FROST'S REALISTIC APPROACH TO MAN AND NATURE

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Robert Frost (1874-1963) can be said as the only nature poet of eminence in modern American poetry. As to his attitude toward nature and his relations to the nineteenth-century romantic tradition, no one seems to agree on though many critics have made comments.

As early as in the 1940's, in Joseph Warren Beach's monumental work *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry,* he argues that in "the most typical of contemporary poetry, English and American, the philosophical concept of nature has virtually disappeared." The reasons Beach gives are that "a great weariness has come over the literary mind, making it loath to grapple with cosmic problems, including the problem of man's place in nature" and that "natural beauty is no longer intimately associated with the concept of universal nature."[1] In Beach's opinion, "Robert Frost is a refined modern agnostic in religion and philosophy, a clear-headed and fastidious realist." But Frost is not a nature poet because "none of our poets has more steadily declined to formulate his thought in philosophical terms."[2] However, twenty years later, Robert Langbaum offers another kind of opinion about nature poetry and Robert Frost in his "The New Nature Poetry." Langbaum does not believe that the concept of nature has disappeared from modern American poetry. But, on the contrary, it is much alive. The only thing is that, as Langbaum has expounded, the notions of nature have been

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1 Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1936, 1966), p. 547.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 551-553.

radically changed since the nineteenth-century poetry. Modern concepts of nature depend upon "the mindlessness of nature, its nonhuman otherness, a concept having nothing to do with optimism or pessimism."[3] After his examination of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost, Langbaum still believes that Frost is "less radically twentieth-century in his sense of nature" because the difference between man and nature in his work is not as wide or as dangerous as it is in the poems of Wallace Stevens or Marianne Moore. Therefore, Langbaum's conclusion is that Frost's poems of nature are generally benign and nearly always consoling.

The debate about Frost's attitude toward nature and his relations to the romantic tradition after Beach and Langbaum has continued to the very present. But a few more examples will be sufficient to demonstrate that Robert Frost is as intriguing and profound as any other modern major poets in America. And it also testifies to the fact that Frost's nature poems are as important as any other twentieth-century major poems and worth further and deeper investigation. For instance, W. H. Auden defines Frost as the kind of nature poet who lives in the country because he works there. So, for Auden, Frost is "almost the only representative" today of a poet who also tills his own land.[4] However, this is not what Carlos Baker thinks about Robert Frost. Baker points out that Frost conceives of nature, man and God as separate entities. Frost admires Wordsworth and Emerson, but he stops short of their belief in natural facts as emblems of supernatural truth. Baker's conclusion comes to this: that although Frost "often deals in his poetry with natural objects, he is very far from being what is ordinarily thought of as a nature poet."[5] Again, Marion Montgomery joins the debate by differentiat-

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[3] Robert Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," *American Scholar* (Summer, 1959), p. 324.

[4] W. H. Auden, "Preface" to *Selected Poems of Robert Frost* (London, 1936), also in *Recognition of Robert Frost*, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), pp. 293-98.

[5] Carlos Baker, "Frost on the Pumpkin," *Georgia Review* (Summer, 1957), p. 125.

ing Frost and the Wordsworthian tradition. According to Montgomery, Wordsworth is at his best displaying nature's panorama, whereas Frost focuses on the drama of man in nature. Thus Montgomery defines Frost's attitude toward nature as "one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries separating the two principles."[6] Unlike Wordsworth, Frost is never sure that nature will return his love. The person in his poems must maintain his guard, for he realizes that the natural world can destroy him. In Montgomery's essay, he tries to answer two related questions: what is Frost's idea of the natural world, and what is man's relation to it? The answers he gives are: the natural world is at best impersonal and unfeeling, unable to express kindship and unwilling to return love, and therefore there are barriers between man and nature.[7]

It would be much too presumptuous to say that all the foregoing critics have in one respect or another misinterpreted Robert Frost or misread his poems. But in their discussions of Robert Frost, they have at least ignored much of his life experiences and the age in which he lives. Frost's life span extends from the late nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. It means that he has both inherited the romantic tradition and absorbed the modern thoughts made available by modern science. It then becomes quite apparent that Frost has incorporated all these seemingly contradictory qualities into his nature poems.

Concerning his romantic inheritance, Frost, brought up by a romantic poetess, loved nature and was introduced to the poems of Wordsworth and Emerson even before the age of twelve. As Lawrance Thompson wrote, "A poetess herself, and a Swedenborgian poetess, Mrs. Frost made her children feel by example rather than by precept that Romantic nature-poetry was at its best when it suggested correspondences or analogies

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6 Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Summer, 1958), p. 341.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 339-53.

between the seen and unseen words."[8] His love for nature leads him to try to identify with it. Like the romantics, Frost tends to center upon Man and Nature as two prime realities and join them in a dramatic encounter. For in Frost, as in Wordsworth or Emerson, a poetic climax often occurs when the human observer confronts nature in isolation, and on the basis of the confrontation discovers meanings about himself and the world he dwells in. To the romantics, the discovered meanings would be the revelation of a universal Being and man's relation to it. In a few of his nature poems, Frost recognizes his romantic impulse toward nature and his tendency to identify with it. But to a twentieth-century poet like Frost, modern thoughts refrain him from expressing, both freely and impulsively, tendencies of this kind. The religion of nature was threatened, first, by early nineteenth-century geology, which found in the rocks evidence of catastrophes that had wiped out whole species, and finally by Darwin's theory that the evolution of species is governed by a mindless force called natural selection. The universe is thus no longer believed to be created by God.

Frost believes that nature is "diminished" when one subtracts both God and romanticism from it. His most important individuality as a modern poet is his squarely facing this problem and exploring ways that man can honestly and realistically relate to nature. Frost also rejected the wish for such identification as a suitable subject for modern poetry. These rejections become one of the important subjects of his own poetry. They were not easy rejections for Frost to make, and his poetry explicitly shows his personal conflicts in trying to accept nature for what it is and in trying to make something of the diminished thing.

I

Man can learn to co-exist well with nature by accepting its

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[8] *Robert Frost: The Early Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 70.

realities and learning to use nature creatively. Man must recognize the need of natural objects to be what they are and man's need to be what he is. Society sometimes distracts man from being what he is meant to be, and Frost believes that one way man can make something of nature is to let its natural influence make man more aware of himself and life than he can be in the ordinary society. Poems such as "Two Leading Lights" show that Frost did have romantic impulse toward nature. His poetic temperament, however, and his individuality as a modern poet deny himself these romantic impulses any indulgence. One of his best poems, "Come In," demonstrates his insistence upon realism and objectivity.

> As I came to the edge of the woods,
> Thrush music–hark:
> Now if it was dusk outside,
> Inside it was dark.
>
> Too dark in the woods for a bird
> By sleight or wing
> To better its perch for the night,
> Though it still could sing.
>
> The last of the light of the sun
> That had died in the west
> Still lived for one song more
> In a thrush's breast.
>
> Far in the pillared dark
> Thrush music went–
> Almost like a call to come in
> To the dark and lament.
>
> But no, I was out for stars:
> I would not come in.
> I meant not even if asked,
> And I hadn't been.[9] (p. 334)

The music of the thrush from the dark woods appears as an invitation, as the nightingale's singing was to Keats an invitation. Keats and his fellow romantic poets recognized and accepted such invitations. They went into the woods to

[9] *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 334. All page numbers following quotations from Frost's poetry refer to this edition of his collected poems.

lament, that is, to indulge in moods of melancholy and self-pity. In so doing, the romantics let themselves feel, at least temporarily, that nature mourns with them. Robert Ornstein has shrewdly pointed out that Frost does not satirize the romantic impulse in "Come In." On the contrary, he owns up to feeling the impulse himself.[10] The word *hark* in the first stanza records the poet's emotional response to the music of the evening bird. The length of time the poet spends describing the woods and the bird, four stanzas, also indicates the strength of his impulse to enter the woods and lament.

In both "Come In" and "Hyla Brook," Frost has used pointed references to define his differences from the English nineteenth-century poets. In the nightingale ode, Keats hears the bird singing from the dark forest, and expresses a wish to:

> Fade away, dissolve, and quite forget
> What thou among the leaves hast never known,
> The weariness, the fever, and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan.[11]

Keats gives in to his desire: "Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,/Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,/But on the viewless wings of poesy."[12] The poet Keats enjoys his trance for several stanzas, but eventually it breaks. In his last stanza, Keats recognizes his own self-deception. The crucial difference between Keats and Frost here is that for Keats, the trance was a proper subject for poetry. Keats believed that the temporary fantasy to be a valid means of escape. Frost denies that the indulgence of such romantic impulses in itself was a proper subject for serious poetry; at least it was not a proper subject for post-romantic poetry. Frost makes this denial one of the subjects of his own poetry, and goes on in other poems to explore what to make of the diminished thing that nature is when one takes romanticism away from it and looks at it realistically.

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10 *The Explicator,* 15 (1951), Item 61.

11 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* ed. M. H. Abrams *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1962), Vol. 2, pp. 3347-3348.

12 *Ibid.*

In the fourth stanza of "Come In," Frost qualifies the seeming beckoning call of the woods by the words *almost like.* This qualification is typical of Frost; it is present from his earliest work. He is meticulously careful never to say that there was an invitation. He says it is *almost like a call.* In the fifth stanza, Frost becomes wholly realistic, rejecting both the existence of the invitation and his desire to accept it. He is out for stars, and he will not permit himself to be sidetracked by impulses from the unconscious. He will not come in, not even if asked, and he hadn't been. That last line, with its trace of humor and its deep seriousness, defines the real subject of this poem. Unlike Keats's ode, Frost's subject is not the impulse toward self-pity and its indulgence. In the closing stanza of Keats's poem, Keats is still chasing his fantasy. Frost's closing stanza rejects not only the impulse, but also the fantasy as his poetic subject.

In the body of his poetry, Frost developed woods as a consistent symbol of the darkness of the inner self. Thus, the invitation which Frost wishes to project as coming from the bird is actually an impulse to descend into the darkness of the mind. Instead, Frost chooses stars. In other poems, he develops stars as symbols of all that is outside man that man cannot reach, especially ultimate knowledge. Still the stars shed some light; at least they are themselves light, and they lift man's concerns above himself. The poet Frost refuses to enter the melancholy dark inner world; instead he will contemplate the unattainable stars and the ultimate things which they represent. In other poems, Frost did enter the inner world, but never in the serious, subjective way that the romantics did.

"Come In" is an excellent poem, and an important one, because in it Frost states his poetic subject and defines his poetic temperament. This is one of Frost's late poems. Placing it last in sequence with the early "Stars," and "Two Look at Two" of his middle period, one can see the consistency of Frost's refusal to give in to romantic impulses toward nature and also the consistent defining of this refusal as one of his poetic subjects.

In "Two Look at Two," Frost deals more sympathetically but still honestly with man's love of nature and his impulses toward unity. This poem is not as profound in meaning as "Come In," since there is no symbolism of the unconscious mind. The two young lovers are described as lovers of nature as well as of each other. Simply enjoying physical closeness to nature, they are on a hike on a lonely mountainside at dusk and regretfully realizing that they must turn back and say good-night to woods. But their adventurous spirits are further rewarded in their face-to-face meeting over a wall with two deer, first a doe, then a buck. The human pair stand absolutely still, and each deer in turn looks at them without fear. The young people romantically attribute thoughts to the buck as he looks at them: "Why don't you make some motion?/Or give some sign of life: Because you can't./I doubt if you're as living as you look." (p. 230) The young man and woman are thrilled and feel a union of love so strongly that they want to stretch out a hand. They realize, however, even in their ecstasy, that the slightest movement would break the spell and strike fright into the deer. Thus any *human* impulse will shatter the momentary illusion of union. That is an illusion Frost states in his closing comment on the event:

> Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
> "This *must* be all." It was all. Still they stood
> A great wave from it going over them,
> As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
> Had make them certain earth returned their love. (p. 230)

The statement, "It was all" refers back to the preceding line, "Two had seen two." Two had only seen, not touched or communed with two. The doe's eyes are clouded with inability to see well what stood still; the buck looks "quizzically," and the deer soon stroll on their way. In addition, the wall between the human pair and the deer is obviously symbolic of the indestructible barriers between man and nature. Whatever union the young people felt existed only in their minds, and they may themselves have realized this. The *as if* in the second-last line places the feelings of the human beings in the realm

of illusion. Earth did not really extend any sign, nor does earth return their love. A coincidence only made it appear as if nature were speaking to them. But the truth is that all the union man can experience with nature is transient and imaginary.

The setting of "Two Look at Two" is not Eden, and a number of elements of the poem remind the reader that nature is a diminished thing. The path the young lovers are following is no smoothed-over trail where they will be unequivocally safe. There is no large round moon this night to guide them safely home, and even if there were, safety would not be insured. The young people are aware of the realities of the path back, "how rough it was/With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness." The wall which finally halts them in their upward climb and which separates them from the deer is tumbled down with "barbed-wired binding." The lovers are not in a state of innocent bliss. They have already learned the uncertainty of the idea that earth returns their love. Still they do feel yearnings toward nature, and they are open for natural occurrences to affect them. They exemplify an early stage of the conflict that Frost struggled with all his life. They recognize the separation of man and nature and the indifference of nature, yet they feel the great weight of their aloneness in the universe. It is this aloneness which makes them still look for signs of nature speaking to them. Part of the technique of Frost's poetry is his recognition of the validity and the reality of such impulses in man, but at the same time to insist that nature gives no signs to man—unless man can accept the reality of nature's being just what it is as a sign.

The harsh realities do not, however, prevent the young people or Frost either from occasionally responding to nature in a romantic way. The sympathy with which Frost tells the story indicates his own conflicting feelings. Frost does not either satirize or criticize the response of the human impulses toward nature. As in "Come In," Frost's subject here is not so much the incident as it is the poet's response to the incident. He steadfastly denies himself and his readers any illusion that

man and nature can commune sympathetically with each other. It is because Frost could not honestly ignore the prominent elements of nature which are indifferent to man and destructive to both man and nature. He feels these manifestations as keenly as he feels nature's creativity, sometimes more so. Often he feels conflict in his effort to accept the realities of nature and to make something of them. He portrays these feelings of conflict, fear, and alienation in both lyric and dramatic poems. Especially the vast expressions of nature make Frost feel alienation. Images he uses to portray this isolation of man are woods, stars, storms, night, and sea. In some poems like "Canis Major," Frost takes a great imaginary leap into identification with the stars or moon. But his tone in these poems always makes it clear that he knows he is not serious. In his more serious poems, he experiences conflict in trying to identifying himself with nature, and out of the conflict he discovers a truth.

In a very early poem, "Stars," he describes the stars on a snowy, cold night and uses the images of earthly weather to find out a truth about man's relationship to the stars. In the first two stanzas, he tries to make the facts fit man's age-old wish to identification with cosmic nature:

> How countlessly they congregate
> O'er our tumultuous snow,
> Which flows in shapes as tall as trees
> When wintry winds do blow!—
>
> As if with keenness for our fate,
> Our faltering few steps on
> To white rest, and a place of rest
> Invisible at dawn— (p. 9)

The snow *flows* in earthly shapes and thus seems formidable than it can actually be. The old-fashioned poetic diction "do blow" emphasizes the romantic view of the snow and stars. In the second stanza, the suggestion of astrology in the stars' keenness for our fate is broadened to a wish that, if we can no longer read our fate in the stars, surely the stars at least have some harmonious connections with human fate. Frost has

already qualified this romantic dream-wish with the important expression of "As if." In the third stanza, with exceptional compactness, he dashes the dream-wish to pieces against reality by changing the function of the imagery.

> And yet with neither love nor hate,
> Those stars like some snow-white
> Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
> Without the gift of sight. (p. 9)

The reference to Minerva (Athena) is appropriate because the Egyptian and other ancient civilizations including the Greek believed that man's fate could be read in the stars. In the twentieth century, however, belief in a god or gods who watch over man and with whom man may experience some relationship is no longer possible for most of us. Minerva-Athena exists now only in statuary, and her eyes are no longer bright and flashing, but snow-white, stone-cold marble. They are unseeing. Since Darwin, man can no longer believe in a Christian universe of absolute, planned harmony, a universe which is ultimately friendly to man and in which man has an ordained part. The accidental evolution of life on the planet earth can claim no relationship with cosmic nature represented by the stars. As Frost says in the third stanza, the stars are neither for us nor against us, they are just simply there.

The snow, instead of flowing in comforting earthly shapes as in the first stanza now becomes the cold indifferent substance it basically is. The cold snow imagery unites with the star imagery to come to the poem's truth. But there is more. The way the poem is written implies a reaction by the speaker. The death of Minerva suggests by analogy the death of God, the loss of man's belief in a Being who is Planner, Father, and Friend. Without such intermediaries between man and nature, especially space, man is left isolated from the universe. Frost's emotion in "Stars" is that of anyone who first confronts the biological and geological facts face to face. Frost's language brings the reader to that feeling in the third stanza, and in this way the truth of the poem is discovered. If the impersonal stars cannot understand and sympathize with

man, neither can man understand the stars. The imperfectness of our knowledge of space increases our isolation. This last idea, man's minute understanding of the stars, and the ultimate pointlessness of naming and locating particular stars and star-groups, is amplified in "The Star-Splitter."

One reason man feels isolated and helpless before the stars is that, compared to mankind, the stars are timeless. Frost describes the comparative permanence of the cosmos in "On Looking up by Chance at the Constellations." The accidents which form the cosmos are certainly beyond the life-span of any individual and probably beyond the life-span of the race of man. The attitude of the speaker is one of half-serious security in the relative timelessness of the stars in contrast to the insecurity of life on earth. Frost is both humorous and serious. The poem ends with these lines:

> It is true the longest drouth will end in rain,
> The longest peace in China will end in strife.
> Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
> In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
> On his particular time and personal sight.
> That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight. (p. 268)

On the serious level, the poem recognizes a difference between cosmic nature and earthly nature. All the natural events that bring disaster and hardship to man originate from forces inside our own solar system. Man can witness changes in earthly nature and feel the effect of such catastrophic changes as winds, snows, and floods. In contrast to this unpredictability, the changeable serenity of the stars and planets ought to give man a feeling of security. But at this point the poem takes on a whimsical, slightly humorous tone. Although the calm patterns of the stars are predictable, in actuality, the stars are no closer to man and no more friendly than earthly nature. The poem, like many of Frost's poems, is a mood piece, not a statement of belief.

The unity of cosmos and the chasm that separates it from earthly life are underscored with great power and skill in "I Will Sing You One-O." The two-beat meter makes the poem

move rapidly, giving a sense of the clock-like movement of the cosmos. A blizzard is raging on earth; the speaker wakes in the night to listen for the tower clock, fearing the storm might have stopped it. When he hears it strikes "One," he experiences a sense of impotence of the snow-storm to affect time. Even if the storm had stopped the clock, time would still move on, and the stars would continue moving in their orbits, heedless of earthly upheavals.

> Then came one knock!
> A note unruffled
> Of earthly weather,
> Though strange and muffled.
> The tower said, "One."
> And then a steeple.
> . . . .
> In that grave One
> They spoke of the sun
> And moon and stars,
> Saturn and Mars
> And Jupiter.
> . . . .
> In that grave word
> Uttered alone
> The utmost star
> Trembled and stirred,
> Though set so far
> Its whirling frenzies
> Appear like standing
> In one self station. (pp. 218-219)

Frost closes the poem with a powerful twelve-line sentence which moves faster and faster, then suddenly slows down as it draws to its masterful conclusion.

> It has not ranged,
> And save for the wonder
> Of once expanding
> To be a nova,
> It has not changed
> To the eye of man
> On planets over
> Around, and under
> It is creation
> Since man began
> To drag down man
> And nation nation. (pp. 219-220)

Not only does the poem accentuate the separation of man from space, but it implies that, if man feels alienated from nature, it is partly man's own responsibility. All recorded history tells of man's variety of excuses and methods to "drag down man/And nation nation." History is the record of man's disharmony with nature. The speaker of "I Will Sing You One-O" feels no unity with the cosmic atonement and timelessness that he senses in the one chime of the clock. He feels that unity to be an entity outside himself and a kind of reproach to man for forfeiting his part in the unity. This view is supported by other poems in which Frost links inward harmony to harmony with nature. The unity and harmony which Frost, realistically or not, sees in the stars cannot impart any moral guidance or security to man. Although this poem rings with a kind of joy, its theme is still man's alienation from nature, an alienation partly natural and inevitable, but made more sharp by man's failures.

II

The inability of the stars to light earth's darkness testifies further to their remoteness. Night magnifies negative feelings; in addition, the darkness is traditionally the time of crime and other secret activities. Crimes, human accident, natural catastrophes, illness, feelings of failure, frustration, and loneliness, as well as death—all of these are suggested by Frost's word-symbol *night*. Laurence Perrine has also noted these meanings of Frost's night.[13] "Acquainted with the Night" develops this symbolism of night in powerful language. The surface calm of the poem strengthens the impact of its theme of isolation of man from man and of man from nature. Distance is a key image in each stanza, as are light and darkness.

> I have been one acquainted with the night.
> I have walked out in rain —and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the furthest city light.

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[13] *The Explicator*, 25 (1967), Item 50.

> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
>
> I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
> When far away an interrupted cry
> Came over houses from another street,
>
> But not to call me back or say goodbye;
> And further still at an unearthly height
> One luminary clock against the sky
>
> Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right,
> I have been one acquainted with the night. (p. 255)

The night lights of the city give a false sense of security. He has felt the lostness of being in utter darkness, a darkness which is inward as well as outward. "I have outwalked the further city light." He has done this not just in fine weather, but in rain. He has "looked down the saddest city lane," where life is a raw fight for physical and psychic survival. This suggests another kind of distance between the speaker and man. He is distant also from the watchman, for whom he has no alibi to account for his presence on the streeets. In the next stanza, when he becomes aware of sorrow or crime, he is too far away to help. This is a fresh and poignant image of the isolation of each one of us in our times of direct need. Distance, both the physical and emotional, separates man from man. The same distance separates man from nature. The tense of the verb *have been* also suggests distance. The speaker is recalling his experiences from a distance. In the interval he has worked through to an acceptance, and it is his acceptance and his distant perspective which make possible the calm mood.

The night is not totally dark, however. There is a moon. One might think that the natural light would offer some comfort and some release from isolation. But Frost does not allow even that. The moon is not called by its familiar title, but is referred to vaguely as "one luminary clock against the sky." The speaker's tone reflects no desirability of traditional romantic closeness with the moon. The mood of the reference is distance: it stands at an "unearthly height." Frost sees the moon as identified with solar and cosmic time, not with earth-

ly activities. The moon "proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right;" thus Frost dynamically demonstrates the utter indifference of the moon to earthly affairs. What a long way this view is from the Greek concept of Diana and the thousand references to Diana in English poetry from Chaucer to Keats. Even Frost attempts in some poems such as "Two Leading Lights" to personify the moon. But the perspective in "Acquainted with the Night" is obdurately naturalistic.

The moon *is* identified with the solar bodies that determine time on earth. But it *is* indifferent to its influence upon the earth and earthly life. Just as Athena is now dead, so also is Diana. Seen from the point of view of modern science, the moon is an uneven hunk of the dead rock and dirt. Its only light is reflected light from the sun. For this moon, the time is neither wrong nor right. Earthly clocks and calendars are used to help man identify when and where he is. The speaker of "Acquainted with the Night" does not acquire any sense of identity from the moon-clock. That image of distance emphasizes the separation of man from nature. The images of chilly rain, night, crime, cosmic time, failure of human communication all combine to present a powerful sense of distance, of alienation and aloneness.

The symbolism of night developed in this poem is consistent throughout Frost's poetry from the early "Storm Fear" through the middle "An Old Man's Winter Night" and the very lovely late group which Frost called "Five Nocturnes." The "Five Nocturnes" are one of the five or so fine poems in his generally unpopulor volume *Steeple Bush.*

In "An Old Man's Winter Night," Frost describes man's condition of isolation from a different point of view, that of an old man pitted against nature on a winter night. Night takes on the complex symbolism of chaos and destructive power with more immediate threat than in "Acquainted with the Night." The battle is for psychic survival, and the old man has lost.

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,

> That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
> What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
> Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand. (p. 108)

These lines introduce a set of sight images and a related set of light and dark images. The old man looks out but does not see. Ironically, it is the lamp he carries which prevents him from seeing. The lamp serves to illuminate his loneliness and lostness rather than to extend his vision, because it makes the glass reflect instead of allowing a view outside. The out-of-doors (nature) looks *darkly* in; it looks in without giving any sight of itself. In addition, nature does not really see either. Nature is blind and indifferent to man. The separation of man from nature is thus introduced through the images of non-seeing. Man and nature look at each other only through a dark glass and the glass is covered with frost. These images reinforce the idea of separation.

The images in the following passage are sound images which vividly reveal the mental picture of the old man's condition:

> 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 here, he scared it once again
> In clomping off—and scared the outer night,
> Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
> Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
> But nothing so like beating on a box. (p. 108)

Not only has the old man failed to see outside, but he has lost his purpose. He doesn't remember why he wandered to this part of the house. The sound images help give us a mental picture of the old man's pathetic condition and also continue the theme of man's separation from nature. The creaking of the room suggests the creaking of the old man's joints. The clomping combines with the previous image of the tilted lamp to suggest his unsteadiness. Frost says that the old man scared both the cellar and the outer night with his clomping. In turn the night has violent sounds which scare man. These fears

further separate man and nature. The image of beating on a box suggests hollowness and emptiness.

> The log that shifted with a jolt
> Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
> And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
> One aged man – one man–can't keep a house,
> A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
> It's thus he does it of a winter night. (p. 108)

Frost compares the old man to the log. He shifts, but he sleeps on. The old man's sleep is not, perhaps, wholly negative. At least he does survive, and he does sleep soundly. There is something positive in that. Although consciousness is reduced to a minimum, life does continue.

The poem describes metaphorically the state of man's relationship to nature. Man knows very little about nature; often his lamps, as system of thought, get in the way of his vision. Mutual fears also separate man and nature. Man occasionally becomes so muddled that he loses his purpose; what man may think of as great progress is perhaps a psychic sleep. In his state of being cut off from nature, the most man can do is to survive physically. This physical survival is important, Frost believes; but the dominant note in this poem is of the diminishment of life and of the decline of humanness. Charles Davis recognizes the universality of its meaning and the portrait it presents of the human condition.

> The tension in the poem causes the reader to ask whether the threats he fears are the real threats, whether his peacefulness is a sign of insensitivity, and whether he is isolated in some way he may not realize.[14]

John Yunen, in his extended discussion of this poem, correctly sees that it is a study of man's condition. He also notes that the light images, diminished lights as they are, are linked with man's consciousness:

> The great danger threatening man's world–his farm, his countryside – is chaos, the lack of meaning and lack of order represented here by darkness. We see this in the opening line, where the man, all alone in the

[14] *The Explicator*, 27 (1968), Item 19.

> empty room, is threatened by the sinister night beyond the window pane. The threat of danger appears to be in nature, but actually it is in man himself.[15]

However, the very graphic detail with which Frost paints the portrait of the old man (mankind) pitted along against a natural world more vast than himself illustrates Frost's feelings of anxiety and conflict.

The emotional quality of this conflict within Frost is well demonstrated by his excellent lyric "Bereft."

> Where had I heard this wind before
> Change like this to a deeper roar?
> What would it take my standing there for,
> Holding open a restive door,
> Looking downhill to a frothy shore?
> Summer was past, and day was past.
> Somber clouds in the west were massed.
> Out in the porch's sagging floor
> Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
> Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
> Something sinister in the tone
> Told me my secret must be known;
> Word I was in the house alone
> Somehow must have gotten abroad
> Word I was in my life alone,
> Word I had no one left but God. (p. 251)

This poem testifies to Frost's personal struggle with the dark powers of nature. "Bereft" is one of Frost's most successful appealing lyrics of loneliness. The feelings of separation from self, from other persons, and from nature are all present. The autumnal setting and the impending storm parallel the speaker's mood of despair and fear of the future. The feeling of helplessness against an alien and hostile world lies in the unconscious of all of us, and occasionally adverse circumstances may drive it to the conscious level. He does not see the storm objectively; his fears make his imagination change nature's actions into personal threats. He sees the leaves swishing and swirling in the wind as a snake hissing, coiling, and striking out

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[15] *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 38.

at him. The work blindly acknowledges the irrationality of seeing conscious action in the natural forces. Still the storm is out to get him, he subjectively feels, because it got word of his adverse circumstances and of his inward despair. In "Lodged," Frost tries to feel an identity with nature in emphasizing with flowers. He, too, has been crushed and has lain lodged when pelted by inward fears and doubts and external troubles. But in "Bereft," behind the subjectivity, he acknowledges the irrevocable separation of man and nature. It is a difficult admission; Frost seems to wish he could believe in a cognizant Being who controls nature. The destructiveness of nature, as well as personal sorrow and trouble, would be easier to bear if only one could blame a god.

"Bereft" describes a mood which can be a preclude to neurotic depression and psychosis. Part of man's battle with nature is his struggle with the destructive forces inside himself. The forces which defeat the old man's vitality in "An Old Man's Winter Night" are inner as well as outer forces. The diminution of nature is accompanied by a diminution of man. Man's battle with the forces of his unconscious is just as difficult as his struggle to survive both physically and psychically against external nature.

However, according to Frost, if man just accepts the realities of nature as they really are, he can certainly make something of nature and survive. Frost's realistic approach to nature is most explicitly seen in his "The Oven Bird." In this poem Frost defines one of his major poetic subjects, what to make of a diminished thing. The seasonal setting for "The Oven Bird" is late summer leading into autumn. Hyatt Waggoner says that Frost's "time of year is fall, and his time of day the night. He writes no poems about the spring."[16] This statement, in modified form, might lead to some truth. But it is not literally true. Frost wrote some exquisite lyrics about spring and summer. "Putting in the Seed" and "Rose Pogonias" are among the most beautiful and poignant anthems ever

[16] *The Heel of Elohim: Science and Values in Modern American Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 211.

written about these seasons and man's response to them. But in a larger sense, Frost is a poet of autumn. He is writing about an era which is autumn for man and for poetry, when man's view of God and the universe, and thus of poetry, has been diminished by evolutionary science and by the growth of industry and cities with the resulting de-emphasis on nature. Man's predicament in this season, as well as the predicament of the poet are presented in "The Oven Bird."

> There is a singer everyone heard,
> Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
> Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
> He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
> Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
> He says the early petal fall is past,
> When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
> On sunny days a moment overcast;
> And comes that other fall we name fall.
> He says the highway dust is over all.
> The bird would cease and be as other birds
> But that he knows in singing not to sing.
> The question that he frames in all but words
> Is what to make of a diminished thing. (p. 119)

Frost's problem was to make both poetry and nature vital in the post-Darwinian age. Frost did not choose to evade this problem like Yeats by building a private poetic world in art, or like Eliot by finally finding shelter in a religious system. George Nitchie believes that Yeats and Eliot have achieved greatness in poetry because of their methods of approach, whereas Frost, according to Nitchie, is only a good second-rate poet. In his final chapter, Nitchie says:

> And we are compelled to conclude that in Frost's terms life cannot really be clarified, cannot be subjected to the order-engendering discipline Yeats achieved; we are compelled to conclude that our momentary stays against confusion are not really stays, that death is merely baffling, and that all ends in jocular snopshot, Frost is not really serious about his poetry and the convictions . . . .[17]
>
> As Frost suffers by comparison with Yeats, so does he suffer by comparison with Eliot, and for broadly similar reasons. Like Yeats's

[17] *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1950), p. 43.

> cycles of sun and moon, Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism provides him with a hierarchy of "values," a theory of reality, and a set of meaningful symbols–in brief, with a myth–that enables him to make large-scale, coherent, consistent propositions about man and the world he lives in.[18]

Nitchie is right, of course, in criticizing some of Frost's later work as irresponsible. But Nitchie fails to judge Frost the way any poet should be judged – on his best work. It may be contended that Nitchie's preference for Yeats and Eliot is a failure on his part to be able to accept the realities Frost's better poetry faces and deals with. This study does not intend to try to systematically prove this contention. But it demonstrates a way of looking at Frost which is more just than Nitchie's and which leads to a greater understanding of his poetry.

One of Frost's most sensitive critics, Randall Jarrell, has noted the two sides of Frost's poetry in his eassy "To the Laodiceans":

> Frost has limitations of a kind very noticeable to us, but they are no more important than those of other contemporary poets; and most of the limitations, less noticeable, that these poets share, Frost is free of.[19]

> His good poems are the best refutation of, the most damning comment on, his bad: his *Complete Poems* have the air of being able to educate any faithful reader into tearing out a third of the pages, reading a third, and practically wearing out the rest.[20]

Jarrell comments on the public figure which Frost made of himself and the difficulties which this public figure has made in rightly reading Frost's poetry.

Nitchie's view does not do Frost justice at all. Frost's greatness is his head-on encounter with the problem of man and nature in the post-Darwinian age. It is precisely because Frost did not invent a system of symbols or flee to a religion that his poetry is great.

In "The Oven Bird," autumn becomes a metaphor for an autumnal stage of man and of poetry. The early petal fall may suggest the great blossoming of romantic poetry and its decline. Or in a larger sense it may suggest the innocence of

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18 *Ibid.*

19 *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 34-35.

20 *Ibid.*

mankind, perhaps all the ages of man preceding Darwin. But Frost gets quickly past that time without so much as a hint of regret or nostalgia. His technique is not, like some of the Victorian poets, looking backward. His setting and his subject are late summer when leaves are old and most birds, having completed their nesting activities, are silent. In the silence, the harsh call of the oven bird, which often sounds like *teacher, teacher teacher,* with rising volume, stands out. As Reuban Brower points out, the bird does not sing, he *says.*[21] He is a teacher-bird, as his call indicates, and Frost as poet identifies with him. Frost's poems do not sing in the traditional romantic sense. He cannot write poems which glory in the pastoral, benign manifestations of nature and in which man can identify with nature. Yet he is not lamenting this lost age of nature poetry or of man. On the contrary, he describes himself, like the bird, as "loud," making "the solid tree trunks sound again."

III

Frost's own poetic techniques demonstrate that he believes poetry can still be vital in the age of evolutionary science. He deplored free verse and "gimmicks" such as experimental spatial arrangement of the poems and uses of new spellings and typography. He deliberately used the traditional forms of poetry such as dramatic monologue, blank verse, sonnet, and other traditional stanzaic forms. The vitality and vigor of his poetry is its own testimony to Frost's success in revitalizing the solid tree trunks and is its own refutation of the notion that man and poetry are decadent in the twentieth century. It is also its own refutation of the notion that Frost's poems are back-looking or pastoral.

"The Oven Bird," then, as one of Frost's excellent poems is also important as announcement of his intentions as a poet. His use of the word *dust* is significant in this regard. Dust

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[21] *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 30.

always suggests death and decay. It contrasts with the brilliant fullness of life expressed in the spring petals. The highway dust phrase reinforces implied death of the golden age of poetry and the resulting decline in significance of man and man's arts. Man in the twentieth century needs instruction. Romantic escape or effusion is no longer viable or even honestly possible. New directions must be explored both for poetry and for man in his relationship to nature. Yet the death of the golden age and its left-over dust are in no way depressing or discouraging. Frost's tone is not resigned, but open and expansive. Poetry can still be made vital: "The bird would cease and be as other birds/But that he knows in singing not to sing." This is Frost's realistic approach, to make a song that is not a song, a nature poem that does not lament or look back, but a nature poem that looks ahead, that frames a question, that states the facts of nature and of the human condition and does not try to escape them, and a nature poem that tries to make something positive out of those facts. Frost used his traditional poetic techniques and infused new life into them by using the vigorous colorful language of his New England characters and by treating with his traditional forms a subject which is one of the most vital questions of the twentieth century: what to make of a diminished thing. This is Frost's central concern as a poet. He set out with the determination to make something out of the realities of the twentieth-century problem of man's alienation from nature and from self.

"The Oven Bird" was first published in *Mountain Interval* (1916) along with "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Hyla Brook." It can only be dated as Frost's early middle period, but his concern with the diminished thing as his poetic subject appears in "Pan with Us" in his earliest volume *A Boy's Will* (1913): "Times were changed from what they were:/Such pipes kept less of power to stir." The poem ends with a question which contains the implication of invalidity of the old nature-concept of Pan for the twentieth century: "Play? Play–What should he play?" (p. 23) In a later poem, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," he also plays with the

idea of man as now being in an old, non-innocent age, an age after the fall. (p. 338) The repetition of the word *fall* in "The Oven Bird" suggests the fall of man from innocence. This fall, as Frost says, is not something that happens only once. It happens anew with each new person, and it also happens as eras of civilization yield to other eras. In this sense, Waggoner is certainly correct to say that Frost is a poet of the fall.

What Frost tried to do in his poetry was to achieve some sort of middle ground between the worship of nature by the romantics and the rejection of nature by the post-Darwinian Victorians. He satirized sentimentalization of nature in both "Hyla Brook" and "The Gold Hesperidee." This sin he also castigates in a passage of "New Hesperides." But he was equally critical of the other extreme. Nature is not "red in tooth and claw," he insisted. Frost often felt this fear and repulsion from nature's indifference and violence, but he never made the mistake of rejecting nature for that reason. The thing may be diminished, but Frost is determined to make something of it, both for himself and man and for poetry.

The wall in "Two Look at Two" sharply reminds us that there is no Eden, not even for young lovers. At best man can find a kind of winter Eden, where life is less that full, where man and nature cannot meet, but where life, nevertheless, does go on. This is part of what Frost makes of the diminished thing. In going on against odds, life attains a kind of dignity. Frost had a faith in the life principle, for which he found renewed support in the survival of life against adverse circumstances. This faith was not easy for Frost to maintain, and his poems demonstrate the mental and emotional struggles he went through to maintain his faith. Furthermore, in order to maintain a faith in man himself and in life, Frost explored a number of stances. Frost's strategies vary as his moods vary, and there is no consistent development in his career toward one certain stance. Anger and defiance, resignation and stoic acceptance, bravado, intellectual quest and perseverance—these are among the responses Frost made to the nature he found and portrayed.

Frost wanted man to survive and at times believed man could. But he believed that in order to survive, man must maintain a strong will so that disaster and accidents do not rob him of his belief in his own powers. If man can maintain his equilibrium against nature and learn to use nature's creative potential, he might move toward self-discovery. This was Frost's faith. If man does have this faith, he may have some control over his own fate, too. One of Frost's fine but neglected poems demonstrates this clearly. It is "Snow." Nature is a New England snowstorm, and Meserve is the small but tough man who defies the storm. Having traveled three hours in the stormy night by horse and buggy, Meserve stops at the Coles' at midnight to rest his horses and warm himself before continuing his journey. The Coles try to persuade him to stay the night since to go on is to risk his life. Fred Cole reminds him of the destructive power of the storm:

> "I shouldn't want to hurry you, Meserve,
> But if you're going–say you'll stay, you know,
> But let me raise this curtain on a scene,
> And show you how it's piling up against you.
> You see the snow-white through the white of frost?
> Ask Helen how far up the sash it's climbed
> Since last we read the gauge." (p. 148)

Meserve's answer reflects his character–cognizant of reality, but aware also of realities beneath the visible ones.

> "It looks as if
> Some pallid thing had squashed its feature flat
> And its eyes shut with overeagerness
> To see what people found as interesting
> In one another, and had gone to sleep
> Of its own stupid lack of understanding
> Or broken its white neck of mushroom stuff
> Short off, and died against the windowpane." (pp. 148–149)

The literal-minded Coles can make nothing of such talk. Helen Cole says, "Brother Meserve, take care, you'll scare yourself/ More than you will us with such nightmare talk." Meserve does admit the reality of the storm's power and potential danger. He says, "I'll own its cold for such a fall of snow./This house is

frozen brittle . . ." Later, to defend his decision to go on, he says:

> "Our snowstorms as a rule
> Aren't looked on as man-killers, and although
> I'd rather be the beast that sleeps the sleep
> Under it all, his door sealed up and lost,
> Than the man fighting it to keep above it,
> Yet think of the small birds at roost and not
> In nests. Shall I be counted less than they are?
> Their bulk in water would be frozen rock
> In no time out tonight. And yet tomorrow
> They will come budding boughs from tree to tree,
> Flirting their wings and saying Chickadee,
> As if not knowing what you meant by the word storm."
> (pp. 150–151)

Meserve emphasizes the fact that life (the chickadees) can stay out in the storm and survive. In a previous speech, he admits about the blizzard, "I like it from inside/More than I shall out in it. But the horses/Are rested and it's time to say Good-night." But, although Meserve's tacit recognition of the storm's realities shows that he doesn't have his head in the clouds of romanticism, he refuses to dwell on the grim realities. The storm also stirs his imagination. His comment quoted above on the snow and cold are invigorating to the body and mind. Another time, Meserve says,

> "Here the soft bombs of dust
> It bursts against us at the chimney mouth,
> And at the eaves. I like it from inside . . ." (p. 150)

The scene through the frosty window piled with snow evokes a second image in his mind:

> "There where
> There is a sort of tunnel in the frost –
> More like a tunnel than a hole–way down
> At the far end of it you see a stir
> And quiver like the frayed edge of the drift
> Blown in the wind. I like that–I like that." (pp. 149–150)

Mrs. Cole doesn't understand at all why Meserve insists on continuing his journey when he could stay there and go in

greater safety the next day when the storm abated. She reminded him for at least the fifth time that no one wants him to go, he himself, his wife whom he called on the telephone, or the Coles. "Who else is there?" she asks. She fears that Meserve, being a preacher, will say something about the call of God, but he says, "Well, there's—the storm. That says I must go on./ That wants me as a ward might if it came./Ask any man." (p. 150) He sees a challenge to himself, and he wants to meet it. His defiance is unnecessary and against the rules of good sense, but he wants to push back the limits of nature's control over man.

His telephone conversation with his wife makes it evident that marriage has not unmanned him any. Fred Cole, in contrast, has been partly unmanned. He obeys when his wife tells him not to go with Meserve to the barn but to stay with her. He defers to her in the attempt to keep Meserve from going on. At one point, he briefly breaks his bondage. He tells Helen that he knows she would really like to see Meserve defy her and go on.

> "Oh, yes you do.
> You like your fun as well as anyone;
> Only you women have to put these airs on
> To impress men. You've got us so ashamed
> Of being men we can't look at a good fight
> Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it.
> Let the man freeze an ear or two, I say.—
> He's here. I leave him all to you. Go in
> And save his life." (pp. 146–147)

Cole is teasing her in the last two lines, but allows her to take the mission seriously. Another time he says,

> ". . . You did the best you could
> To keep him—though perhaps you didn't quite
> Conceal a wish to see him show the spunk
> To disobey you. Much his wife'll thank you." (p. 153)

A definition of manhood and a concept of man's relationship to nature emerge from this poem. Manhood means not being cowed by nature, but occasionally defying nature to do her worst. Distance is risky, but always to accept nature's limits is

not living. Man's defense against nature must be an aggressive, active defense, not the passive defense of hibernation. Meserve mentions the attractions of hibernation, but declines them. He also declines to take the storm as seriously as the Coles. His defiance is not a bid for personal glory. It is not a bombastic, foolish threat to nature; nor does Meserve look on his journey through the storm as a battle for survival. He knows that in a sense it is, but he prefers to see it in a different, more positive way.

This combination of realism and imagination perhaps helps Meserve to survive. If Mrs. Cole were to have to go out in such a storm, she would be defeated mentally before she left. Meserve, while he does understand reality as well as Mrs. Cole, has a dimension of mind that she lacks. His mind can explore images suggested to him by the physical reality. He does not remain tensely aware every moment of the storm's danger. His mind can roam. This quality enables him to feel mentally challenged rather than defeated as he again starts off into storm.

In one sense, though not in a theological sense, Meserve can be said as a preacher. A preacher ought to be a man of faith–not a blind faith that a god will preserve him, but a realistic faith in his own powers of endurance. Whatever his religion is (it is not specified, merely identified by Mrs. Cole as "his wretched little Rack Sect"), it has neither unmanned him nor made him foolhardy in thinking he is one of God's chosen. On the contrary, it lifts his thoughts and stimulates his imagination so that he can see more than the grim realities. His desire to defy the storm is based on his concept of his strength and manliness, not on any religious faith.

It had taken him three hours to go four miles from the village to the Coles, a trip that normally does not take over an hour. It took him three hours to go an even shorter distance from Coles' to his own homes. In addition to his physical toughness, it is partly his ability to be mentally above the storm that enables him to survive so well. When he arrives home at three a.m., he picks up the telephone and talks to

Fred Cole in a strong, positive voice, not a weak, worn-down voice. He says he got there, thanks the Coles again, and hangs up. It was all in a day's work for him. In "Snow," man, a small man, is pitted against nature, and small man wins. The will to survive is strong in him, and more than that, he is potent, both physically and mentally. Perhaps also the large number of persons dependent upon him (a wife and ten children under ten years old) increases his determination.

Meserve's defiance is not a "whistling in the dark" kind of defiance. In the practical sense of avoiding unnecessary risk, his decision to go on was not wise. But in a broader sense it was. He is a man who is willing to live with some risk. Risk even seems to inspire all his powers to their greatest height—even in the face of isolation. His fight is a solitary one. For six hours he battles a blizzard in the dark. Yet the poem does not give the reader a sense of aloneness or of man's helplessness. On the contrary, the positive character of Meserve, who does not dwell on his aloneness, makes the mood positive.

"Snow" is a poem of Frost's early middle period. He wrote a late poem, a very short lyric, expressing the same philosophy; "Bravado," one of the "Five Nocturnes," acknowledges the very basic risks that living involves and recognizes the need for man to accept these risks positively, even defying nature sometimes.

> Have I not walked without an upward look
> Of caution under stars that very well
> Might not have missed me when they shot and fell?
> It was a risk I had to take—and took. (p. 383)

The requirements for survival demand that man not spend time anticipating and fearing every potential danger beyond his control. At the same time that man defies nature, however, he needs to strive for and maintain as much control as possible. Defiance must be realistic, not foolhardy.

Meserve's attitude dramatizes that in the battle with nature, man has one superior weapon—his mind. Nature's destructive forces may even sharpen man's mind. Man's survival depends, ultimately, upon his ability to maintain a

positive mental balance so that he can employ his intelligence and his imagination in the fight for survival. In a number of poems Frost explores the possibilities of man's mind and the meaning of man's intellectual quest.

"The Star-Splitter" exemplifies Frost's conflicting feelings about nature and about man's quest for knowledge and purpose. The main character, Brad McLaughlin, opens the poem by making light talk about the stars, pretending a personal acquaintance with Orion. For a moment, he pretends that the wind and stars are cognizant beings who care about man, at least enough to be consciously perverse or hostile. The poem quickly turns serious, however, and we are told Brad's story.

> So Brad McLaughlin mingled reckless talk
> Of heavenly stars with hugger-mugger farming,
> Till having failed at hugger-mugger farming
> He burned his house down for the fire insurance
> And spent the proceeds on a telescope
> To satisfy a lifelong curiosity
> About our place among the infinities. (pp. 176-177)

Brad failed in his struggle with the rocky soil of his farm. After admitting his failure in this respect, Brad turned to selling railroad tickets to make a living. In sacrificing the house for a telescope, Brad asserts his values and his philosophy of life.

> The best thing that we're put here for's to see;
> The strongest thing that's given us to see with's
> A telescope." (p. 177)

The narrator is impressed with Brad's courage and his brazenness, and he repeats four times the fact that Brad deliberately burned his house down. The narrator pretends to question whether or not Brad was justified in his action; but the real conflict of the speaker is what, if anything, man can gain from looking through a telescope. Can these stars, remote and cold, as Frost describes them in "Stars," tell man anything about his fate or, as the speaker put it, about "our place among the infinities?"

The speaker's conflict, of course, is Frost's conflict. After

Brad has spent years studying the stars, the speaker concludes that man's knowledge has not advanced and that man is still as isolated as ever. The symbolism of the stars is the same as in "Come In" and "Stars." The stars are remote, unattainable, and infinite, and they represent all that man can never attain.

> That telescope was christened the Star-Splitter,
> Because it didn't do a thing but split
> A Star in two or three, the way you split
> A globule of quicksilver in your hand
> With one stroke of your finger in the middle.
> It's a star-splitter if there ever was one,
> And ought to do some good if splitting stars
> 'Sa thing to be compared with splitting wood. (p. 179)

These lines derogate star-gazing, which becomes a metaphor for all man's intellectual question. If man cannot find his "place among the infinities" after centuries of searching, what is the point of looking? The poem ends on a pessimistic note.

> We've looked and looked, but after all, where are we?
> Do we know any better where we are,
> And how it stands between the night tonight
> And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
> How different from the way it ever stood? (p. 179)

But if these lines reflect defeatism and anti-intellectualism, other lines contradict these. The speaker shares many nights of star-gazing with Brad.

> I recollect a night of broken clouds
> And underfoot snow melted down to ice,
> And melting further in the wind to mud.
> Bradford and I had out the telescope.
> We spread our two legs as spread its three,
> Pointed our thoughts the way we pointed it,
> And standing at our leisure till the day broke,
> Said some of the best things we ever said. (p. 179)

The star-gazing nights have served a purpose. They have brought two persons closer together and have stimulated conversation in which perhaps each enriched the insights of the other and each raised significant questions. This human communion would not have taken place if Brad and the speaker had not let the telescope raise their minds above everyday

concerns and narrow earth-bound vision. The truth of the poem is the characters' reactions to the experience of studying the stars, not in facts they did or did not learn. As Frost later indicated in "Come In," there is purpose in going "out for stars" because even if they are unattainable, they lift man's mind up.

The conflict of ideas emphasizes Frost's point that man's questing may not get very far, but the act of quest still has meaning. The telescope may only split star clusters into individual bodies rather than giving us a glimpse of the essence of the star. Still the act of looking is positive. In this poem Frost lets both sides of the question stand and does not commit himself to either.

In contrast to "The Star-Splitter," "Riders" makes a clear affirmation and presents that affirmation in a startling image. The universe (nature as process) is a wild horse, and man is its rider, resolutely but not desperately continuing his attempt to stay on the horse and to guide its course. Just as man "rides" ships, horses, cars, and now airplanes and guides them, Frost points out he also "rides" process and must guide it.

> The surest thing there is ꞌs we are riders,
> And though none too successful at it, guiders,
> Through everything presented, lane and tide
> And now the very air, of what we ride.
>
> What is this talked-of mystery of birth
> But being mounted bareback on the earth?
> We can just see the infant up astride,
> His small fist buried in the bushy hide.
> There is our wildest mount–a headless horse.
> But though it runs unbridled off its course.
> And all our blandishments would seem defined,
> We have ideas yet that we haven't tried. (pp. 267-268)

On first reading, the last line may seem like a foolhardy defiance rather than a serious statement. But I think this poem is very serious, and the word *ideas* is a key to this. One of Frost's concerns was the limitations and possibilities of man's mind in the struggle with nature. Some critics such as George Nitchie have criticized Frost for anti-intellectualism because

he recognized and described the abuses and limitations of intelligence and of systems of thought in "The Bear" and other poems. "Riders" demonstrates that Frost was not anti-intellectual. This late poem affirms the value of a flexible intelligence. Often when Frost seems to derogate intelligence, it is actually rigid systems of thought which he is condemning. The last line of "Riders" stresses the need for flexibility of mind, the need not to grasp after certainties where there are none. "We have ideas yet that we haven't tried."

The greatest certainty, as the first stanza says, is that we are riders. It is hazardous to grasp for any absolute truth beyond this. Any certainties must be found in naturalistic terms, not in theological or philosophical terms. Since there is no absolute truth, man's salvation lies in trial and error and in trying again. Temporary truths may be tried out and should be discarded quickly as untrue if they don't work. Man's mind has so far not achieved any permanent barriers against the confusion and isolation of nature. The ultimate survival of life is no certainty. But the intelligence has elasticity if man will just use it. Acceptance of the indisputable facts of nature, calm acceptance of the worst nature can do, resolute rebuilding after nature's destruction, aggressively forcing back the encroachment of nature's negative forces on occasion, positive belief in man's own powers, and flexible application of intelligence of nature—these are man's tools for survival.

Harold Watts identifies the headless horse as process. In interpretating the first stanza of "Riders," he says "we are—in Frost's sense of the word—'environmentalists' and move intelligently with the beast (process) which carries us . . ."[22] Watts also raises the central question about this poem:

> If we are so mounted on the earth, on the 'headless horse,' on an entity that bears us forward without direction and intelligence, by what right can we think of ourselves as 'guiders'? If nature, 'the headless horse," so solely a succession of particular events or facts (as it is in much of Frost's

[22] "Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue," reprinted in *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James M. Cox. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 107.

> verse) or–when generalized–is just the drift of process, and if we have no secret links with it because of a common creation, we cannot presume to guide it.[23]

Watts answers this question by saying that Frost himself could not answer the question because he distrusted society and would not look deeply enough into it to study ways in which many may be a guider. Watts is certainly right in seeing Frost's limitations in writing about society. But I disagree with his assumption that this limitation detracts from the authority and completeness of Frost's poetry of man and nature. I think that Frost found sufficient answers to support his contention that man is a guider. He supports it by affirming the value of man's flexibility of intelligence, and by demonstrating the healing powers of man's imagination in "Directive."

Frost may not mean in "Riders" that man is a guider of the universe. He knows nature's superior powers too well for that. Frost did believe that man can control his own fate, and he also shows in several poems that man has some limited control over nature and that control can be exercised for purposes good or ill. In "Range-Finding," "The Rabbit-Hunter, "The Line-Gang," and "Christmas Trees," man damages nature. Damage to nature will ultimately result in damage to man himself. This is one way that man may be a guider.

IV

But in a more important sense, Frost believed in creative evolution. Evolution is not biologically predetermined. Man, as the most intelligent form of life, can influence that evolution, and man is still in his infancy, as the image of the second stanza portrays. He has, perhaps, not discovered or developed all the powers of his intelligence. In addition, man is still in a stage of discovering his purpose. A positive response by man to the adverse powers of nature will lead to further self-discovery. Frost admits in both the first and third stanzas that man has not so far been very successful at guiding: "though none too

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[23] *Ibid.*

successful at it, guiders." And our wild mount "runs unbridled off its course." Still the potential is there, and Frost is obviously not for giving up. In his last volume, the long poem "Kitty Hawk" states Frost's hope for mankind. Man may not be able to know much of the Infinite, but Frost has a hope that man will be able to increase his control of the small part he can know. In the same poem he reiterates his faith in the life principle.

Spirit enters flesh
And for all it's worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh. (p. 436)
. . .
I don't say retard,
Keep on elevating.
But while meditating
What we can't or can
Let's keep starring man
In the royal role.
It will not be his
Ever to create
One least germ or coal.
Those two things we can't.
But the comfort is
In the convenant
We may get control,
If not of the whole,
Of at least some part
Where not too immense,
So by craft or art
We can give the part
Wholeness in a sense.
The becoming fear
That becomes us best
Is lest habit-ridden
Of our dump of learning
We come nowhere near
Getting thought expressed. (pp. 441-442)

"Kitty Hawk" demonstrates a full acceptance of the limitations of man's intelligence and of the diminished thing that nature is. The dominant note, however, goes far beyond acceptance to a hopeful vision of man's possibilities for using his

intelligence in the future.

This theme, man's persistence in spite of great obstacles and in spite of little success, calls forth some excellent poems from Frost, with varying viewpoints. Besides "Riders," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" portrays the cold truth of the human condition and finds some dignity in man's stubborn capacity for endurance. But where the dominant image in "Riders" is one of great violence and energy, the mood of "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" is tranquil. Part of the reason is that Frost is not making an affirmation, but recognizing a truth, a truth which is not easy for him or anyone to accept. The poem admits the truth and sets a perspective on the truth.

> The people along the sand
> All turn and look one way.
> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day.
>
> As long as it takes to pass
> A ship keeps raising its hull;
> The wetter ground like glass
> Reflects a standing gull.
>
> The land may vary more;
> But wherever the truth may be—
> The water comes ashore,
> And the people look at the sea.
>
> They cannot look out far.
> They cannot look in deep.
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep. (p. 301)

Jarrell has made a brief but fine comment on the symbolism of this poem:

> When we choose between land and sea, the human and the inhuman, the finite and the infinite the sea has to be the infinite that floods in over us endlessly, the hypnotic monotony of the universe that is incommensurable with us—everything into which we look neither very far nor very deep, but look, look just the same. And yet Frost doesn't say so—it is the geometry of this very geometrical poem, its inescapable structure, that says so.[24]

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24 *Poetry and the Age*, pp. 38-39.

Jarrell also notes the flatness and greyness of the poem and the unpleasantness of the truth. But there is heroism here, too, as Jarrell goes on to say.

The sea, more specifically, suggests the unknown and the unknowable. Man turns his back on the land, the known, the definite and faces the sea which he cannot know. Frost is not judging man's actions, but merely observing a truth of human nature. Even though he cannot look out far nor in deep, man continues to look. Whether man should or should not abandon his looking is not a matter Frost takes up here. He simply notes that man's small amount of success is not deterrent to his quest for knowledge. The point of view Frost takes is one of grim realism, but also one which recognizes man's heroism.

This poem is not a satire of man's ineffectuality and absurdity. It is a serious comment on the human condition. It also portrays one of man's positive responses to nature. As Laurence Perrine says, connecting this poem with the affirmation of "Riders," the watchers can see a little way–they are not wasting their time.[25] Perrine also comments on the grim truth Frost faces:

> The infinite mystery about us is a bottomless bucket which is never less full for all the teaspoonfuls of knowledge we take out of it. . . . The poem is at once an expression of Frost's agnoticism and of his belief in human mind and human courage and persistence.[26]

It is important that Frost does not try to avoid this truth. His facing of this and other unpleasant truths, truths which the scientifically minded twentieth century would prefer to forget, his confrontation of these truths without sentimentality, without self-pity, and without flinching–this is an important part of his poetic individuality. It is this individuality which Nitchie and some other critics have missed in reading Frost's poetry. Jarrell did see the depth of Frost's accomplishment, and I would like to quote him once more because he says it so well:

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[25] *The Explicator*, 7 (1949), Item 46.
[26] *Ibid.*

> This recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation, is very rare and very valuable, and rather usual in Frost's best poetry.[27]

If anyone still doubts Frost's belief in man's intelligence and in the value of intellectual questing, let him look at "Sand Dunes," another poem with sea imagery. Frost makes a more definite affirmation here than in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep." "Sand Dunes" is not flat and grey. The colors of the sea (green) and of the sand (brown) are made visual.

> Sea waves are green and wet,
> But up from where they die
> Rise others vaster yet,
> And those are brown and dry.
>
> They are the made land
> To come at the fisher town
> And bury in solid sand
> The men she could not drown.
>
> She may know cover and cape,
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape
> She hopes to cut off mind.
>
> Men left her a ship to sink:
> They can leave her a hut as well;
> And be but more free to think
> For the one more cast-off shell. (p. 260)

The sea, original source of life, is described in life imagery: it is "green and wet." The sand dunes which the sea makes on the shore suggest death–they are "brown and dry," like dead leaves in autumn. As in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," the sea becomes an arch-symbol of nature, with its contrasts of life and death. The same natural forces which bring spring and greenery also bring death in the autumn. The same nature (sea) which originally gave birth to life drowns man and man's buildings and his ships and his farmland. The same nature which provides food for man and raw materials and the prototype for all beauty destroys man and man's achievements. These paradoxes emerge from the first two stanzas. The last

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[27] *Poetry and the Age,* p. 39.

two stanzas assert man's potential to survive the forces of death as well as the conflict caused by the paradoxes of nature.

In addition to being about life and death, this poem is also about man's mind. If one can carry over the symbolism of sea and land from "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," man is threatened not only by the sea, the unknown, but also by the sand, the known. The dunes of sand, as piled up systems of human knowledge, or as collections of facts which restrain the imagination, "come at the fisher town./And bury in solid sand/The men she could not drown." Frost affirms in the last two stanzas man's ability to cast off old systems of thoughts, ideas that didn't work, and to squeeze through the straight jacket of facts to free himself to think. In the lines quoted from "Kitty Hawk." Frost called these old facts and ideas "out dump of learning." But in both poems Frost expresses his faith in intelligence, which, freed of the concept of absolute Truth, and freed of concern wih facts, can discover ways man can survive, but also perhaps a vision of the wholeness of things. Neither the known nor the unknown can cut off mind. Frost's expression of this faith in "Sand Dunes" is more lyrical and more concise than in "Kitty Hawk." There is joy in "Sand Dunes."

It is, finally, mind–man's intelligence–upon which Frost fastens his hopes for man's survival. In spite of conflict within himself, in spite of his recognition of the limitations of man's mind, this was Frost's most positive response to nature as indifferent power and inexorable process. Nature may be a diminished thing without a cognizant, benign Creator. But much can be made of it, and most important of these things is that nature can estimate man's mind and man's imagination.

Frost is distinctive in modern poetry in his personal struggle with one of the central problems of the twentieth century and in his skill in rendering that struggle without sentimentality. His poems record his fight for psychic survival, but his mind was great enough so that his struggle mirrors one of man's universal problems. His unparallelled honesty in dealing with the relationship of man and nature in all its complexity in his

poetry, and his ability to make something positive out of it without the help of social and cultural traditions make him truly a great poet of our modern world.

佛洛斯特詩中所表現的人與自然

田維新

摘要

佛洛斯特的詩，絕大部分都是有關人與自然。在現代美國文學中，佛氏可算是最負盛名的詩人。這篇論文即在研究他的自然詩中所表現的人與自然的關係，也可以說所表現的自然觀。

評論家們對佛洛斯特的自然觀看法不一；有些評論家認爲他的自然觀仍屬於渥玆華斯（Wordsworth）的浪漫派。這種自然觀所認定的人與自然的關係是人與自然靈性相通。自然對人表現了仁慈、同情、及誘導。人與自然接近，不但獲得安慰與舒暢，並且獲得啓示和道德的力量。

有些評論家認爲佛氏的自然觀，比較接近現代詩人及一般自然主義的自然觀。這派的自然觀是受了科學及進化論的影響，認爲自然對人所表現的是一種漠不關心、冷酷和仇視。人不但從自然中得不到啓示和道德的力量，並且常常遭到自然的玩弄與摧殘。

據本文作者所讀佛洛斯特的自然詩所得，他所表現的自然觀，既不屬於渥玆華斯的浪漫派，也不屬於現代的自然主義派，而是一種寫實主義的確切認知。所以佛氏的自然詩是一種確切認知的探討。自小佛氏受到母親及浪漫詩的影響，所以他並不能完全接受現代自然主義的思想，認定自然對人所表現的全爲冷酷與仇視。他認爲我們現代人所接觸的自然，是失去了它十九世紀的神性與宗教性的自然。由於達爾文進化論及現代地質學的發展，現代的自然已不再具有浪漫時期的靈性與人的互通性。但這並不是自然對人具有仇視與玩弄性。

佛洛斯特認爲現代自然詩人所該描寫的自然，是減去神性價

值的自然 (the diminished nature)。自然的描繪不該是脆弱感情的流露。現代人也該鼓起自己的勇氣，面對眞實的自然，並接受它對人類的挑戰。人類偉大的抵抗力是來自他的心智和堅忍。本文並舉出多首佛洛斯特的詩來說明他的自然觀。