

An Analysis and Synthesis
of the Theme of Nature
in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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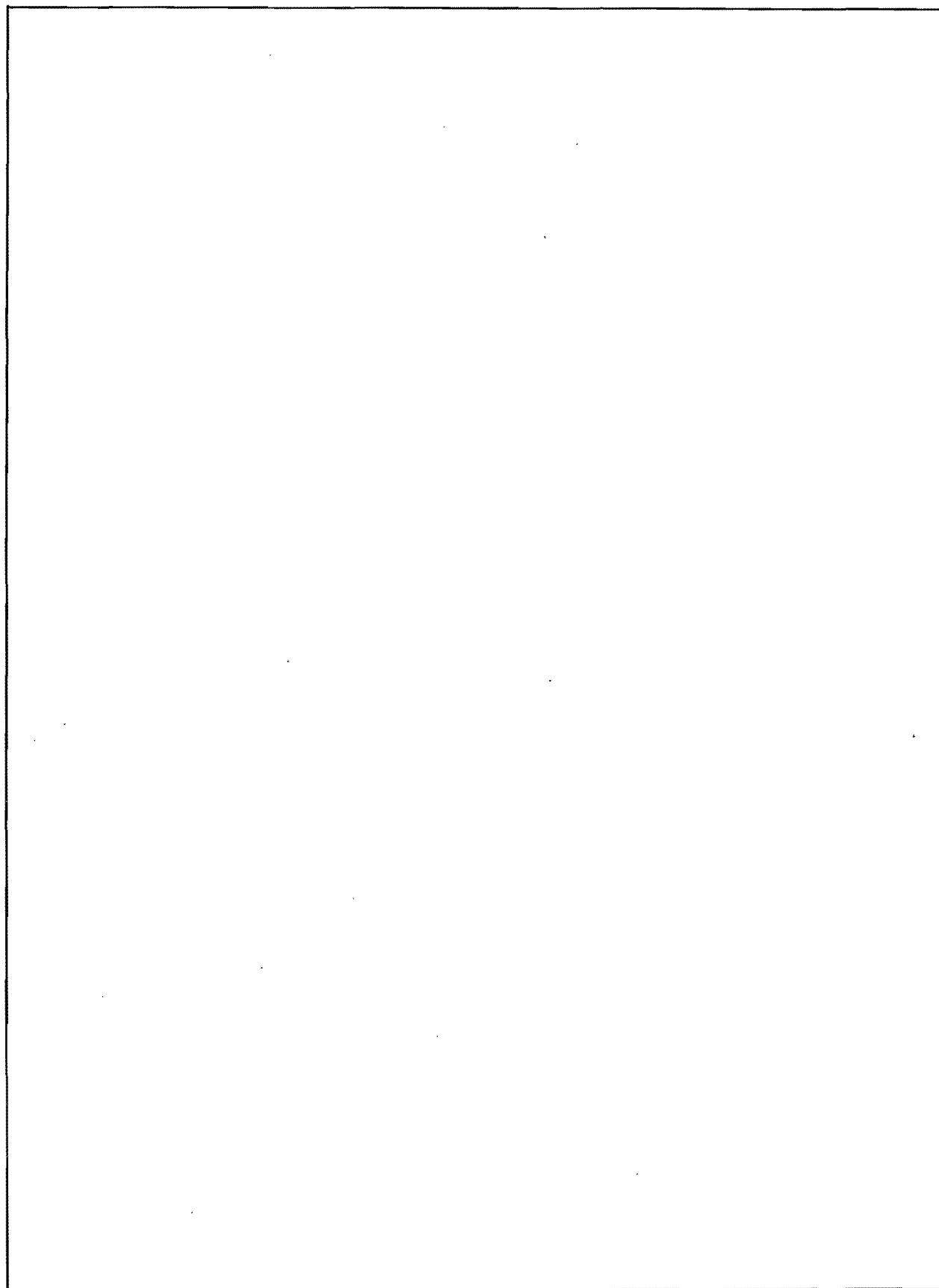


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: FROST'S CONCEPT OF NATURE	3
CHAPTER TWO: MAN'S RESPONSE TO NATURE	16
CONCLUSION.	23
FOOTNOTES	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28

INTRODUCTION

Within the poetry of Robert Frost, a consistent theme appears -- the natural world. It is not surprising that a man of Frost's background should write about nature. He himself grew up in New England where he took to farming -- his source of income for a good many years. He took from this experience a feeling for the earth that only a farmer could have. He was accustomed to long walks around the country as he watched, listened, and often talked to nature. It is precisely this nature that has been much misunderstood by Frost's readers. This paper will attempt to clarify, through careful analysis of the poetry itself and by means of the critical writings, Frost's view of the natural world.

It must be made clear now that the term "nature" (which is, in this consideration, synonymous with "natural World") takes on a specific meaning for Frost. For when he writes of "nature," he is referring to natural objects alone. Nature does not include man, but that which is external to man. One might say that nature and man comprise two distinct planes. Where these two planes meet is Frost's poetic subject. An analysis of this point of meeting is the work of this paper.

The analysis will first look to Frost's own statements, that is, his poems. Although there is a more recent volume available which contains a few more of the later poems, the edition used in this study is the 1964 volume entitled The Complete Poems of Robert Frost. Critical writings of greatest use

are by John F. Lynen, Judson Jerome, David Sohn, John Doyle, Philip Gerber, Radcliffe Squires, and Marion Montgomery.

The paper will be divided into two sections. Chapter I will first show the similarity between Frost and the nature poets of the Nineteenth century, herein represented by William Wordsworth. It will further show Frost's definite break with the Romantic heritage which saw nature as a spiritual entity bound to man by a supernatural love. Frost neither allows for the spirituality of nature nor subscribes to the notion of a bond of supernatural love. Instead, he asserts that nature is impersonal and often cruel. An analysis of several poems, in no particular chronological order, with the help of the critics mentioned above, will demonstrate this. Chapter I ends with the suggestion that in the face of adversity, man is not marooned on a desert isle. The purpose of Chapter II will be to investigate, again through the poetry itself and the critical material, the cautious optimism which Frost seems to demonstrate. It is his belief that man can maintain his hold on the planet and control over nature by responding to its adversity with courage. For Frost, courage becomes a very specific notion quite in accord with the Greek notion which saw it as the strength to endure in the face of adversity.

CHAPTER I

FROST'S CONCEPT OF NATURE

The nature world of Robert Frost is a memorable one. Readers of his poetry will no doubt remember him for the strength and beauty of his rural landscapes. Beginning with such poems as "Stars," "To the Thawing Wind," and "Rose Pogonias," in his first book, A Boy's Will, Frost consistently writes of nature -- an elm tree meadow full of blue, the gold of early spring, a tree-hidden cliff, the boulder-broken beach, flowery waters and watery flowers, frothy shores, a parade of stars, a stricken flower bent double, coiling and hissing leaves.

The fact that there is something in Frost's nature poetry besides strength and beauty is realized by most readers. But, as Mr. John Lynen in his book The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost points out, "The very act of writing about nature seems to mean a commitment to treat nature as poets in England have done since 1800, with the result that most people take Frost's nature poetry as they take Wordsworth's...."¹ Perhaps this is a valid approach to an evaluation of Frost's poetry. However, those who find themselves committed to this type of an analysis will also find that they are sorely mistaken, or at best, oversimplifying the complexities of the nature poetry of Robert Frost.

John Lynen makes an interesting observation and a necessary groundrule. He contends that, although a good percentage of Frost's poetry deals with nature as its theme, this theme

can be divided into two categories. The first is the pastoral mode in which nature is the scene, the background for human activity. The second is nature poetry in the style of Wordsworth, in which nature or an object in nature holds the center of attention for the poet. In the first category, Lynen maintains that Frost's "Yankee point of view"² shows through, in fact glares through the nature or natural object. In the second category, "the regional Arcadia with its Yankee characters is absent or unimportant."³ Lynen does not find it surprising nor inconsistent that Frost, a rural poet, should be able to shift subject material so easily.

The shift in subject is not surprising, for a poet of rural life would find it natural to write about the countryside, but the connection between the two poetic types is more fundamental than this. It consists, I think, in a similarity of thought, and hence, of poetic design.... Both kinds of poetry seem to grow from a single way of looking at reality -- the same perspective which creates pastorals when the poet's eyes are directed to rural life determines his vision of nature.⁴

Hence, both in the pastorals and in his nature poetry in the strict sense of the word, Frost holds to one basic doctrine, one "single way of looking at reality." Therefore, no matter whether one looks at a pastoral or at a nature poem or at a poem in which both poetic types are found, the poetic philosophy most likely will be consistent. This is not to say, however, that Frost's poetic philosophy is always consistent, but that there is no significant difference between pastorals and nature poems in the strict sense. Therefore, no significant distinction between the two will be made in this analysis.

The nineteenth-century literature and sentiment described a special relationship between man and nature -- that of love. For Wordsworth, the relationship was both learned "partly the result of associations made habitual in a happy childhood amid country scenes"⁵ and partly inherited as "something taken for granted and not seeming to require demonstration or analysis."⁶ This special kinship with nature is extremely evident in the bulk of Wordsworth's writings, especially in "The Prelude" and in his contribution to Lyrical Ballads. For him, nature was a spiritual entity where the ultimate realities were considered to be spiritual and the supernatural was brought into a mystical juxtaposition with the natural. In short, man loves nature; the love is returned by a spiritualized nature which forms a spiritual bond. The by-product of this union is wisdom, inspiration, illumination. Nature's spirit "is a spirit of beneficence, in communion with which man finds and frames the measure or ideal of his soul, and in harmony with which he endeavors to tune it."⁷ This and only this relationship with nature could have lead Wordsworth to write in "The Tables Turned:"

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,⁸
Than all the sages can.

Reading through Frost's poetry, one is struck at times by the similarity between Frost's view of nature and that of Wordsworth. In Frost's poem "All Revelation," the idea of nature as a source of inspiration and revelation is brought out

rather explicitly.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
 Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
 Thus concentrating earth and skies
 So none need be afraid of size.
 All revelation has been ours.⁹

The result of this communion with "earth and skies" is revelation. Nature teaches the poet some truth.

John Lynen indicates that there are certain aspects in "The Wood-pile" which link Frost to the Wordsworthian notion of nature. He says that

... the poet of "The Wood-pile" strikes a typically Wordsworthian attitude: he regards his rambles through the countryside as the means of a natural and somewhat mysterious instruction of the soul. In Frost's poem as in Wordsworth's Resolution and Independence, it is tacitly assumed that the poet's stroll will lead to a momentous discovery.... The poet sets out without a plan, unaware of what his goal will be, relying on intuition, waiting for a spontaneous revelation to come to him from nature.¹⁰

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
 I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.
 No, I will go farther -- and we shall see.'¹¹

Lynen continues that the finding of the actual wood-pile must be fortuitous. It must occur by some happy accident. In finding it, the poet strikes another Wordsworthian attitude: there is an immediate recognition "and the significance of the natural scene wells up as from the subconscious."¹²

However, here is where the similarity between Frost and Wordsworth comes to an end. Frost makes a significant break.

For what he finds at the center of the forest is not an image of the spirit imminent in man and nature, but a symbol of the strictly human spirit and its ability to rise above the physical sphere. The wood-pile itself is unimportant. It is meaningful only

because it leads to a revelation of human nature.¹³

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it here far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.¹⁴

The poet's search for meaning is actually to be seen as a search for a human element. The wood-pile signifies the fact that a properly human mind cannot be found in nature -- the only significance or meaning which can be found is that which the human mind imposes upon it. Whatever man sees is a reflection of his own mind.

The firewood will never be used. The man who cut it can carelessly forget its practical value, because humanity transcends the world of physical need. Man lives in turning to fresh tasks in the fulfillment of himself through creativity.¹⁵

Thus, for Frost, inspiration never comes as an impulse from a vernal wood.

If one looks at the imagery of "The Wood-pile," other important aspects of Frost's relationship with nature become apparent. Immediately, the scene is unpleasant. The poet is hiking in a frozen swamp on a gray day. The snow is hard, but occasionally a foot goes through. The poet must be cautious about where he is walking. The location is unfamiliar; the feeling is ambiguous.

The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.
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
 Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.¹⁶

The poet forgets the nameless bird when he encounters something with which he is familiar.

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
 And piled -- and measured, four by four by eight.¹⁷

The description is much more accurate, even to the measurement. The poet's mind is activated, but he is disturbed by the wood-pile.

And not another like it could I see.
 No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
 And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
 Or even last year's or the year's before.¹⁸

Judson Jerome has a very thoughtfull analysis:

It is only after finishing the poem and encountering the carefully stacked, abandoned wood-pile, an enclave of order in an entropic universe, left several seasons before by 'Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks,' that we see any pattern in the opening details.... The literal images take on a symbolic aura as they suggest the uncertainty of our position in the trackless universe, our uneasy little spurts of life and imagination as we dart among trees, confident only of the great weight of 'slow smokeless burning of decay' by which life faintly and futilely warms the frozen swamp.¹⁹

Mr. Jerome has hit upon a key theme that can be traced throughout Frost's poetry.

Nature, for Frost, was never what it was for Wordsworth and the other Romantics. Frost approached the natural world from an essentially realistic point of view, not in the philosophical sense of realism but with a characteristic "Yankee point of view." Frost wrote in "The Lesson for Today," one of his later poems, a telling statement of his poetic point of

view concerning man's existence in the natural world:

And were an epitaph to be my story
I'd have a short one ready for my own,
I would have written of me on my stone:²⁰
I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

Wordsworth would never have said that. On NBC's Program Conversation, an interviewer asked Frost: "Is nature essentially kind?" Frost answered: "I know it isn't kind. Mathew Arnold said, 'Nature is cruel. It's man that's sick of blood.' And man doesn't seem so very sick of it. Nature is always more or less cruel."²¹ Frost used that quotation from Mathew Arnold in a long narrative poem entitled "New Hampshire" which appears in a volume by the same name. It is somewhat surprising that Frost would later use that line from Arnold seriously, when in the somewhat early poem the line is used in comic derision of "the man who cannot face nature, who will have nothing to do with a tree until it has become boards, who talks about but encounters not."²²

The fact is, however, that Frost's view of nature is often tinged with this idea that nature is cruel, at best indifferent to that human creature which inhabits her domain. The remainder of this chapter will trace this theme.

As a starting point, one may recall the epitaph, "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." Marion Montgomery in an article about Frost's use of barriers contents that:

this lover's quarrel is Frost's poetic subject, and throughout his poetry there are evidences of this view of man's existence in the natural world. His attitude is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossing of the boundaries separating the two principles, individual man and

forces of the world.²³

This concept is readily seen in the poem "Two Look at Two." For a brief moment, a type of boundary is crossed as an affinity between the man and woman and the buck and doe is realized

Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.²⁴

However, that affinity is imperfect. For the two look at the other two from across a wall -- a wall that neither party is willing, or perhaps even able, to cross. The wall is what Lynen calls "an impassable gulf."²⁵ Furthermore, the idea of an "unlooked-for favor" is indicative, especially when joined with the ambiguous "as if." Frost is apparently unwilling to concede that earth actually did return the man and woman's love for it. At most, Frost would say that it was a rare "favor" -- something that doesn't happen often. Compounded with this is the idea of the "unlooked-for favor," and one can conclude that human beings know that they cannot expect nature to return love, for nature is indifferent.

In the poem "Dust of Snow," which was originally entitled "A Favor," there is, it seems at first reading, a slight departure from Frost's usual view of nature.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood

And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.²⁶

Nevertheless, it is clear from this poem that Frost's later decision to change the title from the original "A Favor" to "Dust of Snow" is consistent with his view of nature. For what is on the surface a gratuitous favor that nature has bestowed upon the poet is actually a chance occurrence. It is not the snow that saves the day, as it were, but the poet's receptivity -- what significance he himself finds in the event. Marion Montgomery says,

Nature's favors are restricted: the humor of "Dust of Snow" does not obscure the fact that the crow's actions are accidental and unintended... and in the poem "Two Look at Two" there is a man-made fence, an important part of the poem, standing between the human and the natural world. Man is never completely certain that earth, the natural world, returns his love.²⁷

Many of Frost's poems are less ambiguous and clearly point out his view of nature as impersonal, even alien. For example, in "The Demiurge's Laugh" (The Demiurge is the concept of a heartless creator and destroyer), Frost's view of nature as impersonal is expressed according to Radcliffe Squires.²⁸

The Sound was behind me instead of before,
A Sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As of one who utterly couldn't care,
The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;
And well I know what the Demon meant.²⁹

Mr. Squires has noted this impersonality in another poem. "In 'Stars' he [Frost] may momentarily feel that the constellations have some kinship with man, but shortly their impersonality reveals itself."³⁰

And yet with neither love nor hate,
 Those stars like some snow-white
 Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
 Without the gift of sight.³¹

The stars become nothing more than the blind eyes of the marble statue of Minerva. They are completely incognizant of man.

John F. Lynen makes interesting observations concerning "To a Moth Seen in Winter." He considers the poem significant for two reasons, both of which are important, the second being more to the point in view of the objective of this chapter. He contends, first of all, that this poem, although dated "circa 1900," is very characteristic of Frost's mature verse. Secondly, but bound-up with the first point, is Lynen's contention that the view of nature expressed in the poem is characteristic of Frost's view of nature as impersonal. Even as early as 1900, it seems that Frost had a clear idea of the "impassable gulf" separating man from the natural world. One can only speculate as to his reason for withholding this early poem and publishing it in one of his last books.

The poem itself is one of the relatively few occasions when the poet is speaking directly to an object in nature. The first lines imply a sort of kinship with the moth by virtue of the direct address. However, the concluding lines reveal his typical view of nature.

You must be made more simply wise than I
 To know the hand I stretch impulsively
 Across the gulf of well nigh everything
 May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate.
 I cannot touch your life, much less can save,³²
 Who am tasked to save my own a little while.

As Lynen explains, "not only do these lines epitomize the view

of nature characteristic of his mature verse, but, what is even more significant, they show... from a very early date the idea of nature's remoteness."³³

Not uncommonly, one finds precursory mention of the possibility of nature as alien. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time" Frost warns that the water which man finds so necessary (he himself was a farmer) can change.

Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.³⁴

Both in tone and in imagery, Frost presents a threatening scene. For him, the frost is "lurking," all too ready to "steal forth" and rob man of vital water. The imagery of water becoming "crystal teeth" adds to the uneasy quality that the poet has achieved in his representation of frost.

The poem "In Time of Cloudburst" expresses this view clearly. The poet is willing to agree that the rain is necessary and that it is a blessing. But the rain is not gratuitous.

'Tis the world-old way of the rain
When it comes to a mountain farm
To exact for a present gain
A little of future harm.³⁵

While it is necessary for growing crops, Frost knows that the action of the water, especially on a mountain farm, is erosive. The crops may grow this season, but the rain will have washed away some of the precious soil. By next planting there will be less soil. Eventually, nature taking its inevitable course, the farm will be virtually useless -- all because of the rain.

Thus far, the major objective of this chapter has been

to show specifically how Frost viewed the natural world. It has been labeled in many ways. Nature has been called remote, impersonal, and even alien. One critic has referred to an "impassable gulf" separating man from the natural world. Another has spoken in terms of a "barrier" which divides the two worlds. It has been shown that there are certain inconsistencies in Frost's thought. He at one moment feels a kinship with an object in nature; the next moment there is a barrier, an impassable gulf as nature becomes remote or as the poet realizes his position. An attempt has also been made to differentiate Frost's view from that of the strictly Romantic poets.

Philip Gerber has a rather good summary of the theme that will serve quite adequately as a conclusion of this chapter.

Nature, for Frost, is scarcely what it was for... worshippers of the woods of the Nineteenth century.... The natural features do not invariably solace with warm companionship or bring a flush of hope to the pallored cheeks of despair. Nature does not exist to work continual miracles of revelation. Nor will it impart transcendental truths to any poor, bare, forked creature who straggles near a brook or tuft of flowers. For nature is hard as she is soft. She can destroy and thwart, disappoint, frustrate, and halter.... On the other hand, the poet is unwilling to declare man marooned on a desert isle called 'earth.'³⁶

The second chapter will discuss why.

CHAPTER TWO

MAN'S RESPONSE TO NATURE

As was pointed out in the conclusion to the first chapter, Frost is unwilling to view man's existence as "marooned on a desert isle called 'earth.'" Despite the adversity of the natural world, he has managed to maintain an attitude of cautious optimism and has demonstrated a "willingness to make the best of the existing situation."³⁷

We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
Take nature altogether since time began,
Including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favor of man,
Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.³⁸

John Doyle says of this passage from "Our Hold on the Planet"

that Frost has succeeded in retaining a balanced outlook in a world where there is more than enough evidence to upset all but the most courageous minds.... Here is no blind optimism, no averting the gaze from reality, no avoidance of struggle against great odds; but here is a philosophy that offers some basis for calmness against intense adversity.³⁹

Frost poses a question in "The Oven Bird" that this chapter will attempt to answer. That question:

Is what to make of a diminished thing.⁴⁰

Judson Jerome says that Frost is that oven bird (a bird that builds a domed nest) about which he is writing.⁴¹

There is a singer everyone has 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 the fall.
 He says the highway dust is over all.
 The bird will cease to 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.⁴²

For the poet, the oven bird (one of the few birds that sings loudly in summer) is not voicing celebrations, but posing questions. The bird (Frost, if Jerome's analysis is correct) is asking what to make of "falls," the two in line 9 which play off "petal-fall" in line 6. There are several possible explanations of the two "falls:" the seasons; the falling of the leaves; the fall of man in Genesis; the decline of man's control over himself and the natural world; and finally death.⁴³ In the dry, unproductive, and rather ugly setting of mid-summer, the oven bird knows "in singing not to sing." And thus the question arises as to what to make of the diminished world. As Jerome says, "In aesthetic moments we love truth, however unendurable; love man, however pathetic and repulsive; love words, however treacherous; love things, however transitory; love life, which kills us."⁴⁴ In his most aesthetic moments, Frost loves nature, however remote, impersonal, and alien it might be. However, man cannot rely on those rare aesthetic moments to carry him along. He cannot rest upon those brief periods of love; for the aesthetic moment merely blinds man to the fact of the "diminished thing." The question posed is not whether one will make anything of the diminished world, although that is certainly an option realized by Frost. The question is what he will make of

the "diminished thing" and how he will go about it. The spirit with which one deals with the diminished world is the same spirit that is required for facing nature. The same question is asked, not whether but what one will do in the face of a remote, impersonal natural world which is, practically speaking, oblivious to mankind and which is only a fraction of one per cent in its favor.

One must also consider that Frost never actually states whether he believes that nature is really slightly in favor of mankind or whether it is man's efforts that bring about the swing in the balance, that fraction on one per cent. In arriving at the fraction, nature includes "human nature, in peace and war." This must be kept in mind, especially when Frost hints in another poem that nature will take over unless man is careful. Our hold on the planet is dependent upon a desire to survive, and the strength which man is able to muster for the task, often in the face of an adverse nature, may well be the deciding factor which assures man of his position on the planet.

For example, in "The Times Table," Frost objects to the "multiplication table" of the farmer who casually and matter-of-factly claims:

'A sigh for every so many breath,
And for every so many sigh a death.'⁴⁵

this attitude of blatant acceptance carries with it a threat, for it robs man of his spirit, of his desire to face adversity, and ultimately of his ability to maintain his hold on this

planet.

'A sigh for every so many breath,
And for every so many sigh a death.
That's what I always tell my wife
Is the multiplication table of life.'
The saying may be ever so true;
But it's just the kind of thing that you
Nor I, nor nobody else may say,
Unless our purpose is doing harm,
And then I know of no better way
To close a road, abandon a farm,
Reduce the births of the human race,
And bring back nature in people's place.⁴⁶

What response, then, does Frost expect of man in the face of nature? "Willful Homing" gives one clue.

It is getting dark and time he drew to a house,
But the blizzard blinds him to any house ahead.
The storm gets down his neck in an icy souse
That sucks his breath like a wicked cat in bed.

The snow blows on him and off him, exerting force
Downward to make him sit astride a drift,
Imprint a saddle and calmly consider a course.
He peers out shrewdly into the thick and swift.

Since he means to come to a door he will come to a door,
Although so compromised of aim and rate
He may fumble wide of the knob a yard or more,
And to those concerned he may seem a little late.⁴⁷

The acceptance implied in this poem leads the traveler to action. He knows he cannot alter the will of nature. Therefore, shrewdly and calmly he decides upon a course, and, with the strength to endure, he arrives at his destination. Since he has decided to come to a door, he will come to a door. The two virtues, strength and endurance, bring about a victory over nature. It is interesting that the Greek notion of courage is epitomized in this poem -- strength to endure in time of difficulty. This also involves an ordering of the passions and a

subordination of them to reason. It matters little that the traveler is, as it were, diminished by the time he reaches his destination. What is important is the minor victory won over nature because of courage -- the strength to endure. David Sohn has reached the same conclusion.

Frost believed that man should face up to the indifference and hostility of nature, accepting the disturbing qualities within himself, and go about his daily affairs with courage.... For Frost courage is not fighting back; it is the power to endure.⁴⁸

The poem "Brown's Descent" is another example of Frost's concept of courage in time of adversity. The setting is a steep mountain during a snow storm. Brown attempted to return to his mountain farm by climbing the two-mile slope, even during the night. One cannot but admire him for his sheer determination as

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked;
He fell and made the lantern rattle
(But saved the light from going out.)
So halfway down he fought the battle....⁴⁹

There is no humor in his sliding back down to the road (even though Brown is somewhat of a comic character), and his response to his situation is nothing less than admirable.

Yankees are what they always were.
Don't think Brown ever gave up hope
Of getting home again because
He couldn't climb that slippery slope;

Or even thought of standing there
Until the January thaw
Should take the polish off the crust.
He bowed with grace to the natural law,

And then went round it on his feet,
After the manner of our stock....⁵⁰

Perhaps, one might argue, Brown should have realized the situation before he attempted the impossible climb. His reason should

have ordered his passions. However, Frost never overtly stresses the use of the intellect, although he would certainly never deny its importance. What is to be admired in Brown is his determination, first, in climbing as much of the slope as he did, and secondly, in starting again on another path. Herein lies the importance of the intellect, in the ability to choose an alternative. But that importance is subordinate to Brown's courage-- his strength to endure. Marion Montgomery has described it well:

The old farmer maintains his fight against the physical world, grimly and determinedly. Though he slides all the way down the mountain on icy snow, he never gives up his struggle against gravity; and he wins too. For finally, bowing to natural laws, he goes around the mountain and re-establishes himself on top. Nature's laws are inexorable, but man is armed against them.⁵¹

Such is the stuff out of which Frostian heroism is made. The courage of Brown is the archetypal response which assures man of his hold on the planet.

One final poem will help clarify this idea of courage. "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" is another clear statement of this theme.

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey's end for good,
But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so.
She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,
And make us get down in a foot of snow
Debating what to do without an ax.

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain:
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain,
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole

And tired of aimless circling in one place,
Steer straight off after something into space.⁵²

The third quatrain is obviously most to the point of this chapter. Frost believes that, in the final analysis, man will overcome, that he will be able to summon the courage required in face of adversity of nature and maintain that balance of at least one tenth of one per cent in his favor. However, it is not necessary for man to grapple with nature, to violently seize the earth by the pole. Man endures, and to endure is to stand rigidly in the face of adversity. Greater courage is shown by man in sustaining the onslaught of external forces than in reducing himself in the role of mutual combatant with nature.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to clarify a major theme in the poetry of Robert Frost. Chapter I first showed the kinship between Frost and the nature poets of the Nineteenth century. Next, in contrasting them, Chapter I traced Frost's own belief that meaning in nature is an act of man. Nature is proclaimed as cruel and impersonal, being a potential threat against the well-being of man who is confronted by this strong, unethical opponent. Chapter II pursued the question of man's relation to nature as it emerges in the world of Frost. Because nature is one tenth of one per cent on the side of man in virtue of his rational obstinance, man is provided with the solution to what would otherwise be an unavailing conflict. Man is courageous and endures, instilled with a firm sense of attaining his goal. It is by this endurance that man stands strongly against the cruelty of nature and fashions his own optimism, force, and dignity. This is the truth that emerged from Frost's poetry in the course of this study.

The question of the Frostian nature world is never completely clear; he seems, at various times, to change his mind. As was pointed out earlier, even within a single poem his view of nature wavers between an almost Wordsworthian kinship and definite Frostian alienation. This need not be a source of discomfort, for to demand absolute consistency from Frost is to deny him the right to poetically explore the various human ways

of responding to ever-changing natural situations. It is almost a fact of life that a person responds differently to different types of weather. Certainly a poet should be allowed that same type of privilege.

When one is confronted with that which is obviously alien in nature, Frost calls for courage in the specific sense of strength to endure. Generally, man responds. By his own nature, man will seek the most dignified solution to a difficult situation. Faced with a tempest, man does not raise his fists and do battle. Instead, he constructs a shelter, either physical or emotional, in which he safely regards the elements of nature at their angriest. Frost is making a statement on man's integrity, an integrity that does not allow man to lower himself to the use of unchannelled energy. For Frost, it seems, this is the basis for man's superiority over nature, who assails man with her unchannelled energy. Man raises his head and walks on, as it were, sustained by endurance and confident in his human dignity. He knows that there are better things to occupy his time than the impetuous anger of the inferior elements. Man is self-directed, and he will not be impeded.

FOOTNOTES

¹John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1960), p. 141.

²Ibid., p. 141.

³Idem.

⁴Idem.

⁵Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936), p. 199.

⁶Ibid., p. 200.

⁷E. Hershy Sneath, Wordsworth, Poet of Nature and Poet of Man (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1912), p. 106.

⁸Mark Van Doren, ed., William Wordsworth Selected Poetry (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 83.

⁹Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 444.

¹⁰Lynen, op. cit., p. 144.

¹¹Frost, op. cit., p. 126.

¹²Lynen, op. cit., p. 144.

¹³Idem.

¹⁴Frost, op. cit., p. 127.

¹⁵Lynen, op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁶Frost, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁷Idem.

¹⁸Idem.

¹⁹Judson Jerome, Poetry: Premeditated Art (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), pp. 135-135.

²⁰Frost, op. cit., p. 476.

²¹David A. Sohn and Richard H. Tyre, Frost: the Poet and His Poetry (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 3.

²²John Robert Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1962), p. 83.

²³James M. Cox, ed., Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 138.

²⁴Frost, op. cit., p. 283.

²⁵Lynen, op. cit., p. 145.

²⁶Frost, op. cit., p. 270.

²⁷Cox, op. cit., p. 139.

²⁸Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 26.

²⁹Frost, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁰Squires, op. cit., p. 27.

³¹Frost, op. cit., p. 12.

³²Ibid., p. 480.

³³Cox, op. cit., p. 184.

³⁴Frost, op. cit., p. 358.

³⁵Ibid., p. 369.

³⁶Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 154.

³⁷Doyle, op. cit., p. 218.

³⁸Frost, op. cit., p. 469.

³⁹Doyle, op. cit., pp. 221-222.

⁴⁰Frost, op. cit., p. 150.

⁴¹Jerome, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴²Frost, op. cit., p. 150.

⁴³Sohn, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴⁴Jerome, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴⁵Frost, op. cit., p. 150.

⁴⁶Idem.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 456.

⁴⁸Sohn, op. cit., p. 63.

⁴⁹Frost, op. cit., p. 175.

⁵⁰Idem.

⁵¹Cox, op. cit., p. 146.

⁵²Frost, op. cit., p. 196.

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