but also how easily we turn away from heavier things and how any sort of excuse to do so cheers us up. Whether you call such opportunities "Folly," as Erasmus did, or "a trifle" as Pascal does, the fact remains they lift our spirits and help us go on in an otherwise unpleasant world. The difference is, for Pascal, the psychologically preservative effect focuses on one individual at a time as opposed to groups of people. Although these lines remind me of Whitman's "Song of Myself" where the speaker proceeds to "loaf and invite my soul” (*Leaves of Grass* 29) Frost's scene offers no "invitation" of any kind. The speaker of "The Vantage Point" craves no company. He would prefer that no one close to him "loose the stop” from their voice since that would disturb the integrity of the scene. While Pascal admires only those "who seek with groans" Frost has his speaker admire what there is to be seen, for well or ill. Rarely do I consider the poetry of Robert Frost upbeat. However, I must do so in this case because the speaker does not demand that the reader be downhearted about the

scene. In fact, the speaker does as Pascal suggests in pensée 405. He does not praise or condemn anyone, living or dead. Still, he nevertheless illustrates Pascal's idea that "it is not good to be too free/it is not good to have all that one needs" (Pascal *Pensées* 15*)* because all he does is observe. He has this free time, and, yet, compared to, for instance, the speakers of "The Road Not Taken" or "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" he makes no good use of it. By the end of the poem he gives the reader no indication he has gained any useful knowledge that he can eventually pass on to others. Now, that would be forgivable except that a speaker in a Frost poem is not supposed to be out for himself alone, even though his focus centers on individual perspectives. "I smell the earth, I smell the bruisèd plant,/I look into the crater of the ant." (Frost *CPPP* 26).

Here again we have an example of Pascal's idea of the danger of having too much free time. The speaker observes nature and even looks into the anthill. Yet still he acquires no knowledge, no potent aphorism with which to leave a reader changed for the better. When he "smells the Earth" the speaker sounds very much like the speaker of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" while he was "observing a spear of summer grass" (*Leaves of Grass* 29). Still, unlike Whitman, Frost fails to invite the reader to get comfortable on the grass and observe alongside him. Whitman's speaker wants to share a communal experience with the reader. By contrast Frost's speaker would prefer the reader were to remain as oblivious of his presence as are the townsfolk, both living and dead. The speaker ends the poem exactly where Whitman would begin a new section of "Song of Myself". He does this precisely because *his* observations of whatever he sees in the anthill are strictly *his observations*. They constitute something personal to him which someone else might "misinterpret." As it is, in looking down the anthill the speaker

begins "seeking with groans" whatever insight he can gain from his surroundings. For Frost, the "seeking" Pascal urged need not be a torturous process. The speaker of "Directive" tells of a winding, indirect journey toward secret knowledge, not a harrowing death march through the slough of despond. Likewise, the speaker of "The Vantage Point" need not risk any serious injury to observe the ants. He simply must know where to look and be willing to look deeply and patiently for his quarry.

In other instances daydreaming allows a momentary respite from a changing world as in "The Black Cottage," and "The Census Taker." Unfortunately, imaginative musings often do speakers more psychological harm than good. In poems such as "A Servant to Servants," the speakers actually increase their own suffering because they cannot stop thinking about either what previously traumatized them, or may do so eventually.

I don't learn what their names are, let alone
Their characters, or whether they are safe
To have inside the house with doors unlocked. (Frost *CPPP* 67).

By not endeavoring to gain any knowledge about the men, the woman fails to "seek with groans" information that could bring some relief to her drab existence. For all the reader knows maybe at least one of them would be glad to help her with the chores, at least occasionally. In the same way, some of "their talk" which annoys her so much at present would connect with her if she got to know them. Now, of course, we get no inkling that any of them in has taken it upon himself to get to know this woman. Therefore, they are also guilty of not "seeking" in the way that Pascal advises. As it is, no one directly involved in the scene seeks much of anything. Even her husband Len only does his "seeking" outside the home. He praises everyone by looking for the sunshine

everywhere. His wife condemns anyone and anything of consequence in the scene, while the hired men appear only to praise themselves. Through this poem, Frost's characters show us the results when an opportunity to employ one of the pensée goes unutilized. “I have my fancies: it runs in the family” (Frost *CPPP* 67).

Even if it hadn't before, the idea of the imagination let loose comes to the forefront of the poem in this line. She magnifies everything to exorbitant size by virtue of an overactive imagination. Granted, the reader soon comes to know she has at least one raving nut hanging off a nearby branch of the family tree. Still, her eventual collapse is far from inevitable, at least until she starts fixating on what it will be like. From that point on she excludes reason without realizing it. Her imagination, coupled with a generous dose of fear quickly blur the lines between what happened to her relative, and what has happened, or may happen to her. In the tense world of Robert Frost even letting one's mind drift for a moment or two can spell disaster as evidenced by the doomed boy in "Out, Out." No psychological demons caused his fatal lapse in concentration. All it took to seal his fate was letting his mind wander away from the task at hand at precisely the wrong moment.

For Pascal and Frost, imaginings assist in placing reality in perspective. “For Pascal, human life is a phenomenon situated between the infinitely great and the infinitely small” (Law and Law *Reason to Romanticism* 16). Frost shifts the focus of the "rock and a hard place" between which humans find themselves to the interesting and the uninteresting. In other words Frost's speakers lose much less sleep over the fact they are only one voice in the universal chorus then over the fact that not all of that universe

stimulates them and lets them feel that their finite lives matter to someone other than themselves.

Frost and Pascal concur that lives must contain meaning. They disagree on what brings it about. “Pascal's repeated insistence that it is impossible to be indifferent or neutral…” (Hammond “Pascal's *Pensée*s and the Art of Persuasion” 239). In poem after poem we see that it is not neutrality that is impossible, but stasis. Imagination cannot permit situations to remain unchanged for long. Fred's wife has to perceive the Brook as waving to them. She possesses no other means of orienting her psyche to her surroundings at that moment. The speaker of "A Brook in the City" must conceptualize the Brook as the lifeblood of the newly industrialized area. For him, it must keep flowing under the steel and concrete "skin" of the new metropolis. If his mind ever let it stop he would suffer a terrible loss that he cannot bear. The grief stricken wife in "Home Burial" will never be able to understand that her husband grieves as much for the child as does she. In her imagination outward sorrow stands in direct proportion to inward affection. Since her husband does not mope around, he never really loved the child.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns. (Frost *CPPP* 58).

Here we have a reversal of Pascal's idea that "a trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us". (Pascal *Pensées* 8). Under normal circumstances muddy shoes would be nothing to rant and rave about. Yet, the notion of the child's death has so grafted itself onto the wife's consciousness and grown so all-consuming she cannot rest even once the shoes have been cleaned and shined. It no longer matters if the shoes are still muddy, or even if they ever really were. The point is she has an image lodged in her mind through

which she repeatedly revisits pain she might otherwise have subdued by now. Her reactions also give us the opposite view of Pascal's idea that we avoid thinking about things like death in order to be happy. She cannot be happy because she cannot think about anything but the child's death. At the same time her imagination has so fixated on the event that her husband's seeming lack of concern for the deceased child now troubles her even more than did the original tragedy. She takes a warped consolation from dressing down her husband over his apparent indifference. The images in her mind tell her that the only way to make things all right again is to cause her husband to grieve as she grieves so that they will grow closer to each other in shared, *identical* morning for their mutual loss. She does not wish to soften the pain of her loss by employing pleasant euphemisms. She hardly cares if "That syllable 'death' struck Roman ears too roughly; the very word was thought to bring ill-luck, so they learned to soften and dilute it with paraphrases… They found consolation in living, even in a past tense!" (21). A similar attempt to keep the "essence" of his child alive causes the husband in "Home Burial" to speak of the graveyard as "not much bigger than a bedroom." People can relate to bedrooms. Children can live and play in bedrooms. Bedrooms are normally thought of as places for children grow and thrive, not sicken and die. The sons of the old woman who owned "The Black Cottage" have failed to return to it since she passed on because they do not wish to become enmeshed in a place so closely connected to their tragic loss. Granted, they make a show of saying they wish to return. They do this out of politeness to people like the minister, whom their mother probably knew well. Moreover, the notion, even the false notion that they will someday return to their summer house brings their mother back to life through their shared childhood memories.

Pascal's idea of diversion helps Frost's characters to adapt to difficult conditions by allowing them to imagine more favorable ones. In "The Vantage Point" the speaker looks down the anthill because watching the flurry of activity takes his mind off of the lifelessness present in the human institutions close by. In "Good Hours" the speaker wants company precisely because the darkened windows leave his imagination nothing to play with in terms of the actions and motivations of the people inside. I had such company outward bound.

I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black. (Frost *CPPP* 102).

At this point we encounter a clever inversion of Pascal's idea that "a trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us." (Pascal *Pensées* 8). The trifle in question only upsets him because there is no other trifle to offset it. The speaker only laments a lack of companionship because he wants it. If he were heading out into the forest to listen to songbirds or something like that he would hardly notice his solitude. Being alone, in and of itself, causes him no distress, so long as he has some activity or puzzle with which to take his mind off the fact he is alone. He possesses none and so he cannot keep his thought from centering on his solitude. However, unlike for Pascal, it is not mortality or depravity which Frost's speaker prefers not to think about. Instead, he just wishes he could find a friendly soul with whom to pair off. The speaker of "Tree at My Window" bonds with a weathered old tree in hopes of taking his mind off his own troubles by imagining how much worse off the tree must be in the storm. The solitary census taker entertains himself by conducting an imaginary headcount of nine other "people" who are not there, and, just as likely as not, never were. The speaker of "Desert Places" could

learn a lot from the census taker about how to stave off depression brought on by an overactive imagination. He should follow the census taker's lead and conjure up some company. At least then, even if he was still only he would have "others" with whom to be "scared."

All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count; (Frost *CPPP* 269).

We can just as easily conclude that the animals are insulated against the psychological troubles the speaker must endure. They might as well be deceased since nothing can harm them so long as their burrows remain intact. I find it interesting that the speaker excludes no animals from the scenario, especially because some species do not hibernate. In doing so, the speaker allows imagination to magnify any loneliness he already feels. He not only imagines himself as completely distinct from the natural world around him, but also projects a great deal of jealousy toward it. He imagines that the hibernating animals spend the winter season in relative bliss. Whether they do or they do not, hardly matters. The fact remains the speaker fixates on his notion that they do. His inability to number the slumbering creatures around him comes not from having too much on his mind, but instead from having too much on his conscience. He is "absent-spirited" because his imagination cannot let go of the resentment he harbors toward the supposed peace the animals enjoy by not having to obsess over day-to-day problems during the winter. The speaker is not absent-minded because if you were any unpleasantness crossing his path day by day would quickly fade from his consciousness amongst everything else he needed to do. In other words, the speaker of "Desert Places" bears little of the spirit of the unseen woodcutter in "The Wood-Pile" who found his place "in turning to fresh tasks" (Frost *CPPP* 101). The speaker of "Desert Places" gives us no indication he has anything

else on his plate beyond his bleak surroundings, and is even bleaker imaginings regarding those who do not have to witness them.

Like Pascal, Frost connects his use of imagination to his notions of understanding of the universe. Pascal's theory of knowledge is in fact, a 'negative epistemology': it constantly tells us what knowledge cannot be, and in particular stresses the vanity of efforts towards a *comprehensive* knowledge of nature (Khalfa "Pascal's Theory of Knowledge"124). Frost does not so much contradict Pascal here is take his idea down a different path towards a different conclusion. Whereas Pascal fretted over the notion of an encompassing understanding of the universe, Frost transfers the impetus for any such idea from human society to the individual. In other words, he granted human beings could not know everything. All the same, he saw individual human beings as inquisitive enough and perceptive enough to understand how their world impacted them personally and vice versa, in order to work toward its, and their improvement. Not everyone can manage to do so. By the look of her home, the deceased woman in "The Black Cottage" certainly does not.

> Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
> Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
> The little cottage we were speaking of,
> A front with just a door between two windows,
> Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black. (Frost *CPPP* 59).

In the image of this dilapidated old house, we witness again a reinterpretation of Pascal's notion that imagination amplifies inconsequential things and wears down monumental ones. In this case, it is not the speaker who does the imagining. Neither is it his companion the minister. Instead, it is the reader who engages in speculation during an uneasy guided tour of his rundown dump of a dwelling. The blackness of the windows

lends an air of sinister mystery to the scene. What lies hidden behind them? The minister already knows. Likewise, the speaker, if he is a local, presumably has at least heard rumors about the place. Only the reader remains totally in the dark at that moment. Is the grimy condition of the building merely a result of its having stood empty for some time, or is the blackness meant to call forth memories of despicable depravity? Frost gives us no direct evidence of any kind of occult activities ever occurring at the house. Still, the fact that the minister, a holy man, initially endeavors to keep his distance from the house raises the likelihood that something unsavory occurred nearby in recent memory. Then again, as I said, in the tour of this house the reader's imagination provides as much narration as does the speaker.

We pressed our faces to the pane. "You see," he said,
"Everything's as she left it when she died (Frost *CPPP* 59).
The bleakness of the house reminds me of the mood presented in Tennyson's "Mariana".

With blackest moss the flower-pots
Were thickly crusted, one and all;
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable wall.
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange;
Unlifted was the clinking latch:
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
(Tennyson *Selected Poems* 9).

The reader might well expect to see Mariana, coming out the front door at any moment lamenting that "he cometh not." Tennyson's Mariana only wishes she was dead. By all rights we ought to find her deeply depressed, but very much alive in this poem. Unfortunately for her when Robert Frost makes a play on someone else's character, that character has a much rougher time in his world. Yet again, we have so little information

about the occupant of the house that the readers' own imagination rushes in to fill the vacuum.

Her sons won't sell the house or the things in it.
They say they mean to come and summer here
Where they were boys. They haven't come this year. (Frost *CPPP* 59).

The fact that the old woman's sons have failed to return to their former summer home further feeds into the "Mariana" theme. The house itself is waiting for the ones who will never return. The discernible blackness emanates not just from the passage of time, but from spiritual and emotional abandonment. Where the reader previously speculated some evil had occurred in the house, now it becomes clear the old structure is more sinned against than sinning. Its state of arrested decay hints at a museum quality. Yet the home is not a public landmark. It holds no treasures apart from a few mementos belonging to the old woman and her family. The poem never makes clear, to my satisfaction anyway, what business brought the speaker to the house in the first place.

She valued the considerate neglect…
It always seems to me a sort of mark
To measure how far fifty years have brought us. (Frost *CPPP* 60).

It is paramount that the old woman "valued" the state of controlled disrepair in which we now find the house. She had a reason for it. It reassured her in a changing world. If the house really served as a measuring stick, then I assert time has stood still in the poem since we cannot accurately judge the rate of change outside the house. This functions as another play on Pascal's wisdom. In pensée 520 he observes, in part, "… our nature is nothing but continual change…". (*Pensées* 185). Yet, in the poem we not only perceive no change, but no one around to do any changing.

Her giving somehow touched the principle
That all men are created free and equal. (Frost *CPPP* 60).

On the surface, the old woman just seems like a classic American deeply devoted to the principles contained in the Declaration of Independence. Looking a little deeper, we find more going on. Remember that Robert Frost distrusted too much democracy, especially constitutional democracy. Also, his fascination with the principal of predestination meant he perceived a fundamental inequity within the human race. His comments here give the reader a glimpse of the dark side of Pascal's pensée "it is not good to be too free/it is not good to have all that one needs". In other words, the reader is drawn to the conclusion that the old woman had the liberty to run her home however she wished, and *this* was the *best* she could manage.

Frost and Pascal each pondered what human wisdom could do, and could not do. “Most philosophers accept that there will always be an unknown beyond the limits of current science, but Pascal adds that there is also, necessarily, a void within it, at its foundation…” (Khalfa “Pascal's Theory of Knowledge”133). For Frost, the hole in human knowledge exists not at the base, and not even at the apex. It appears instead when humans attempt to apply what they already know to new set of circumstances. In the rush for innovative solutions they often forget that just because techniques may have become outdated does not mean they possess no worth. In paving over "A Brook in the City" the populace ignores any pleasure and usefulness the brook held for them in the past. Moreover, they conveniently forget that the Brook preceded them in the area, and will outlast them. That is why the minister in "The Black Cottage" encourages his listeners not to forsake supposedly "outdated" ideas too quickly. He understands that the fundamental laws of nature, and what it takes to be human within nature never really change. Human society superficially changes according to circumstances. However, once

conditions revert back to a previous state they readopt old customs readily since any such customs are, at the core, interchangeable.

For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes. (Frost *CPPP* 61).

Here Frost presents us with another illustration of Pascal's idea that "… our nature is nothing but continual change…" (Pascal *Pensées* 185). In the world of Robert Frost, human minds are so fickle they recycle the same ideas over and over and over again. They do this by holding onto ideas simply because they are fond of them. That scenario puts another of Pascal's ideas under scrutiny as well. Here, as in many Frost poems, we witness "two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason" (Pascal *Pensées* 55). Clutching to a belief that may never have been true in the first place denies logic and makes a person a relic of the past. All the same, hoping that the future will bring change while not actively striving to make the change yourself admits reason but does nothing with it. The minister does a disservice to the house and respecting the sons' wishes because he knows all too well they are never going to visit the old homestead again whether or not it holds pleasant childhood memories for them. Either way their declaration of wishing to return came more from respect for their mother's love of the place than for their own. In that way the sons are also guilty of excluding reason from their thinking. They ought to just come on out and say they have no use for the old place.

Imagination influences how characters regard larger society. “Pascal considers society to be the product of human invention alone, bearing only indirectly the marks of a divine origin in the mixture of sublimity and depravity of its citizens” (Law and Law *Reason to Romanticism* 68). Frost likewise regarded civil society as a haphazard

arrangement. However, rather than despair over its effects on the human psyche, he has his speakers retreat into nature, and into themselves as often as possible. Hence, why the speaker of "The Vantage Point" only returns to civilization when nature has yielded up all the rejuvenation it can offer him at any given time. Like Pascal, Frost positions his characters between two extremes, in his case tranquility and turmoil. Both of these are fostered and fueled by the imagination. Fred's wife feels the turmoil of disorientation until she knows where "North" is. She cannot make peace with the Brook until she can imagine for it a motivation similar to her own. The speaker of "The Census Taker" decides he must protect himself with "the pitch-blackened stub of an ax-handle" (*CPPP* 165) only after his imagination cannot cope with the sights and sounds he witnesses in the abandoned dwelling. Before, and, after that point he felt himself almost at peace even taking the time to do a little "dreamy unofficial counting" (*CPPP* 165) of friendly poltergeists he perceives milling around the structure. The burnt out speaker of "A Servant to Servants" previously took solace in the "dazzle" of the nearby lake water. Of late, an ever-increasing workload, and her imagined anxiety over the hired men and what she perceives as her husband's increasing indifference toward her have rendered that pressure release valve inoperable for her. By the opening of the poem, cut off from her preferred means of recreation she focuses her overactive imagination on what the men may do to her if given the chance, and what the experiences of her conscripted mother, and her deranged grandfather may foretell regarding future events.

Imagination propels the societal structures both Frost and Pascal present to the reader. "Pascal thinks that man is naturally incapable of truth and of goodness, that the political order is founded not on a knowledge of the true and the good, but on strength

and imagination…" (Bouchilloux "Pascal and the Social World" 206). In the poetry of Robert Frost, it is founded much more on imagination. Entire social webs are founded on what people choose to believe is going on around them, whether or not it actually is. In "West Running Brook" the Brook initially irritates Fred's wife since she cannot discern what she considers any logical sense out of what the Brook is doing. When Fred steps in an attempt to correct her he ends up only fanning the flames of her imagination. Before you know it a simple anomalous waterway has transmogrified into a symbol of everything worthwhile in life and death.

It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life and love-
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial; (Frost *CPPP* 238).

The two of them become so enthralled with the Brook that they end up symbolically "marrying" it to themselves.

As you and I are married to each other,
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it. (Frost *CPPP* 236).

As a prepubescent boy reading this poem for the first time I did not have a clue in hell why they felt the need to "wed" an inanimate object. I confess I still consider the idea downright unnerving. Their actions do take on a semblance of sanity, however, in light of the fact it was they themselves who perceived and projected onto the Brook the qualities which they found so irresistible. They could no more refrain from uniting with the Brook then they could cut a chunk out of one of their legs with a pocket knife. They have turned perception into reality to an extent scarcely any other characters do.

Perception also becomes reality within the realm of opinion. This is particularly true concerning notions of justice. "In usurping the place of God, men have substituted

their individual judgment for a knowledge of what is good and true…" (Bouchilloux "Pascal and the Social World" 203). Pascal's pensée "Justice is as much a matter of fashion as charm is" (18) proves illuminating here. In the absence of any indisputable absolute, something has to fill the void. Opinions, and social mores plug the hole as best they can. Yet, since they were not forged out of the same material as that for which they substitute they will never provide a perfect seal. Something of God's righteousness and power will always be beyond reach of the human intellect. Frost accepted God's power over human life and destiny. What he could not accept was the notion that that power played out equally for everyone. His conviction that poetic meanings must be personal to everyone extended into a view that each individual must find a separate tailor-made path to the divine. No person could access another's path. He made no overarching about having a direct line up to heaven. He simply wanted to understand God "whoever he is" (Hall *Robert Frost-Contours of Belief* 49).

The feelings Frost's characters express are, above all, subjective. "But all these methods for finding a reason behind the effects only unify regions within being according to local points of view" (Khalfa "Pascal's Theory of Knowledge" 127). The returning traveler in "Good Hours" wants someone with whom to converse in order to pass the time, not to change the world. His loneliness is "a trifle" which the "trifle" of a companion would eliminate. The sound of "over the snow my creaking feet/Disturbed the slumbering village street" (*CPPP* 102) only bothers him because he is alone. When the speaker of "The Census Taker" ponders the whereabouts of the evening meal in the abandoned house, he understands full well no one else can or will answer him back. The "desert" he presently inhabits encompasses him both externally and internally. He lacks even the

luxury of knowing that life will return to the area with the changing of the seasons which the speaker of "Desert Places" enjoys. He can "seek with groans" answers which Pascal would cherish, but he will only find a drafty old dump. In "West Running Brook" just because Fred and his wife feel a spiritual connection with the brook when it "waves" at them, does not mean anyone else will. The loss of the Brook in "A Brook in the City" strikes the speaker of the poem at his very core. Nevertheless, another observer, one less attuned to the history of the area, would regard the event as a trifle that a momentary daydream would soothe.

Imagination helps cushion the impact of unpleasant reality, often at the expense of needed information. “First, he argues that man is incapable of knowing what is true and good because reason, or the capacity to know, is corrupted by the heart, or the capacity to love” (Bouchilloux “Pascal and the Social World” 207). Frost agrees with this idea, but expands it. What Pascal identified as "capacity to love" gets retooled into the capacity to form attachments, particularly psychological attachments. The waters in "West Running Brook," and "a Brook in the City" would both never be much more than natural phenomena except that human observers identify with them enough to endow them with supernatural qualities. The speaker of "The Wood-Pile" comes to admire a woodcutter he never sees simply based on his own perceptions of what the woodsman left behind. In "Tree at My Window" the speaker develops an impromptu kinship with a nearby tree at the mercy of the storm. He perceives what the tree is going through as an outward representation of his inner struggles. It hardly matters whether the tree would agree added the power to do so. The speaker’s imagination has marshaled the two of them together in a bond that even clear morning skies cannot break. The mud on the husband's shoes in

"Home Burial" gives the wife fits not because of its ability to stain a newly waxed floor, but because of its ability to conjure up memories of her child's death and confusion over her husband's reaction to their mutual loss. So far as I can tell, the sons in "The Black Cottage" stay away from their former summer home for the same reason. They cannot bear whatever memories returning to it may unearth in them. Conversely, the forming of attachments can serve as a barrier against unpleasant reality, at least for a little while. Many of Frost's speakers enmesh themselves in the idea that "a trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us." The wife in "A Servant to Servants" used to take comfort in looking at the lake. "It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit/To step outdoors and take the water dazzle" (Frost *CPPP* 66). She only starts going full on cuckoo for Cocoa puffs after circumstances deprive her of that pleasure. Her frustration spills over in fairly short order.

It's rest I want---there, I have said it out---
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them---from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done. (Frost *CPPP* 66).

The minister in "The Black Cottage" exudes no such irritation. He takes a small measure of comfort from giving the speaker a guided tour of the old woman's house and recounting what he knows about her life and times. The reader cannot really be sure of the accuracy of any of what he says. All the same, he paints a picture of a woman in whom the reader could seek solace whenever necessary.

That solace comes by way of language. "For Pascal, the fall away from God brings about an epistemological fall-a fall from truth into language. Cut off from God and from the world of essential truth, we fall into a world of obscurity, of opaque signs" (Melzer *Discourses of the Fall: A Study of Pascal's Pensées* 2). It brings a fall into imagination as well as characters try to decode the visible world around them. Lacking

knowledge of an ultimate starting point they begin their fantastical investigations at the point of any stimuli they encounter. Fred's wife in "West running Brook" does not bother digging any further once she decides she "understands" the nature of the Brook. She takes Pascal's idea "a trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us" (Pascal *Pensées* 8) and shows how a trifle can also inspire us. She does not merely take comfort in the unusual nature of the Brook, she uses it to redefine her relationship with Fred. She inspires in Fred imagined feelings of connectedness to the Brook to match her own. By the end, the more logically thinking Fred forgets the fact that the two of them have imparted qualities of "the source" on to the Brook which it did not previously possess. They set aside the notion that they cannot definitively understand why the Brook flows as it does. They have to in order to see the Brook as anything more than just a waterway. The Brook, in turn, must exist as more than a mere waterway or else run the risk of being pushed aside by the onrush of humanity as was "A Brook in the City". Pascal's idea that imagination makes little things appear bigger sheds light on the situation here. The magnification comes less in terms of size, than in terms of importance. The reader has no way of knowing exactly how many other people the brook has "waved at" before Fred and his wife happened to notice it signaling them. Likewise, Fred's determination of the importance of the brook's back flow assumes he has found its genuine source, and that he understands what he is witnessing in the same terms the brook itself does. The exuberance with which Fred and his wife embrace their interpretation of what they see makes clear that neither of them can scratch the surface of what the brook "means" to itself.

Actual reality holds much less importance for Frost's characters than does perceived reality. They react to what they believe is occurring around them, regardless of whether it really is or not. By contrast, the wife in "Home Burial" lets her disgust with the stains on her husband's shoes fester by not asking him how he feels about the child's death. She imagines she already knows.

If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand---how could you?---his little grave; (Frost *CPPP* 57).

At this point the wife cannot understand why the husband has not degenerated into a blubbering heap. She contends that, if anything, he should be cracking faster than she is since he had the extra trauma of burying the child. When she asks him "how could you?" she brings up two things at the same time. Firstly, she accuses him of treason against her and their deceased child by possessing the gall to dispose of the child while displaying no emotion. Secondly, and simultaneously, she expresses unwitting admiration for her husband by wondering from where he found the inner strength to bury the child and keep his sanity. The two ideas are inseparable here because to the wife internal emotions must have external expression, or else they are not real. What's more when emotions are repressed even the slightest expression of them gets magnified and distorted by the imagination because of the rarity of such a display. By now, both the husband and wife have let their imaginations throw everything out of proportion. The wife thinks her husband is heartless because of how she imagines he would react if he had a heart. The husband imagines his wife has become a scatterbrain because if she had dealt with her grief as quietly as he had his she would not still be afraid of everything that moved. Neither understands why the other has built the fantasy world they have. They cannot conceive that they each attempting to preserve the balance they formerly enjoyed.

In the same way “Pascal concludes that if a better state exists, it must be a previous one we have lost but can remember (Melzer *Discourses of the Fall: A Study of Pascal's Pensées* 83). Robert Frost takes Pascal's ideal environment and moves it from the realm of remembrance to the realm of imagination. His characters construct worlds for themselves, and unto themselves. None of these worlds are ideal to the degree Pascal desired for man. Nevertheless, they provide environments with which the characters that construct them can feel most comfortable, or at least think that they can. The overworked speaker of "A Servant to Servants" idealizes the little lake where she used to relax in a manner reminiscent of the Lake Poets. We never see her there, still, what remained of her sanity would not have held out even as long as it did without her reconstruction of such a memory. Memory created the very structures in which it operated. The emptiness the speaker of "Desert Places" grapples with only possesses the power to "scare" him because his memories of the animals in their burrows continually reinforce his isolation. Such increasing isolation causes him to look on the dormant world around him with even more hopelessness, thus perpetuating the cycle.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (Frost *CPPP* 269).

This reversal of Pascal's concern that the newly expanding science of his time left no room for what he believes, moves the anxiety from the external to the internal. Whereas Pascal feared a nearly unfathomable universe full of who knows what just outside of himself, the speaker dreads the psychological "slings and arrows" he can let loose on himself at any time. Moreover, the switch from Pascal's word "terrifies" to the speaker's "scare" suits the tone of the poem. Human beings are usually terrified by

tangible things outside of themselves, like fires or floods. These causes of terror usually do not linger in the mind once they are out of range. By contrast, the things that scare people, like the dark, being in confined spaces, or the fear of failure, never go out of sight. They cling to us in the back of our minds ready to pop out at any moment. That is why the speaker requires no help to make himself uneasy. His own psychological makeup, and life experiences do the job for him. He "seeks with groans" as Pascal advises. I doubt, though, that Pascal would consider his search worthy of praise since he seeks only self-consolation and not divine assistance. The wife in "Home Burial" can never be free of her memories of the child's death. Every time she sees her husband's money shoes she, in effect, loses the child all over again. At each sighting of the shoes she convinces herself anew that her husband is an unfeeling monster because if he weren't he would talk of nothing else accept the child. He also, she believes, would stop wearing those muddy shoes so as to not traumatize the two of them any further.

Her dismay over the tragedy would decrease if she realized “there is no place where death cannot find us-even if we constantly twist our heads about in all directions as in a suspect land…” (Montaigne *The Essays: A Selection* 20). For the same reason, our solitary census taker, has little actual need to "defend himself" with the ax handle. Under Pascal's logic, if it is his "time to go" even a hundred such implements will avail him nothing. The unnamed girl in "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers" likewise has no chance of avoiding her fate. She will, nevertheless, be able to go down happy, as pleasantness and benevolence will follow her every step of the way to the grave. Since she will be "always blameless" I imagine her demise will proceed very much like that of the mortally

wounded boy in "Out, Out." She will be going along minding her own business until just moments before the end.

Give her a child at either knee for fourth joy
To tell once and once only, for them never to forget,
How once she walked in brightness,
And make them see it in the winter firelight. (Frost *CPPP* 235).

At just the wrong instant some insignificant something will cause her to daydream just long enough for death to claim her. She will never see it coming. Then, again, according to Michel De Montaigne, it would not matter if she did. "…death is equally near when we are vigorous or feverish, at sea or at home, in battle or in repose" (Montaigne *The Essays: A Selection* 25). The boy in "Out, Out" proved himself more than strong enough to do an honest day's work. All the same, it only took one little daydream, one little imagining about how good supper would taste on his tongue to put him on the road to the afterlife. Yet, by Pascal's reckoning, none of us are ever very far from it. Physical death rarely strikes in the world of Robert Frost. Emotional death, born of imagined danger and fear of the unknown, strikes without end. In "Home Burial," "A Servant to Servants," "The Black Cottage," "The Census Taker," and "Desert Places" among many others, the speaker "survives" the poem in a strictly material sense, while simultaneously "dying" psychologically. Their imaginations serve as their executioners because they obsess so much over what troubles them that they strangle the life out of themselves.

A lack of anything specific to focus itself on causes the mind to become lazy and undisciplined. Random thoughts begin to proliferate, quickly overwhelming any previously existing sense of logic or perspective. Montaigne suffers through such an episode when he left his psychological health in the hands of fate. "On the contrary it bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over

anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness…" (Montaigne *The Essays: A Selection* 10). A person experiencing such thoughts exists in a waking dream where fantasy and reality twisted and tangled together so much that the conventional boundary between them might just as well not exist. It is for this reason that Pascal warns "it is not good to be too free/it is not good to have all that one needs." For good or bad, a person who does not have the object of his desire will think more clearly than someone who does by virtue of needing to figure out how to gain the object in question. The troubled wives in "Home Burial," and "A Servant to Servants" each have what they need to fulfill their material needs. Thus, they are devoid of any pressing concerns that might take their minds off of their grief.

Of course, a person need not suffer a devastating loss in order to grieve. Isolation serves equally well as a catalyst. Jay Parini calls the final couplet of "Desert Places" "chilling" (*Robert Frost: A Life* 286). "I have it in me so much nearer home/To scare myself with my own desert places". (Frost *CPPP* 269).This is a fitting way to characterize these lines. It underscores just how deep the speaker's psychological discord runs. Additionally, it reveals that the trauma with which the speaker feels himself confronted will be far more difficult to overcome than that dreaded by Pascal. The "spaces between stars" are, in fact, not infinite after all. Admittedly, no human technology could easily traverse the distance between even neighboring stars. Still, we can measure that distance, and we can classify it in terms most educated people can understand. Unpleasant emotions of the sort referred to by the speaker defy such easy categorization. Frost knows this. He uses it to place limits on the influence of science and the logical human intellect in his poetry. He nonetheless cannot escape the natural human

tendency to seek after information when little of it is available. In these situations his powerful imagination stimulates equally potent fantasies in his characters.

Robert Frost's insistence that individuals must personalize meanings drove him to create observant characters. When they misinterpret events around them, their inability or unwillingness to modify their viewpoints leaves them ill equipped to cope with an impersonal cosmos.

CHAPTER EIGHT

YOUR EVERYDAY CONCERNS: FROST, NIETZSCHE, AND THE FORCE OF HABIT

Driven to examine the effects of habit on existence, Robert Frost and Frederick Nietzsche became in their separate fashions armchair behavioral psychologists. Frost's uncertainty regarding humanity's place in the universe meant he could not embrace Nietzsche's views on Christianity. What Frost could embrace was Nietzsche's notion that in order for life to possess meaning, all actions should derive from well-defined goals, not arise from unsrutinized habit. Both Frost and Nietzsche seek to uncover how and why habits are formed and broken. They wish to know the precise attraction habits hold. They likewise endeavor to understand how to live freely in conventional society. I find it ever so interesting that Robert Frost expressed a desire to disrupt the status quo in terms of thought, not in terms of form. Frost cannot bring himself to divorce his work entirely from habits born out of tradition. Frost crowds his poems with creatures of habit. His characters engage in the same mundane activities over and over again. Some strive to break away, others do not. Yet, habit molds them all by dictating which boundaries they will and will not challenge. Frost's poems place the concerns Nietzsche raises in his writings in the spotlight, inspecting whether his philosophy can produce tangible change.

Form constitutes the backbone of Robert Frost's poetry, but it is not unanalyzed form. The form is not the be-all and the end-all. Frederick Nietzsche contends that form, by way of tradition, hinders the growth of mankind. Robert Frost, by contrast, takes the

content contained in the form, as the key to meaning in poetry and to success in life. When Frost writes about carving an oddly shaped carrot in the shape of a man (*Collected Prose* 79), he does not do so because some tradition demands that he do so. Rather, he does so because that is what the form, the material available readily on hand, brings out of him. The emotion that the observation conjures up in him never loses its fundamental qualities. It remains always intact, just as a sonnet remains always a sonnet. In each case only the physical manifestation changes. The idea closely follows Nietzsche's in that Frost closely examines what he encounters rather than taking it at face value. Still, Frost moves beyond Nietzsche through his propensity to build something new within the forms he encounters as opposed to simply criticizing them.

Frost analyzed his habits and how they affected the poetry he produced. The pull of tradition was not so strong that he blindly adhered to methods that he found no longer suitable. His habits came out of the traditions he held dear. “Like Hardy, Frost established his methods and ideas in his early years and did not change them very much as he grew older”. (Myers *Robert Frost: A Biography* 74). Frost’s fondness for traditional meter ran as deep as Hardy’s. So too did his regionalism. For better or worse, Frost did not give his poetic landscapes a single unifying name, in the style of Hardy’s Wessex. Still, the types of animals, woods, pastures, roads, houses, and people he crafted are so consistently visible that the reader recognizes them instinctively even in an unfamiliar poem. Nothing and no one compelled him to do this other than his love of the tradition out of which his ideas arose. Nevertheless his need to innovate within the boundaries of that tradition meant he made a habit of seeing how far he could push his methods without breaking them.

Nietzsche and Frost both yearned to utilize traditions to alter their world. However, while Nietzsche, longs to find a single unifying scientific theory which will take him back to the gods of Mount Olympus and the heroes of antiquity, Frost seeks to take the templates of his ancestors and construct from them new ideas at once familiar and foreign. He has no qualms about dancing to the tune of habit so long as he gets a turn at playing the fiddle. “I am not fearful of uniformity, even though it led to external monotony. For this monotony cannot go beyond externals. The ultimate things are too spiritual for that.” ("There Will Always Be Something Left to Know…" 65). Frost is talking out of both sides of his mouth here. His poetic world abounds with situations that both support and contradict this idea. The habits exhibited by the hornet probably do not reflect whatever internal personality the insect possesses. The song of the sleeping bird in "On a Bird Singing in its Sleep" certainly cannot because the song is sung only while the bird is asleep and therefore not representative of the rest of its character.

Still, many of Frost's characters let their habits seep all the way to the bone. The wife in "A Servant to Servants" lets the monotony of her work infuriate her and ultimately drive her mad.

It's rest I want---there, I have said it out---
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them---from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done. (Frost *CPPP* 66).

The exhausted wife in "a Servant to Servants" serves as a test case for the inevitable degeneration that occurs when a person not only cannot examine themselves as if they were under glass, but has lost track of herself to such an extent that she would not even recognize their former mentality if it shook her by the hand

It's got so I don't even know for sure
Whether I *am* glad, sorry, or anything.
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel, (Frost *CPPP* 65).

The "voice left inside" is the remnant of her former attitude combined with reactions of others toward that attitude over the years. She perceives no way out of the rut in which she finds herself. Her habits neither comfort nor please her. They infuriate her, stealing her humanity little by little. Even a teaspoon of Erasmus's notion of folly would do her a world of good. Unfortunately, her empire building husband lacks the inclination to put his work on hold long enough to provide it for her.

I 'spose I've got to go the road I'm going:
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I? (Frost *CPPP* 65).

To me, these lines provide an interesting commentary on Nietzsche's idea that strong character comes from a few motives carried through to their apex. The speaker has been reduced to a glob of psychological grease by the "road she's going". All the same, she will not leave it because she takes it as her lot in life. She thinks others will ostracize her she tries to do anything different. She believes she must remain under these unhappy conditions because those around her believe that she should. I will not venture to guess if this is exactly what Nietzsche meant by his idea that we believe what others believe passionately. Nonetheless, Frost turns the idea into a thick midnight black tar which binds the speaker into a situation from which she should otherwise flee.

People must be open to change beyond their control. “There is no ultimate privacy or final isolation. We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim on us, and that demands response from us” (Tillich “The Escape from God" 176). Both Frost and Nietzsche see the required response as coming

from constant searching. Individuals must seek passionately after their goals not just going through the motions or being blasé about what they may or may not find. However, where Nietzsche's seeker must continually delve into scientific research in order to find some alternative to threadbare spirituality, Frost has his speakers go on scavenger hunts in the natural world in hopes of currying favor from a powerful, but indifferent, divinity not easily impressed by human hopes. For me, "final isolation" becomes most important because the speaker of "A Late Walk" is only isolated until he starts walking back home. While in the woods not only can he avoid potentially unpleasant human contact, but he can uncouple his mind from everyday concerns such as what kind of flowers to bring home to his sweetheart so she will not hit him over the head for being out so late. Only at the close of the poem, when his walk is coming to its end does the speaker "plug back into the matrix" by remembering he ought not come home empty-handed. The fact that he ends his journey pretty much where he began it tells me he has got this particular "road trip" down to a routine. That is, except for the picking of the flowers. As I read the poem, he had not planned on picking a blue flower, but does so when the occasion arises. A habit has been, if not broken, modified in a way which may breed other changes in the time ahead. Likewise, in “Happiness Makes Up in Height”

Oh, stormy stormy world,
The days you were not swirled
Around with mist and cloud. (Frost *CPPP* 303).

Here, Frost connects us to his accustomed perceptions of the world through his habit of remembering a contrasting situation. While Nietzsche attempts to sweep away mindless tradition by cleaving to scientific research, Frost holds fast to memory of more pleasant times.

Were days so very few
I can but wonder whence
I get the lasting sense
Of so much warmth and light. (Frost *CPPP* 303).

The speaker gets the idea because he cultivates within himself a more benevolent form of the self-deception that, for Nietzsche, causes flattery and conniving. The very fact the pleasant time is scarce makes it more precious and memorable. That is why the speaker draws "so much" comfort from an image Nietzsche would dismiss.

If my mistrust is right
It may be altogether
From one day's perfect weather, (Frost *CPPP* 303).

Frost flips Nietzsche's idea of observing ourselves in a glass case upside down. Frost's speaker possesses enough self-awareness to understand his memory of the scene may not be accurate. However, unlike Nietzsche, who would use this opportunity to meditate on what really happened during that "clear day". Frost's speaker settles down and revels in the memory. He no longer cares so much what actually happened, as he does what knowledge or insight he can gain out of what he remembers as happening. The clearer day he "recalls" attracts his interest much more than the actual unpleasantness he may have forgotten. The speaker ends up going out and about because his current surroundings cease to provide sufficient fuel for the memory. He requires a "change of solitude".

Mindlessness, and blind adherence to tradition, trouble Robert Frost and Fredrick Nietzsche. Nietzsche laments that “knowledge today is greatly hindered by the fact that all words have become hazy and inflated through centuries of exaggerated feeling” (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 121). Frost replaces "feeling" with "habit". For him, as for his characters, how habit is employed determines whether it limits intellectual

growth or encourages it. In "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same" the birds expand their repertoire of song and knowledge by incorporating the new information they encounter in Eve's contribution.

That the birds there in all the garden round
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
Had added to their own an oversound, (Frost *CPPP* 308).

The birds add her song out of instinct or what we call in human society habit. They have grown used to her song, and no longer see it as unusual. They no longer see it as an imposition. It has co-mingled with them "from the beginning" as far as they know. The fact that it has become an "over sound" points to Nietzsche's idea that a nobler nature will overcome, and impose its will upon a lesser one. Frost applies the same notion to the relationship between Eve, a human, and the birds, or animals. However, unlike Nietzsche, who would place the birds in a subservient, position of slavery, Frost gives them the position of apprentices learning Eve's song as they go along, thereby, improving on their own. They will build on it or adapt it in some way.

Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost. (Frost *CPPP* 308).

By this point in the poem her voice has reached the status of an institution among the birds. They no longer know how to do without it. Her voice has blended with theirs because the birds chose to allow such mixing. Through the harmonic cocktail that emerges, Frost modifies Nietzsche's idea of living and borrowed finery. Eva's song was borrowed initially, but now it has become more the birds' property than it ever was hers. A new habit has emerged out of the ashes of the old one. Frost, as is his own habit, has displaced tradition without dispersing it.

The feathered ventriloquist in "On a Bird Singing in its Sleep" gains no such insights from his vocalizations. His habits deny him even the satisfaction of knowing he put one over on his predators once again.

Partly because it sang but once all night
And that from no especial bush's height;
Partly because it sang ventriloquist
And had the inspiration to desist
Almost before the prick of hostile ears, (Frost *CPPP* 275).

In this scene, Frost gives us a picture of tradition, which I take to be a habit which one did not invent, but which one still practices anyway. It is a survival instinct just as much as is flattery for Nietzsche, or folly for Erasmus. I find it interesting that the bird only has to sing a portion of what it knows in order to achieve the desired security. Nothing breaches its "defenses". I just cannot help thinking how some predator should be able to "penetrate the force field", and thereafter enjoy a midnight snack. This is especially true because, to me, being able to "do something in my sleep" means I do not think about it and might get careless. The fact that the bird is a ventriloquist plays into Nietzsche's idea that we have to become something else in order to survive in the outside world. Like Nietzsche, Frost understands what is lost when we indulge in habits so frequently that we forget why we started them. The sleeping bird never makes this mistake. His song never continues any longer than it must. His dreaming state means he never gets bored with the song, and never makes an alteration which could prove disastrous. As it is, the bird might hear the song differently every night in its dreams. This resting recitation has not placed the bird risk of falling prey to anything except tradition which it cannot possibly destroy since it has no conscious part in maintaining it.

The speaker of "The White Tailed Hornet" gains an understanding of the insect because his habit of watching the little winged avenger lets him see the insect in a way it could never see itself.

The white-tailed hornet lives in a balloon
That floats against the ceiling of the woodshed.
The exit he comes out at like a bullet
Is like the pupil of a pointed gun.
And having power to change his aim in flight,
He comes out more unerring than a bullet. (Frost *CPPP* 253).

We might just as well say the hornet lives in a bubble since the balloon and the immediate area around it comprise the whole of the hornet's world. Frost adapts Nietzsche's idea that an insect would think itself just as much the center of the universe as we do, but gives us that supposed perspective from an outside source. The hornet comes and goes the way he does not only because of natural instinct, but also because experience has taught him that habitually doing so will not get him splattered all over a nearby wall. “Such is the instinct of it I allow.” (Frost *CPPP* 253). "If I allow" is the pivotal phrase here. With those words the speaker lets us know that it is his habits, his notions of right and wrong, instinct and free will which will provide the framework within which the reader must make judgments about the speaker and the hornet both individually and collectively. Granted, any reader could say that the hornet does what he does by pure instinct. There is some truth in that. However, as when Nietzsche referred to the midge's view of itself “But if we could communicate with a midge we would hear that it too floats through the air with the very same pathos, feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of this world” (Nietzsche "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" 141) no human can ever be sure what of its behavior the hornet considers instinct as opposed to free will. Were the poem to be recast from the point of view of the hornet,

it is likely the human who would be shown as operating on nothing but instinct. The speaker's position as speaker makes him the poem's supreme arbiter of motivations. The same privileged status allows the speaker of "Mending Wall" to conclude that his neighbor was operating without some sort of necessary enlightenment.

In "The Vantage Point" the speaker, by changing things up when he looks in the anthill, acquires new knowledge of some sort. The reader has no idea what it could be. All the same, the reader concludes it must be of great personal significance to the speaker since he keeps it to himself. Readers assume as much because of the natural human tendency to keep secret information we find more applicable to ourselves than to others. Robert Frost recasts Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". Frost assigns the satirical role not to "ambition" and "grandeur", but instead to boredom and complacency. The speaker of "The Vantage Point" treats his secretive observations of the living and dead around him like scenes from a favorite television show. He already knows the "plot" to his own satisfaction so he can predict any changes to what he will see. He lacks even the right to snobbery that the aristocrats Gray refers to would claim. He is just as common as those he judges, but he has grown accustomed to judging them without repercussions. They are just museum pieces to the speaker. Their habits make them worth gawking at, whereas his habits make him worthy of doing the gawking.

As Robert Frost doubts nearly everything in the universe short of the power of poetry it makes perfect sense that he holds to what he sees as the solid rock of form. All the same, he uses ready-made molds to exceed what his own poetic nature could otherwise achieve on its own. It is only when the energy of examination and reflection

goes out of form and it degenerates into habit that it becomes an untouchable image that even the slightest touch will leave unusable.

Deception prevents this by distracting those who get too curious. “Human beings do not so much flee from being tricked as from being harmed by being tricked.” (Nietzsche "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" 143) "Home Burial" tests this notion by moving the deception out of the realm of interpersonal communication and into the realm of self-delusion. I believe the husband and wife both understand that their two forms of grief have to coexist. Moreover, I see the tension stemming from their war of wills as rooted more in wanting their own way than in wanting to memorialize the child. Each one of them has found an outlook that, on some level, makes them comfortable because they already know what to do with it for better or worse. To give it up would involve going through a learning curve in which neither one has any interest. In "Home Burial" the husband and wife let their habits concerning the grief over their dead child permeate them to such an extent that by the end of the poem they regard each other as separate species of humanity.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns. (Frost *CPPP* 58).

In the wife's condemnation of her husband we see the problematic nature of Nietzsche's idea that humans ought to examine themselves like they would any other scientific specimen. Nietzsche, as I understand him, intended individuals to analyze themselves, first and foremost. Frost allows the husband and wife to analyze each other, with particularly scarring results. Also, while Nietzsche asserted that people have to act as if they cannot see each other's motives, the husband and wife in "Home Burial" cannot

find each other's motives with a map. The husband cannot appease his wife by any means he understands.

"My words are nearly always an offence." (Frost *CPPP* 56).

This line provides an interesting take on Nietzsche's idea that when people we do not like are nice to us we get offended anyway. Now, one would think that a husband and wife who stay together for any length of time care for each other a great deal even when things are not going well. In such a situation I would hardly expect either spouse to become "unpopular" to the extent Nietzsche describes. However, the husband's approval rating has taken a rocket ride into the toilet since the child's passing. He has grown accustomed to his wife getting angry at almost everything he says. Yet, unlike virtually all of his counterparts in Frost's poetry, he wants to break a habit. What I mean is this. He cannot bring himself to go on with his life as currently constructed but he knows that he cannot rebuild whatever happiness existed while the child lived. Moreover, he perceives that just rebuilding his marital relationship without both he and his wife fully coming to terms with the death of the child will do no good.

In "The Black Cottage" the old woman's ideas about democracy have combined with the unpleasantness of her death so as to keep her children from returning to their former summer home. Of course, part of their reluctance to return emanates from their unwillingness to alter the new habits they have established in there now independent lives. The minister puts Nietzsche's principle of "a benevolent dissembling" into practice when talking about the old woman's children. He knows full well they will never return to their childhood home because they now consider it a macabre place. Still, he tries to make the boys look good to his hearer and to the reader. I get the sense that he knows the

old woman's keepsakes are not worth any significant money or else the children would have sold them already. I would say that the things in the house held a sentimental attachment for the old woman's children, but they already have the memories of summer vacations which may not even have been pleasant.

It always seems to me a sort of mark
To measure how far fifty years have brought us. (Frost *CPPP* 60).

The Minister's assessment tells us more about him than about the old woman. After all, if the old woman had felt forlorn in the house I'm certain she would not have continued to live as she did. The word "seemed" provides more evidence that the minister did not know the old woman as thoroughly as the reader at first expected, at least not in worldly matters.

Such a phrase couldn't have meant much to her.
  But suppose she had missed it from the Creed
  As a child misses the unsaid Good-night,
And falls asleep with heartache---how should *I* feel? (Frost *CPPP* 61).

The phrase provides essential comfort to the old woman, even if she does not understand it. It is familiar, and that familiarity is enough to get a reaction out of her. It moves her in some way, even if she is too drowsy to even "cry her heart out" as Nietzsche would expect her to on hearing about the tragic outcome of possibly ending up in hell. She embodies the essence of the "bird singing in it sleep" only in reverse. Unlike the bird, she does not have to sing the song, but rather has it sung to her in order to provide the "protection" she requires against outside dangers.

“If it could be demonstrated, for example, that the human mind, as both Wordsworth and Coleridge argued, partially constructed rather than discovered its own universe, then a universe of constantly changing particulars might be shaped and reshaped into a realm

more thoroughly compatible with one's desires for permanence and value" (Hass *Going by Contraries* 102). Without question Robert Frost agreed that human beings have a hand in shaping every aspect of the world around them both physical and psychological. I can also see Frost agreeing with Nietzsche on such an idea in that if the spiritual world does not or cannot provide the needed stability for self-actualization human perception, refined and sharpened by research, must pick up the slack.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
Thus concentrating earth and skies (Frost *CPPP* 303).

Eyes require responses for sake of confirmation. After a while even an observant person becomes enmeshed enough in his own world that he no longer sees it like Sherlock Holmes would but instead as Dr. Watson would. Human beings can always "see" things like stars, grass, trees, and mountains but without someone else to verify it we can never be quite sure of the accuracy of our perceptions. After all, if Nietzsche is correct and we cannot even perceive ourselves, how can we be certain how well we perceive anything else? Our senses go about "concentrating" observations confirmed by witnesses because they catalog and categorize them within our memories so that we have them on hand for future comparison

Frost and Nietzsche both place importance on the value individual perspectives have for and can add to everyday life. I see them differing significantly, however, regarding notions of the permanence of these perspectives. For Nietzsche, although formal scientific conclusions might be suspect, so long as one kept researching the quest for knowledge itself would keep even changing notions fundamentally intact. Perspectives held no such permanence for Robert Frost. Even writing them down did not

"fortify" them against the ravages of time since someone else could read them and misinterpret what their original author intended.

Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favour. (Frost *CPPP* 61).

Permanence for Robert Frost means that a belief not only stood the test of time, but that those who adhered to it "stayed the course" regardless of new developments or even new contradictory evidence. The minister's description of the old woman in "The Black Cottage" provides a prime example of what such permanence looks like when fully expressed.

For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes. (Frost *CPPP* 61).

For Frost, poetry stems from the familiar. “Inspiration doesn't lie in the mud; it lies in the clean and wholesome life of the ordinary man.” (“We Seem to Lack the Courage to Be Ourselves” 47). I take "wholesomeness" to mean "habit". It is the habits and traditions which average individuals utilize and alter that inspire Robert Frost the most. Eve, does nothing extraordinary in "Never Again Would Birds’ Song be the Same". She does not take a bite out of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and get kicked out of paradise. She just hums a little tune and it becomes a hit. The speaker of "Happiness Makes up in Height" is not recalling the day when he gave a Nobel lecture, or anything like that. A nice sunny day when nothing went wrong makes a suitable memory for him. The speaker of "The White Tailed Hornet" admires the insect not because he is the first in a new variety that the speaker finally perfected after years of failed experiments in a lab, but instead because the insect does him a good service. The homeward bound traveler in "A Late Walk" picks the flower not because he wants to take a photograph that will end

up in a museum of modern art, but instead because doing so might save him from having to sleep on the couch.

What people know about themselves troubles Robert Frost less then what it teaches them to think they know about others. In "The Vantage Point" our gentle voyeur contents himself with thinking he knows a great deal about his neighbors, both living and dead. He gives off an air of superiority that comes from knowing he can slip back into the woods if anyone disturbs him or tries to challenge his ideas. He is, literally, "above" the concerns of his neighbors not because we receive an indication of special prowess on his part, but because he has made a habit out of doing so. Mind you, when he looks down the anthill he relays no information and the poem ends. He keeps silent precisely because observing the anthill is not yet part of his routine. He does not yet feel superior to them because he does not understand the ins and outs of their comings and goings to his satisfaction. The desire for concealment also propels the action in “Revelation”.

We make ourselves a place apart
Behind light words that tease and flout,
But oh, the agitated heart
Till someone find us really out. (*CPPP* 27).

The idea of setting oneself off from "the crowd" brings to mind two meanings. On the one hand a person must be isolated from the erroneous influences of others less knowledgeable about their topic. Robert Frost's speakers trek into the woods for this very reason. On the other hand, such isolation stems from only wanting to show others our "personal highlight reel" in order to make ourselves look good. We want to encourage others to think as highly of us as we think of ourselves so that they will not disturb our habits with the "trifles" which constitute theirs. In this way, Frost brings the "low gate" from Emily Dickinson's "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" from the private to the

public sphere. Frost reflects Dickinson's ideas of isolation back to us in a more pleasing light. His “letter to the world” is written in the footsteps of his travelers. He does not care so much if we look at him, as follow after him.

The "light words" speak to the lying and backstabbing Nietzsche observes all around him in society. “People who want to flatter us to dull our caution in dealing with them are using a very dangerous tool, like a sleeping potion which, if it does not put us to sleep, keeps us only the more awake” (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 179). The fact that the words "tease" reveals that they entice the listener to think better of their speaker in hopes of gaining some "secret knowledge", but also that such potions fail to deliver what they promise. They function as a flaky pie crust but contain no filling. They are the "polite meaningless words" Yeats disdains in "Dublin 1916". Frost's speakers all have "agitated" dispositions. They cannot be content taking the world at face value. They have to understand what lies behind appearances, even as they strive not to damage those appearances.

In "The Death of the Hired Man" Robert Frost moves Nietzsche’s idea that “The origin of the opposites *good* and *bad* is to be found in the pathos of nobility and distance, representing the dominant temper of a higher, ruling class in relation to a lower, dependent one” (Nietzsche "The Genealogy of Morals" 160) from the realm of the manor house, to that of the farmhouse. Even though Warren is not a rich nobleman he lords over his home as if he were. He exhibits what Nietzsche called the "dominant temper" that comes from being habitually in charge and getting one's way with little or no argument. His position as Silas's employer gives Warren the privilege of passing judgment over Silas without having to care about how Silas might judge him. When Warren speaks

about Silas's shortcomings I wonder which, if any of them, originate from poor management on Warren's part. The reader never learns that answer, and the structure of the poem itself discourages even raising the question.

Mary and Warren believe they know Silas well enough to make their analysis of his character one of the focal points of "The Death of the Hired Man". Still, I could have done without most of their assessments because all they really said about him was "well, his habits don't interface very well with ours, and since ours are right and correct he is not much more than a waste of space." Even just a few words from Silas concerning what he thought about the way Mary and Warren ran things would have helped the reader to determine just how valid their charges against him were. Of course, "in conversation, it is largely a matter of habit whether one decides mainly for or against the other person: both make sense" (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 181).

Frost removes "largely" from the equation. In "Home Burial" the husband and wife cannot come to terms with each other because each of them has gotten into the habit of believing that their accustomed method of grieving is the only "appropriate" means of memorializing the dead child. Nothing beyond habit accounts for this. No other harbingers of trouble hang over the poem. Mary and Warren in "The Death of the Hired Man" cannot bring themselves to perceive Silas in a way contrary to that to which they had become accustomed. I get the impression Merry will go on defending Silas even if he shoots the family dog. Likewise, Warren would go on berating him even if he signed over the patent rights to a world changing invention. In truth, what Silas has been like in the past, is like now, or would be like in the future no longer has any bearing on the discussion. Silas has become nothing more than a tangible symbol of what each of them

thinks this particular collection of habits can make out of a person. Nietzsche is correct to say that both sides of such an argument are equally reasonable because they both look at opposite sides of the same habits.

Frost reexamines Nietzsche's assertions concerning what habit has to do with how we come to believe what believe. Nietzsche maintains that "men will believe something is true, if it is evident that others believe in it firmly" (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 51). Robert Frost goes beyond Nietzsche in this case. He explores not only the fact that people believe what others already take as truth, but that people will naturally believe something that others already think they will believe. The speaker of "A Late Walk" cannot be sure that his sweetheart will like a flower he picked for her while the two of them are out together running errands on Sunday morning. However, he knows she will like receiving a flower that he "went out of his way to get". It hardly matters under what circumstances the speaker actually got the flower. It only matters that his cover story sync up with what his sweetheart would have done in his place. In other words, it matters to what extent he can mimic the habits of his sweetheart.

For Robert Frost, the initial impetus for forming habits came from somewhere outside the average individual. He writes "we are all toadies to the fashionable metaphor of the hour. Great is he who imposes the metaphor (Lentricchia *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* 11). I would extend that sentiment to say that not only is the constructor of the metaphor worthy of praise but so too is the person, place, or thing which inspires him to impose that metaphor. My meaning is this. While the architect of the metaphor du jour had to break his own habits and think outside of himself in order to emerge with a metaphor which would transport others out of their ordinary

modes of thinking, something or someone else had to inspire that metaphor in him. He could not do so by himself. Even if the raw material for the metaphor came from within himself something or someone else had to bring it out of him in much the same way that Wordsworth says that the essence of poetry is "strong emotions recollected in tranquility".

Habits dictate how thoroughly individuals scrutinize the actions of others. “In interaction with people, a benevolent dissembling is often required, as if we did not see through the motives for their behavior” (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 176). Hence, why the speaker's sweetheart will graciously accept the flower he offers her. She could find out more about the circumstances under which he got it by just digging a little. However, to do so might start a fight because the speaker's motives might confuse her. So she leaves them undisturbed for the sake of harmony in the house.

For Frost and Nietzsche, any value judgments people make derive from habit. “At first we call particular acts good or evil without any consideration of their motives, but simply on the basis of their beneficial or harmful consequences”. (Nietzsche *Human, All Too Human* 43). The day described in "Happiness Makes up in Height" possessed no fewer flaws than any other similar day. The speaker just happened to notice the flowers, the sunshine, and the cloudless sky. He only did so because nothing happened to spoil the atmosphere of the day. He encountered no difficulties or irritations to "kill the mood". He remembers the day specifically because it broke the monotony of the roller coaster ride of human life as presented in the world of Robert Frost.

Our optimistic speaker of "Happiness Makes up in Height" consciously chooses to focus on happy memories rather than potential storm clouds on the horizon. He does

this because, unlike the unpredictable future, he knows how the memory turned out. It holds no mystery and, consequently, no terror. His mind transforms the memory into second nature. He can emphasize or downplay any portion of the memory he chooses at any time for any reason. The memory, thus, becomes the gift that keeps on giving, inoculating him against all manner of unpleasantness.

For Nietzsche, such selective perception comes as naturally to people as does breathing. “This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in humankind” (Nietzsche "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" 142). Robert Frost transports this idea from the illusory to the ordinary. Even though "all revelation has been ours" (*CPPP* 303) allowing us to construct the world for ourselves, what we at last manufacture is a marginalized version of the world. By this I mean that our habits, our accustomed understanding, only let us take note of that which impacts us positively or negatively. In this way we are not "reading the text" that life actually sets in front of us. Instead, we are only "memorizing" the "marginalia" placed in our psyche after something we "read" struck a chord for whatever reason. In "Happiness Makes up in Height" we only know what the speaker chooses to tell us, and he only chooses to tell us what he does because it pleases him to do so. Since he does not examine the situation further, the reader possesses only a limited capacity to do so. In "The White Tailed Hornet" the speaker extols the hornet's actions only to the extent that he can understand them in terms of what he would do were their places reversed. He makes no mention of wondering if the motives of this particular hornet are different than any other hornet might display under similar circumstances. A hornet, is a hornet, is a hornet so far as our contented speaker is concerned. In "The Death of the Hired Man" I get the impression that both Mary and Warren have come to regard

Silas less as a unique, individual person, and more as a collection of the "types" of traits they see in him that either please or irritate them. Indeed, by the end of the poem they have reduced him to a habit with which they must come to terms, or a chore which they must complete.

Frost takes Nietzsche's ideas out of the realm of the sinister, transposing them into the familiar and habitual. Eve becomes a part of the flock through her influence on their song. The speaker and the white tailed hornet form a fraternal attachment through their mutual interest in keeping each other safe. The speaker of "A Late Walk" wishes to solidify, or perhaps, rebuild a previously existing bond with his sweetheart. Thus, he brings home a flower as he may or may not have done previously. Of course, Robert Frost's characters often carry scars of their habitual relationships. Such mementos of prior injuries stem from the choice of relationships in which they engage. In "A Servant to Servants" the wife has condemned herself to eventual madness because, at heart, she would rather adhere to the destructive, but more habitual, bond with her departed lunatic relative rather than that with her sane, but benignly neglectful husband. In "Home Burial" both the husband and wife choose to bond with their personal styles of grief rather than with each other. Thus is their suffering separately eased.

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