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THE AX, THE SCYTHE, AND THE PEN:
WORK AND LEISURE
IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

by

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iv
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. CLEANING THE SPRING</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. OUT- AND INDOOR SCHOOLING</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. A TURN TOO MUCH</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. A GATHERING METAPHOR</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE AGITATED HEART</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. AT HOME IN AMERICA</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

THE AX, THE SCYTHE, AND THE PEN:
WORK AND LEISURE
IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

by

BRUCE GUERNSEY

This study is composed of six chapters and deals with the theme of work and leisure in Robert Frost's poetry. Work is both the subject and the dramatic context of many of his poems and is important to him for the leisure it provides, not in and for itself. Work and leisure ideally belong together for Frost; like the eyes, they make one in sight. They are the rhythmic beating of the healthy heart. Leisure is not an experience that excludes work, in other words, not a vacation in the mountains or factory coffee-break, but part of work itself. It is a creative moment and an opportunity for vision, for bringing order from chaos.

Frost once said that his three favorite tools were the ax, the scythe, and the pen. Each of these is an instrument of clearing, of the land and of the language, and clearing is an experience Frost continually renews in his poems. It is his central metaphor, as it was, he believed, for the first settlers in New England. Puritanism meant "to purify" for Frost, and he chose to be a New Englander because he saw in the remnants of the Puritan experience something of himself. As the first colonists cleared the land to survive and to drive
the devil from the wilderness, so too did Frost wish to chase
more personal devils from his mind.

Seeing members of his family driven to breakdown and
suicide, the poet was haunted by the fear of his own madness.
To maintain himself emotionally was his goal in life; he wished
to be a whole man in the Greek sense, healthy in body and mind.
The writing of poetry was his way to emotional survival much
as work with an ax or scythe kept him physically in shape. The
poem was a stay against confusion, albeit a momentary one.
What counted most was the writing itself, the actual doing of
the task whether on paper or in a field cutting hay, for it
is in process that we find "man thinking." Frost shares with
Emerson this belief that man is most alive, most fully human,
when he continually engages his mind and body in the endless
pursuit of meaning.

Frost does not share Emerson's love of the common
worker, however. The day-laborer does not "see" in Frost, he
does not "seek." Without language, he lacks the main tool
to do so. Whether lugging rocks or furiously shoveling dirt,
Frost's workers are either speechless or frantic talkers and
differ most from the poet himself in their inability to articu-
late their distress. Whereas Frost attempts to balance the
contradictions of reality through language and hold them at bay,
his speechless laborers are overwhelmed by them.

Frost's distancing himself from "the people" led to
trouble for him with the socially minded critics of the
thirties. In A Further Range especially Frost distinguished
himself from writers like Carl Sandburg by resisting the
corporate movements of his times. But such resistance had its emotional cost. Raised by a mother who believed that one's highest calling was love for "dear humanity," Frost wrestled with the question of his proper role as poet in an out-of-work and unhappy world. Selfish and yet not wanting to be, he was nagged by guilt much of his life, a guilt suggested perhaps by the private and tortured poems in the middle of his seemingly most public book, A Further Range.

Frost's favorite tools are ones of solitary work. They are part of the back country, not of the factory union. His interest as a poet is with the isolated man who works not for society but for himself, who struggles not with the world at large but with the voices inside him that will not let him rest. Frost's place in America is thus in the tradition of Hawthorne and Brown, and he is a "terrifying poet," in Lionel Trilling's words, because he forces us to "front" reality, not run from it. To win at the ruthless game of life meant to do for Frost, for nature is always in his vision knocking our best fences down. Finding meaning and joy in the very task of remaking is his "object in living."
PREFACE

Yes. Work—that's the chief thing in life.
I never was an ivory-tower scholar; I always liked the soil. And there was a time I made my living working on a farm. My favorite tools are the ax, the scythe and the pen.¹

Though termed a "slugabed" by his official biographer, Lawrence Thompson, and a notoriously lazy farmer during his poultry raising days in Derry, New Hampshire, Robert Frost wrote poems that often deal with work itself. Frequently, he will set his poems in fields and orchards as he cuts hay or picks fruit, or will present himself resting from or returning to his labors. In other poems Frost gives us characters who are caught up in the world of work and who have their identities either confirmed or destroyed by what they do or their spouses do. In still others Frost presents in dramatic and/or didactic ways contrasting attitudes toward work and leisure between him and his characters. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine fully the role work, and leisure, play in Robert Frost's poetry.

In Frost we find the meeting of two opposed traditions, the Greek and the Yankee. A self-taught classicist, the poet much admired the Greek notion of "the good life" and the value the Greeks placed on leisure and particular kinds of work. In contrast, the Yankee disposition, shaped by the Puritan culture

¹F. D. Reeve, Robert Frost in Russia (Boston, 1963), p. 42-43.
and the long winters of New England, tends to stress the value of all work. A consideration of both classical and regional influences on the poet in terms of the work theme will be taken up early in this study.

Frost was also influenced by the Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau especially, both of whom had very definite ideas about the role of work and leisure in a man's life. Frost cited Emerson's Essays and Walden among his ten favorite books together with Robinson Crusoe which he linked with Walden as examples of man's ability "to make snug in the limitless." For Frost, the most important work a man has is the act of survival itself, both physical and emotional survival, for which he must continually build and rebuild walls as Robinson Crusoe does.

Poetry itself was Frost's final stay against the confusion he felt around him all his life, especially his family life. Language in form enabled him to stand still temporarily "in the rush of things to waste." Since he associated the ax and scythe with the pen, we should ask in what way the pen was a tool for him and, importantly, if work itself helped determine what that pen wrote. In other words, did Frost derive an aesthetic from farm and factory work; did work itself influence his very language? We should consider too in what way leisure influences language, for, as we shall see, the overworked characters in Frost's verse are curiously speechless. Is work always beneficial, then, in Frost? Is it "the chief thing in life"? Might it not also be destructive and both a cause and an indication of emotional breakdown?
The work-leisure theme leads us as well into political and moral questions. Do men work together or apart, the issue Frost raises in "The Tuft of Flowers"? Does work join men as one or separate them? In A Further Range of 1936 Frost asks us to consider the value of Utopian social movements. The 1930's were years of intense labor activity, and the common assumption was that unions were good and valuable. With poems such as "The Lone Striker" and "Departmental" Frost challenges this generally held notion, and his reviewers on the Left challenged him. The 1936 collection, however, is Frost's most complex book. It does not by any means represent a simple rejection of social responsibility on Frost's part but a deeply worrisome one. Loneliness and guilt are at the heart of A Further Range, and we shall investigate thoroughly the poet's attitude toward the common worker and poetry's role for Frost in an out-of-work world.

General criticism of Frost has moved through two distinct phases, that of recognition of him as indeed a poet worth reading (see Richard Thornton's Recognition of Robert Frost, 1938, and Thompson's Fire and Ice, 1942) and that of acceptance of him as a poet deserving the same patient attention as Yeats or Eliot, Wordsworth or Emerson (see George Mitchie's Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, 1960, and Reuben

Brower's *Constellations of Intention*, 1963). The direction of Frost criticism now is to understand the poems themselves, for what they have to say on their own and not in comparison with other poets. Whereas the work of Yeats or Eliot has demanded close scrutiny, Frost's poems have been readily accepted as simple and straightforward; the poems, seemingly, have not needed close study and, in general, have not received it. In fact, until John Lynen's book in 1960, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, and Richard Poirier's 1977 study, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, there had been no extended study based on a series of analyses of individual poems.

No reading of the poems can now be complete, however, without some consideration of the newly completed biography. A very different man appears in the Thompson volumes than had previously been known, and the dark facts of Frost's life as well as the more happy will inevitably enter into any future study of the poet, and rightly so. (Poirier's recent book is a good example.) Accordingly, this investigation will use the biography where appropriate for a further understanding of the poems. Our focus, however, will always be on the poems themselves. We will proceed, in other words, in Lynen's and Poirier's way, from the work. The comparisons we shall make will be largely from within, from how one Frost poem or group of poems compares with another. Finally, we shall seek to establish, as Lynen does especially, with his pastoral approach, a way into Frost's poetry, a fresh basis for reading him. The work theme occurs and reoccurs so often in the poems that we must ask what Frost's attitude is toward it. Why is
he or one of his characters nearly always working, resting from work, or talking about it? The goal is to answer this question, to see what work means in the poems for the purpose of understanding the vision of Robert Frost.
CHAPTER I

CLEANING THE SPRING

"The Pasture" is Robert Frost's epigraph to his collected works. Set apart by type face and position, it was the poet's own choice for a way to begin, a way into his poetry as a whole. It is, as Reuben Brower suggests, a poem of "multiple intentions," too often passed over as a slight lyric of the sentimental variety that made the poet popular with women's clubs and local literary societies. Any study of Frost's poetry should begin with "The Pasture," with the poet's own beginning. What is important about the poem, what issues central to Frost's work does it raise?

Though probably written in England in 1913, "The Pasture" is an act of memory, the recollection of "moments of lovemaking at Derry," a love poem that Frost boasted to be "new in treatment and effect. You won't find anything in the whole range of English poetry just like that." The poet as farm worker addresses his lover (and by virtue of the poem's opening position, the reader) in an amiable, conversational way,

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1 "The Pasture" did not appear in A Boy's Will, although it was written before publication of that book. It did preface North of Boston, however, and all later editions of Frost's collected poems.


3 Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years (New York, 1966), p. 311.

4 The Early Years, p. 561.
asking her to join him in his tasks of cleaning the spring
and fetching the calf:

The Pasture

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.—You come too."

The poem links three central themes in Frost's poetry:
work, leisure, and love. He is "going out" to perform his
chores, the assumption being that he is currently in; that is,
the work he is about to do is an outside thing, something having
to do with the natural world. In asking his lover-reader to
join him, the poet is asking that we help him in, or at least
be witness to, what he is about to do. But the "help" he asks
of us does not suggest a burden we are to bear nor are we
being swindled in a Tom Sawyer-like way into doing something
we do not want to do. Work here is pleasurable and natural,
not a task to be dreaded. The cleaning of the spring is a
clarifying process as the parenthetical third line suggests,
a way of seeing to the bottom of the water; and the fetching
of the calf is obviously a life-sustaining act of protection
as we help him bring the calf to its new enclosure. We are,
in short, joining in two jobs here that are fulfilling ones,

5The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. by Edward Connery
all subsequent quotations from the poems are from this
dition.
hardly those of the mechanized routine of the modern factory
worker or common day laborer.

It is important to note that the two outside jobs are,
as it were, in the future. What the poet is going to do and
his hope for our company and that of his lover are yet to be
satisfied. The question is, where is he "now" in the poem's
present and what is he doing? He is, it seems, at rest, at a
moment of leisure, about to begin work again. But, unlike
many of us for whom the thought of return to work is anathema,
Frost has no dread here, and, in fact, as his tone suggests,
looks forward to doing what he has to do. The break between
work and leisure in the poem is not one characterized by
dread or exhaustion, and his request for company is not made
out of fear or need but simply out of the belief that we also
may find joy in the task. The "You come too" refrain of the
fourth and eighth lines is not meant as an imperative demand.
Instead, he is saying, "Join me, won't you," asking the reader
to be his joyful helpmate.

In essence, what we have in "The Pasture" is a sense
of rhythmic alternation between work and leisure. Though one
is possible without the other, the tone here implies the inter-
dependence of the two without which, as we will clearly see
in other poems, both physical and emotional health are not
possible. Like the systolic/diastolic beatings of the heart
or the alternating stresses of an iambic line (the only meter
possible, Frost believed), work and leisure combine in their
own kind of rhythmic way to make an individual whole, just as
the poet here must be with his lover to make his life complete.
This rhythm of work and leisure provides a fresh perspective to the famous and overly explicited "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem that begins, much as "The Pasture" does, with the poet at rest, about to begin in this case the chore of keeping unspecified promises. In fact, the entire poem might be considered a leisure moment, the need of returning to work, though never threatening, always there.

Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

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

The lyric presents two worlds, that of the workaday village and that of the woods, "lovely, dark, and deep," whose owner, a practical man it seems, not wanting to drive through snow to get to work, lives in town. The poet is a man-in-between, mediating between the busy village and the sleepy forest, able to move easily between work and rest, practicality and dream. Though provocative, the many darker interpretations of this poem as Frost's death wish seem too severe and terribly final, overstressing as they do the act
of stopping and the woods themselves as total escape. We would do the restful tone of the poem more justice if we were to see the stopping as part of a natural process, that diastolic phase of the heart before the thumping work of the next beat. In short, the poet stops for a needed moment of leisure before his return to the working world of the village, its land barons and draw horses.

But the poet is neither baron nor horse; he alone in the poem sees the woods as "lovely"—to the horse they are out of pattern, to the owner, out of town. For the speaker, however, able to balance his life between sleeping and waking, leisure and chore, they are a stay against the confusion of day-to-day life, a retreat. But just as he recognizes the need for such a retreat, he realizes as well the urgency of return, as the final quatrain makes clear. Thus, the poem in this interpretation is a statement of health not suicide.

It is the healthy heart that beats and pauses and the healthy life that is ruled by concentration balanced by relaxation,

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For a reading that suggests a less dark aspect to the woods see John T. Ogilvie, "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry," South Atlantic Quarterly (Winter, 1959), pp. 64-76.

7 Thompson draws a similar conclusion in The Early Years: "The poem makes more sense if taken as an expression of a mood in which the death-wish is answered and rejected" (p. 548).
not solely by the drive forward. As Dr. Alexander Reid Martin makes clear in his persuasive essay, "Self-Alienation and the Loss of Leisure," "In the creative cycle work and leisure complement each other. Creative growth depends upon the maintainance of this cycle. It is not achieved through leisure alone, but is impossible without it."\(^8\)

The work-leisure cycle we have seen in the above, well-known poems and the locales of both suggest the Eden theme in Frost's poetry. Though a much discussed topic in Frost criticism,\(^9\) the issue of Edenic imagery has not been related to the work theme, and work, after all, was Adam's curse for eating the apple with Eve:

> And to Adam he said,  
> "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
> and have eaten of the tree  
> of which I commanded you,  
> 'You shall not eat of it,'  
> cursed is the ground because of you;  
> in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;  
> and you shall eat of the plants of the field.  
> In the sweat of your face  
> you shall eat bread  
> till you return to the ground,  
> for out of it you were taken;  
> you are dust,  
> and to dust you shall return."

---


\(^9\)Negative criticism of Frost has often referred to his apparent yearning for Eden, his seeming desire to run away from reality. See especially: Ivor Winters, "Robert Frost: Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet" in Cox, pp. 58-82; George W. Nichie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham, 1960); Isadore Traschen, "Robert Frost: Some Divisions in the Whole Man," Yale Review (October, 1965), pp. 57-70.
The soil, work, and even apples themselves are linked again and again by Frost in varying ways: from the comic "Cow at Apple Time" to the meditative "After Apple Picking."

His is a post-Edenic world; our fall is the premise he accepts, the basis of his vision of man. "'Yes, I suppose I am a Puritan," he said to his friend John Farrar, and the Puritan sense of man's limitations as a result of his fall is crucial to an understanding of Frost. Too often critics of the poet have considered Frost as escapist, his poems a nostalgic yearning for a simplified world, his portrait of New England the Forest of Arden. Malcolm Cowley's comments are typical:

\[\ldots\text{he/Frost}\ldots\] is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill. And the praise heaped on Frost in recent years is somehow connected in one's mind with the search for ancestors and authentic old furniture. You imagine a saltbox cottage restored to its original lines; outside it a wellsweep preserved for its picturesque quality, even though there is also an electric pump; at the doorway a coach lamp wired and polished; inside the house a set of Hitchcock chairs, a Salem rocker, willow-ware plates and Sandwich glass; and, on the tip-top table, carefully dusted, a first edition of Robert Frost.\[11\]

To read Frost's poems as Edenic yearnings is to misread them badly. The abundance of work poems itself suggests a postlapsarian, hardly sanguine vision. As we shall see in later chapters of this study, Frost's characters live by the sweat of their brows, fighting to shape their lives out of the

\[\ldots\text{Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph (New York, 1970), p. 230.}\]

\[\ldots\text{Malcolm Cowley, 'The Case Against Mr. Frost' in Cox, p. 45.}\]
dust they have come from, in fear of the dust they will return to. Our immediate concern, however, is not with how particular characters survive or are destroyed by their work but with Frost's attitude toward work itself. Is work indeed man's curse or his blessing in disguise? What rewards does work hold for us; are there any at all?

One of the more famous work scenes in Frost's poetry occurs that morning when the poet, pitchfork in hand, sets out to turn the newly cut hay in the sun. Originally written as a theme paper for an English class at Harvard in 1897, "The Tuft of Flowers," Lawrence Thompson tells us, "had been inspired by an experience that had occurred while he was haying for Old John Dinsmore at Corbett's Pond near Salem, New Hampshire," one of the many and various summer work experiences Frost had.

The Tuft of Flowers

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the leveled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been—alone,

"As all must be," I said within my heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

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12 The Early Years, p. 318.

13 A complete list of Frost's odd jobs is given by Thompson in The Early Years, pp. 615-616. Several of these jobs are discussed in detail in Chapter Five of this study.
But as I said it, swift there passed me by
On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly,
Seeking with memories grown dim o'er night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.
And once I marked his flight go round and round,
As where some flower lay withering on the ground.
And then he flew as far as eye could see,
And then on tremulous wing came back to me.
I thought of questions that have no reply,
And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;
But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,
A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.
The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,
Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim.
The butterfly and I had lit upon,
Nevertheless, a message from the dawn,
That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,
And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone;
But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade;
And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.
"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

There are two workers in this poem, the mower and the
turner-poet, who become as one by their task and, more especially, how they perform that task. Like Ishmael and Queequeg tied together by "the monkey rope" or like the very couplets the poem is arranged in, each worker needs the other;
their jobs are inextricably linked, mower and turner joining in the making of hay out of grass. Theirs is "the yoke of a common task," as G. R. Elliott has said, although this yoking in the physical chore leads directly to their union in "the spirit of labor and the spirit of sympathy." Both workers see beauty in the common, in that clump of wildflowers that the mower had spared and that the turner discovers with the aid of the butterfly. Here, in the reverence they share for natural beauty and for "sheer morning gladness at the brim," the two workers, together as they are in their physical activity, become as brothers in spirit. The physical work, in other words, has a reward in itself and in the recognition that men work together, "Whether they work together or apart."

The last three stanzas are particularly important, for they contain the clearest articulation of the poet's epiphany. Having worked with a sense of the mower's presence around him all morning, the turner takes his lunch break in the shade. He relaxes from his work and has what might be referred to by Dr. Reid as a "creative flash":

During leisure, we shift, as it were, from a high-power microscope to a low-power microscope. With this relaxation and the widening of the field of consciousness to include what previously had been peripheral, subconscious, and unconscious, great unifying patterns suddenly are recognized and the creative flash occurs.15


15 Reid, p. 158.
The "brotherly speech" that the "heart" holds with the mower is, of course, the message of the poem. What is equally important for our purposes is when it occurs, namely, during that diastolic phase of work we call leisure. "At noon with him in the shade," Frost "dreams," Whitman-like, realizing his union with his fellow man. The "dream" is based on and derives from the work done. Without the work there would be no dream, and without the dream the work would be but lonely toil.

There is no return to Eden as such for Frost, to a world free of work; and a return were it possible is not even desired, for we will find whatever paradise there is here and now, a beauty in the ordinary, a vision in the workaday. As Dr. Reid states,

> We can see clearly that leisure is not the opposite of work in the sense of being opposed to work. In work there is a focusing, a concentration of faculties, and an acuteness of consciousness. During true leisure, there is an unfocusing, a relaxation of faculties, a greater diffusion of consciousness.\(^{16}\)

Thus, work is not man's curse in Frost but, potentially, his blessing. When balanced with the leisure moment, work is an opportunity for vision and fulfillment; it is one of God's gifts to man, a source of celebration.

Nowhere is this sense of celebration, of work as a form of prayer, more clearly seen than in "Mowing" from *A Boy's Will*:

\(^{16}\)Reid, pp. 157-158.
Mowing

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

Like "The Pasture," "Mowing" was apparently one of
Frost's favorites, one that came very close to what he longed
to achieve in his poetry. As he wrote from England to a
prospective American publisher of his work, Thomas Bird Mosher,
in July, 1913:

I like the decision with which you speak and am
content to have you prefer "Reluctance" to anything
else I have written. Nevertheless the book [A Boy's
Will] contains a dozen poems that are at least as
good in the same kind and for the same reason. In
"Mowing," for instance, I come so near what I long
to get that I almost despair of coming nearer. 17

About a year and a half later, in replying to Sidney Cox
regarding reviews of his first book, Frost said,

I'd like to thank specially the fellow who picked
out "Mowing." I guess there is no doubt that is
the best poem in Book I. We all think so over here. 18

Clearly, this poem written during the early Derry years was one
of those the poet wished to lodge like burrs on the reader's
memory.

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17 Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. by Lawrence
18 Selected Letters, p. 141.
"Mowing" is a poem of work but not strain. Its dominant feeling is of quietness as the poet seeks to overhear what the scythe whispers to the ground. The work he is doing, in other words, has some kind of reward, some truth of life, to come out of it. Good Puritan that he is, Frost well knows that idle hours themselves are unimportant. They and "easy gold" are frowned upon—we must earn what we get and only by earning, i.e., working, will we receive the answer to what the scythe whispers. (This is, after all, an earnest love "that laid the swale in rows," Frost playfully punning in the midst of a serious poem.) Fact as truth is the fruit of labor, not idleness, though it must be emphasized that the labor done here is done leisurely, at ease, with a sense of harmony. It is as if the work experience is one with the leisure experience, the work of mowing not toil but joy.

The work brings him face-to-face with the facts of life around him, those "feeble-pointed spikes of flowers/(Pale orchises)" and that "bright green snake." He names these so particularly here because he wishes to celebrate their very actuality, the truth that they are. Their existence is wondrous to him; it is, as he says in the next and penultimate line of the poem, "the sweetest dream that labor knows." Fact is one with dream in "Mowing," not separate, and work is the source of the creative vision as we are brought, in Thoreau's words, "to front . . . the essential facts of life."
What the scythe whispers, after all, is mutability, Robert Frost's great theme. It whispers that we are born, we are here, we grow and die. The immersion in the actual that work provides reminds us that flowers are indeed "feeble pointed" and that the hay must be left "to make." Our world is post-Edenic, but instead of bemoaning man's condition, his doom to work, Frost here celebrates it for what it can bring us to, that magnification of vision that leads us to see the wondrous in the actual, the dream in the fact. "Mowing" is thus a kind of prayer, the type of prayer Emerson spoke of in "Self-Reliance:

Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. . . . As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature.

The picture we are given in "Mowing" is of easeful work, work and leisure practically one. In "The Pasture," "Stopping By Woods," and "The Tuft of Flowers," this closeness is seen in terms of rhythmic wholeness and the sense of health that such wholeness results in. This rhythm is the "natural creative process" Dr. Reid identifies in his essay:


20 Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by Stephen E. Wicher (Boston, 1957), p. 162.
The natural creative process follows a rhythmic pattern: 1) A phase of conscious work and struggle lasting for days, months or years. This is followed by 2) a leisure phase, variously described as a relaxation of conscious effort, an abandonment of logical work and reason, a period of "leaving it alone," of "letting come what will," of "opening up," of communion with self, of intimate involvement with the real self, of allowing natural biological rhythms to assert themselves, of getting in touch with the darker reaches of ourselves and "letting the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, rise up through the common."21

If anything differentiates "Mowing" from these three poems in terms of the work theme, it is the degree to which work and leisure are linked. In the three poems above, leisure grows naturally from work and work gives leisure meaning. Here, however, work and leisure are as close to being one as fact and dream are in the thirteenth line of the poem. Such a union is a vital one to Frost, for as he says in a much later poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time":

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

In "Mowing" he has done just that. The "task" of cutting hay has been eliminated; the work itself is relaxing, fulfilling, visionary.

Emerson's sense of prayer as "the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul" is seen again in the lovely poem "Putting in the Seed," one that shares with "The Pasture, the union of two lovers in work with the soil. Reuben Brower even

21Reid, p. 157.
goes so far as to call it "an allegory of marriage" and the closest Frost ever came to D. H. Lawrence. 22

Putting in the Seed

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yet, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea),
And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding earth crumbs.

The opening words are reminiscent of the refrain line
"You come too" in "The Pasture," a gentle imperative asking
that his lover bring him back from his work if she can without
being made a "slave" to the earth's cycles and processes as he is. (We might point out here in further comparing "The Pasture" and "Putting in the Seed" an interesting twist: the lover will come to "fetch" him back at nightfall, the same verb Frost used for the weak calf in the prologue poem. The return to enclosure and the maintenance of such walls of protection is one of Frost's most important work projects, one we shall discuss later.) But being a slave here is hardly feared; to be nature's captive is both desirable and inevitable. This is a world of fallen apple blossoms that mingle with the "smooth bean and wrinkled pea," a world in which youth and age, death and life, flow together.

22 Brower, pp. 183-184.
So too do work and leisure, for the work done here is done in the fashion of Emerson's prayer, on the knees. There is no sweat on the face, no thorn or thistle spoken of in the Genesis story to combat. The work is that of a lover who "burns" while putting in the seed and whose burning produces life, a paradox Emerson stresses in "Uriel," Frost's favorite poem:

>'Line in nature is not found;  
Unit and universe are round;  
In vain produced, all rays return;  
Evil will bless, and ice will burn.'  

To love one's work, to find in it a source of harmony and fulfillment, indeed, to see it as akin to leisure itself, and not a thoroughly separate experience, is of profound value to Robert Frost.

Throughout his life the poet ran in fear of mental illness. He saw it all around him: as a child in the raging despair of his father; as a young man in the paranoid schizophrenia of his sister, Jeanie; later, as a husband and parent, in the dark, brooding moods of Elinor, in the breakdown and confinement of his second daughter, Irma, and the suicide of his son, Carol. He felt it in himself: afraid of the dark, he slept in his mother's bedroom until he was seventeen; afraid of failure, he fiercely and foolishly competed with other poets throughout his life. How to maintain one's emotional integrity in the midst of darkness is of major

\[23\] Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 426.
concern to Frost, what to do to survive "in the rush of everything to waste" his dominant theme.

"The most exciting movement in nature is not progress," he once write, "... but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the hand, the heart, the mind." The poems we have considered in this chapter suggest that to be in tune with this movement is both an indication of emotional health and a way of maintaining that health. As we shall see, the emotional problems of many of Frost's characters stem from what they do for work and, more especially, how they do it. Overworked, they are destroyed by constant labor that denies them leisure, the opportunity, that is, for beauty and love. It is the healthy heart that beats in the rhythm of work and leisure; our fists clenched, we can never shake hands. In order to understand this important issue of overwork thoroughly, let us first turn to the sources of Frost's attitude toward it, his out- and indoor schooling in the New England and Greek traditions.

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CHAPTER II

OUT- AND INDOOR SCHOOLING

When Robert Frost first came to New England with his mother and sister in 1885, he came to a land his father had abandoned for the west coast years before. And his father had not been alone: during the gold rush and Civil War periods, many young men, especially those from rural areas, left their native region for more prosperous parts of the country, and New England experienced a decline in influence from which it has never quite recovered. It also experienced a shift in living patterns. Despite the decrease in farms, the population during the second half of the century doubled as New England became largely industrialized and urban: "Marginal land and farms were abandoned . . . bridges went unrepaired, and old roads disappeared vaguely in the middle of a woods."¹

Frost himself did not come to rural New England after his father's death but to his paternal grandfather's home in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the heavily industrialized mill town of Melville's "The Tartarus of Maids." The young poet's experience with the land, in fact, did not really begin until he moved to Derry in 1900; he was a "city boy" all the way, born in San Francisco, nurtured in and around Lawrence—indeed,

not a New Englander at all, named by his father under his grandfather's Copperhead influence, "Robert Lee" Frost.

The point is that this poet so identified with New England itself actually "chose" to be a New Englander; that is, he found the region with its remnants of Puritan culture congenial to his own temperament. He saw aspects of his own personality in the area's, especially in the back country. It was a New Englander of the old kind that Frost wished to be, of the land and of the farm where the ritual of clearing, so important in his own life, is forever repeated, as it was for the earliest settlers. He identifies his position in the abandoned landscape in "The Census-Taker":

I came as census-taker to the waste
To count the people in it and found none,
None in the hundred miles, none in the house,
Where I came last with some hope, but not much,
After hours' overlooking from the cliffs
An emptiness flayed to the very stone.

Frost is interested in examining what is left in the region, the traditional New England values that have enabled those who remain to survive. Despite "The melancholy of having to count souls/Where they grow fewer and fewer every year," he wants "life to go on living." The question is what in the New England vision enables life to do so. What in this land, this heritage, appealed so to him? What, finally, is most New England about Robert Frost?

Let us begin with the land itself, as so many of Frost's poems do. D. H. Lawrence's claim that "the American landscape has never been at one with the white man"\(^2\) is nowhere more

true than in this region. Rocky and cold, its stubborn soil means hard work; one's birthplace, Frost tells us, is not granted but earned, forged in the mountain, the land subdued:

Here further up the mountain slope
Than there was ever any hope,
My father built, enclosed a spring,
Strung chains of wall around everything,
Subdued the growth of earth and grass
And brought our various lives to pass . . .
Today /the mountain/ wouldn't know our name . . .
/She/ pushed us off her knees.
And now her lap is full of trees.

("The Birthplace")

This is a land of gravel pits and granite, where shelter requires continual clearing, the steeple bush and chokecherry forever closing in:

At the present rate it must come to pass,
And that right soon, that the meadowsweet
And steeple bush, not good to eat,
Will have crowded out the edible grass.

Then all there is to do is wait
For maple, birch, and spruce to push
Through meadowsweet and steeple bush
And crowd them out at a similar rate.

No plow among these rocks would pay.

("Something for Hope")

These facts of the New England landscape Frost continually gives us were quickly realized by the first colonists. Despite such promotional tracts as Francis Higginson's New England Plantation and claims like John Winthrop's that "here is sweet air, fair rivers, and plenty of springs," the task of building Zion proved greater than expected: "Plagues, water

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shortages, famines, miserable climate, and hardships of every kind came between the emigrants and their objectives."^4

Looking back to their landing in 1620, William Bradford saw from the perspective of a decade's experience the difficulties this rugged land presented. There was nothing given in the new world, no one there to greet the Mayflower, to provide warmth and food. To survive meant to do:

And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search an unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men--and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. Neither could they, as it were, go to the top of Pisgah to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed their hopes; for which way soever they turned their eyes (save upward to the heavens) they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects. For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a weather-beaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue.^5

Fortunately, the society that Bradford was so instrumental in forming was "founded by men dedicated, in unity and simplicity, to realizing on earth eternal and immutable principles . . . and that every man should have a calling and work hard in it was a first premise of Puritanism."^6 The meeting of the region's unyielding soil and the dedicated,

^4Heimart, p. 362.


unyielding Puritan community for which work was considered a calling was thus most appropriate and evidence certainly of God's will: "Their difficulties in the wilderness served to reinforce the Puritans' belief that they were the chosen of God." In Genesis, God had commanded the sons of Adam to subdue the earth, and, as Peter N. Carroll points out, here was that very land in need of subjugation. "The Puritan settlers saw the Devil lurking in the wilderness," and the work of settlement became one's duty as partial fulfillment of the holy plan.

The Puritan existence in the new world was a leveling one, a kind of early experience in democracy. As Perry Miller reminds us, "These were not--despite their analogies with Moses and the tribes of Israel--refugees seeking a promised land, but English scholars, soldiers, and statesmen; taking the long way about in order that someday they, or their children, could subdue the earth and establish a government of their own, a government designed for the salvation of mankind." As Carroll points out, the Puritans believed that their work was a religious act, one vital to the salvation of God's community.

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7Heimart, p. 382.


9Frost considered the clearing of the land as a metaphor for the bringing of order out of the chaos of his own life. Clearing for him represented a kind of personal salvation. The Puritan, in seeing the untamed land as the home of the devil, considered clearing as a religious act, one vital to the salvation of God's community. See the discussion of personal and communal salvation in Chapters IV and V of this study.
or at least their friends, might rule in Lambeth."\(^{10}\) To do so, everyone, "even the man who \(\sqrt{\text{Had}}\) an income,"\(^{11}\) had to roll up his sleeves and get to work, for not only "since the fall of Adam \(\sqrt{\text{Was}}\) such diligence obligatory,"\(^{12}\) but one's very survival on the land demanded it: "Whatever we stand in need of is insured in the earth by the Creator, and to be fetched thence by the sweat of our brows."\(^{13}\) Thus, a man was doing the will of God by tilling his fields as much as by preaching, and to make this stony soil bloom was to praise the Lord.

The New England that Robert Frost adopted as his own is this very world of work the landscape still demands. As a census-taker for the life and heritage that remained in New England, Frost is concerned with the images of man's labors, the walls and cellar holes he built, his habits and tools, his moments of rest:

> Perhaps the wind the more without the help
> Of breathing trees said something of the time
> Of year or day the way it swung a door
> Forever off the latch, as if rude men
> Passed in and slammed it shut each one behind him
> For the next one to open for himself.


\(^{11}\)Miller, p. 40.

\(^{12}\)Miller, p. 5.

\(^{13}\)Quoted by Miller, p. 41.
I counted nine I had no right to count
(But this was dreamy unofficial counting)
Before I made the tenth across the threshold.
Where was my supper? Where was anyone's?
No lamp was lit. Nothing was on the table.
The stove was cold—the stove was off the chimney—
And down by one side where it lacked a leg.
The people that had loudly passed the door
Were people to the ear but not the eye.
They were not on the table with their elbows.
They were not sleeping in the shelves of bunks.
I saw no men there and no bones of men there.
I armed myself against such bones as might be
With the pitch-blackened stub of an ax-handle
I picked up off the straw-dust-covered floor.

Visions like this make Malcolm Cowley dead wrong when
he identifies the poet with "the tourist home and the antique
shop in the abandoned gristmill." Frost, he claims, is not
a representative of the true New England tradition, lacking
the "social passions of the great New Englanders": "One can-
not imagine him thundering against the Fugitive Slave Law,
like Emerson, or rising like Thoreau to defend John Brown
after the Harpers Ferry raid; or even conducting a quietly
persistent campaign against brutality on American ships, as
Hawthorne did when he was consul at Liverpool. He is concerned
chiefly with himself. . . ." 

Curiously, Cowley has chosen as representatives of
this tradition three writers who were not always so socially
passionate. One needs only to consider the opening paragraph
of Walden and Hawthorne's and Emerson's response to Brook Farm
to realize that these supposed examples of New England's social

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14 Cowley, p. 42.
15 Cowley, p. 42.
liberalism were not "joiners" at all; their speaking out on social issues such as Cowley gives was more the exception than the rule. Each was, however, terribly concerned with the individual, his spirit, his work, and the tradition Frost shares with them, as Charles Howell Foster makes clear in his point-by-point rebuttal to Cowley, is the tradition they shared with one another: "the Yankee independence and conviction concerning 'the one-man revolution,' the habit of metaphorical thinking, the delight in man as he reveals himself eccentrically and humorously in New England, the belief that art should be a beautiful wisdom."\(^{16}\)

Cowley, to be sure, is certainly right when he suggests that Frost is no "liberal," but is liberalism of the Whittier stripe really the "New England tradition" as Cowley claims? Is the Boston-Cambridge-Brahmin heritage the heart of this region? Hayden Carruth, for one,\(^{17}\) thinks not, and rightly dismisses the entire Boston-Cambridge scene:

Brownson, Longfellow, Motley, Lowell, Holmes, Henry James, and all the rest... the entire thrust of this development, though originating in Puritanism, was away from New England and toward nationalism and internationalism, i.e.,


\(^{17}\)See Gladys Hasty Carroll, "New England Sees It Through," Saturday Review of Literature (Nov. 9, 1935), pp. 3-4, 14, 17. Carroll calls Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, and Longfellow, "Polite writers." But America, she says, was "tired of tea; it wanted meat... It wanted life." Carroll goes on to say that "we were closer to literary oblivion than we knew, here in New England, around the middle of the 19th century." But in his concern for "real life," Frost (together with E. A. Robinson) signals for Carroll a rebirth of New England letters.
toward cosmopolitan culture. It succeeded, as we know, remarkably well, forming alliances with German, French, Italian, and English literary movements. This Brahmin culture was a long literary evolution from provincialism to cosmopolitanism. Its ambition was to deny New England as such.18

Believing that Boston-Cambridge, like many other capitals, lost touch with its constituents, Carruth goes on to state that "the real vitality of the New England tradition has never been a product of the sophisticated metropolitan drawing rooms in which the Brahmins played out their roles as culture heroes; it has originated in the back-country."19

The most symbolic act, then, in the history of New England literature was, in Carruth's words, Emerson's move to Concord, "a short but magnificent migration. Emerson turned his back on the Brahmin culture. He would have none of it, determined to give himself to a life of contemplation.20

Though certainly more rhapsodic than his Puritan forefathers, Emerson was, Carruth says, "restoring vitality of faith to the New England mind."21 What Emerson did, in short was to refocus literary vision, especially New England's, to its original roots in the countryside, the soil, the worker himself. In Emerson's own words, "I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor

19Carruth, pp. 16-17.
20Carruth, p. 16.
21Carruth, p. 19.
to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the
spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands. And labor
everywhere is welcome; always we are invited to work..."\(^{22}\)

The New England tradition Frost shares with Emerson is
thus a spiritual heritage more than a matter of liberal politics
and active social concerns.\(^{23}\) It is a way of seeing that
considers the specific as indicative of the general, the secular
as representative of the divine; it is a belief in work that
views labor as fulfilling, salvatory, and democratic; it is
a way of life, as Jonathan Edwards' "Great Awakening" made
clear, more characteristic of the back country than the inter-
nationalism of Boston and Cambridge. In short, the remnants
of the Puritan culture are found north of Boston, in New
Hampshire, by its west-running brooks.

As his official biographer points out, Frost very much
wanted to be "a good Puritan."\(^{24}\) Time and again he acknowledged
his heritage, defended and defined it in his own way, aware,
Thompson suggests, that since Shakespeare's time, poets, critics,
and historians had tended to use "Puritan" as a dirty word.
Frost's bitterness toward Matthew Arnold, for example, so
fiercely expressed in the last section of "New Hampshire"

\(^{22}\) "The American Scholar," Selections from Ralph Waldo
Emerson, p. 72.

\(^{23}\) See Greiner, pp. 181-203. Greiner gives a thorough
listing here of studies linking Frost and his New England
heritage. He sees Cowley's and Carruth's attitudes as "the
outer boundaries of the debate" on Frost's position. "The
crucial factor," as Greiner rightly says, "remains the particular
critic's definition of the New England tradition" (p. 203).

\(^{24}\) The Years of Triumph, p. 632.
(11. 358-413), came from Arnold's insistence that Hebraism meant anarchy, Hellenism, culture. To "Hebraise," Arnold says is
to sacrifice all other sides of our being to the religious side... it has dangers for us, we have seen that it leads to a narrow and twisted growth of our religious side itself, and to a failure in perfection... Other sides of our being are thus neglected, because the religious side... is in quite absorbing and tyrannous... All this leaves little leisure or inclination for culture.25

Thompson concludes that "a careful tabulation of RF's attitudes will show him more inclined to defend puritanism than Hellenism,"26 though, as we shall see later in this chapter, his education in the Greek culture tended to complement rather than contradict his "puritanism."

Frost's understanding of the term "Puritan" may not have been historically sound and was undoubtedly simplistic, but our concern here is not so much with the historian's definition as with Frost's. This he most clearly expressed in a commencement address, "What Became of New England," made at Oberlin College in 1937. "I don't give up New England too easily," he said, "And the thing New England gave most to America was the thing I am talking about: a stubborn clinging to meaning—to purify words until they meant again what they should mean. Puritanism had that meaning entirely: a purification of words and a renewal of words and a renewal of meaning."27

26The Years of Triumph, p. 632.
27The Years of Triumph, p. 483.
To purify, to renew, to clarify—these were the vestiges of Puritanism Robert Frost realized in New England and in himself. These are, in fact, the very words he uses for work: "I am going out to clean the pasture spring," he says, "(And wait to watch the water clear I may)." These are his words, too, for the whole process of settlement, that act of pushing "the woods back from around the house" to keep one's home "In the Clearing." Clearing was, of course, an experience the colonists knew well as they looked at the land with its "wild and savage hue." Clearing is also the ritual of every farmer, then and now, and is, most importantly, the central metaphor of Frost's poetry as he seeks order amidst his life's confusion. In short, the appeal of "puritanism" for Frost is in the word "purify" itself, the work of clearing an experience he renews continually in his poems:

The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again. . . .

("Mending Wall")

The meadow is finished with men.
Then now is the chance for the flowers
That can't stand mowers and plowers.
It must be now, though, in season
Before the not mowing brings trees on,
Before trees, seeing the opening,
March into shadowy claim.
The trees are all I'm afraid of . . .

("The Last Mowing")

The Puritan, for Frost, also emphasized "meaning," and there is no "play" as such in his own poetry. Repeatedly, he called himself a "synecdochist" linking the Greek habit of
taking the part for the whole with what he believed to be the Puritan tendency to see God's purpose in all things: "Always, always a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing." Taking his cue from Emerson's belief that the world is "a temple whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures and commandments of the deity," Frost's poetic strategy is to endow physical facts with higher meaning. Nothing we do or encounter is without purpose; nothing, not even play, is non-utilitarian.

Certainly, Frost's poems are often "playful" and wryly humorous, but if we agree with Charles Brightbill's definition of play as "free, pleasurable, immediate, and natural expression ... with no observable utilitarian result," such activity does not exist in Frost any more than it did for the first New Englanders who went so far as to eliminate from their calendar some of the very opportunities for play. Abolishing Christmas and May Day, for example, because both had become too filled with revelry, they instituted two new holidays, election day and college commencement, that were clearly more opportunities for deep thought and decision-making than spontaneous play. Time off, in other words, was time on, a chance to probe, to consider, to clarify one's position in God's world.

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This is also the purpose of poetry for Frost. Though he often spoke of verse in terms of game and play (one thinks of his famous remark about free verse as similar to playing tennis with the net down), what counts, as he said in his preface to Robinson's *King Jasper*, is play and earnestness in balance, the outer humor with the inner seriousness. As playful as his poetry could be, it was never play itself, spontaneous and immediate, but, rather, a sacrifice, an offering, a life's work that he hoped, as he says in "A Masque of Mercy," would be "found acceptable in Heaven's sight." Frost summarizes this point in the concluding lines of "Two Tramps in Mud Time":

Only where love and need are one  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Play, however, by normal definition is not work. What Frost means here is what he also gives us in poems such as "Birches," play with meaning behind it, meaning that is not yet there for the innocent boy swinging from the trees but is indeed present for the mature poet who realizes purpose behind all play, who views the world as synecdochist.

"Birches" sets "Truth" with all its "matter of fact" such as ice storms against the imaginative possibilities behind truth. The boy's play is one such possibility. Too far from town for baseball, he plays alone in his father's trees and plays carefully, the poet realizes, as he learns the poise and discipline necessary to subdue the birches:

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31 "Introduction to King Jasper," *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 65.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.

The whole episode of the boy's swinging from birches
is, of course, the poet's fantasy ("I should prefer to have
some boy bend them" vs. the ice storms having actually done so),
a playful flight of the mind used by Frost for the purpose of
his own launching out into a definition of love and man's
place in the world. In short, the play is not the thing here;
what matters is what the play means. Will Durant's statement
on the nature of play suggests this distinction: "Children are
happy because they find their pleasure in the immediate action;
their movements are not means to distant ends; their eyes are
upon the things they do, not vainly on the stars; they fall,
but seldom into wells."^{32}

Frost's eyes are always looking to the stars or into
wells with that inner seriousness that makes all play a kind
of work, for there are always in his vision distant ends behind
the immediate, fun experience. One can never dance with pure,
unadulterated joy as, for example, William Carlos Williams
does, naked in front of his mirror:

DANSE RUSSE

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen

^{32}Quoted by Brightbill, pp. 7-8.
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household? 33

This poem is from another world than Frost's. He is
never childlike and gleeful, for play is done "for mortal
stakes." His kind of dancing is around a secret that "sits
in the middle and knows"; his kind of "fooling" requires both
"in- and outdoor schooling."

Frost's own schooling offered another vision to that
of his adopted region. Although he "chose" to identify with
the New England heritage, its sense of the land and the work
required to live on it, its belief in the final meaning of all
activity, work and play alike, he more consciously selected in
his readings and formal education to be a student of the Greek
tradition. "Aware," Thompson tells us, "of his brilliant
father's career in this same high school and at Harvard, the
boy planned to give special emphasis to the study of the
classics and history. . . . His mother had already made him

33 William Carlos Williams, Selected Poems (New York,
familiar with many stories involving heroes of Greece and Rome." The result of this curious mixture of the fire of Hebraism and the ice of Hellenism was not, despite Matthew Arnold, a contradictory one in the poet but a tempering experience, the values of his learned classicism tending to qualify rather than negate his regional heritage.

Whereas the New England tradition valued work and its meaning, the Greek emphasized leisure, that "leisure for stargazing" one of Frost's characters burns down his barn for. But this is not to say that the Greeks believed "work was a curse and nothing else"; rather, they refused to consider work in the abstract. While the New Englander's tendency was to value all work, the Greek wanted to know instead what kind of work one did; as H. D. F. Kitto points out, "He would want to know 'Working at what? And How?'" Work that confirmed independence and provided the chance for leisure was praiseworthy; work for which one expected fees and which required specialization and fragmentation of the work force was both feared and despised:

To a Greek, obsessed as he was with the idea of freedom, to be dependent on some other person for one's daily bread seemed an intolerable servitude. A truly free man should be altogether his own master; and how could he

34 The Early Years, p. 79.


be that if he was drawing a salary from someone else? Even in Homer's time the worst condition of humanity is that of the agricultural laborer, the thēs—that is to say, the proletariet, forced by grinding poverty to hire out their services for pay.37

That Robert Frost shared this hatred of economic prostitution is seen clearly throughout his poetry and especially in A Further Range. Poems such as "A Roadside Stand," in which both the buyers from the city and the sellers in the country are part of an economic system the poet eschews, and "A Lone Striker," where the worker has become machine and one's only option is the one-man revolution, make his abhorrence evident. It is precisely because it is free of such systems that the state of New Hampshire, having nothing to sell, is celebrated more as a way of life than a geographic location:

The having anything to sell is what
Is the disgrace in man or state or nation . . .
Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,
One each of everything as in a showcase,
Which naturally she doesn't care to sell.

In such a place one can be "a good Greek" as he says in the poem, that is, "A Good Greek Out of New England," as Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant once called Frost.38


38 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "A Good Greek out of New England" in Thornton, pp. 147-154. Sergeant's article is more anecdotal than valuable for an understanding of Frost's classical background. More critically intriguing, though simplistic, is Gorham B. Munson's "Against the World in General" in Thornton, pp. 197-206. Munson argues that Frost is more a "pure" classicist than either Eliot or Pound; his classicism is a product of experience, not reading: "In comparison with him, Eliot and Pound appear formalistic, and the distinction between them and Frost is the distinction between neo-classicism and classicism." Munson misrepresents
For the Greek, not only did retail trade make one dependent on others, it eliminated pride in craftsmanship, the aesthetic dimension of work. The tradesman, to paraphrase Kitto, does not make anything demanding skill or giving satisfaction. The Greeks took the dignity of the artist's profession for granted, but the arts extended to crafts as well, vase-painters often signing their work with obvious pride. That Greek potters would include work scenes from their own shops on the pots they made suggests that such a trade, that is, one in which the individual demonstrated skill and artistry, was worthy of recognition.

Baptiste is a kind of Greek craftsman in Frost's poem "The Ax-Helve." Derived in part from Thoreau's Homeric woodchopper in Walden, this French-Canadian woodchopper knows well the difference between handles made on machine and those Frost, however, by stressing that his classicism is solely a natural response to personal experience. John Lylen's The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven, 1960) shows how indebted the poet was to his reading in the classics and how traditionally literary his poems are. Lylen makes clear that RF's so-called "pure" classicism is very much the "neo-" variety Munson ascribes to Eliot and Pound.

39 Flaceliere, p. 119.

40 "The Ax-Helve" was published in 1916. In a letter to Walter Eaton in 1915, Frost said that Thoreau's woodchopper in the "Visitors" section of Walden "must have had a good deal to do with the making of me" (Selected Letters, p. 182). In an interview in 1916, Frost traced the origins of poetry itself to the woodchopper: "Love, the moon, and murder have poetry in them by common consent. But it's in other places. It's in the ax-handle of a French-Canadian woodchopper" (Interviews with Robert Frost, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem / New York, 1966, p. 19).

The portraits Thoreau and Frost paint of their choppers are the same. In their woodsmen "the animal man is chiefly developed," as Thoreau says. What is not developed is the consciousness that makes man more than animal.
carved by hand according to the grain. His special, and only, kind of knowledge qualifies him to halt the poet's swing of his store-bought ax:

I've known ere now an interfering branch
Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.
But that was in the woods, to hold my hand
From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch.
This was a man, Baptiste, who stole one day
Behind me on the snow in my own yard
Where I was working at the chopping-block,
And cutting nothing not cut down already.
He caught my ax expertly on the rise,
When all my strength put forth was in his favor,
Held it a moment where it was, to calm me.

Baptiste halts his friend's ax to show him how poorly made his handle is. "Plowing the grain" with his thick fingers, he explains how it runs "Across the handle's long drawn serpentine, / Like the two strokes across a dollar sign"; criticizing the artificial, he shows off his knowledge of wood and how to shape it into efficient handles. Like the fabled staff-maker of Kouroo in Walden whose search for the perfect stick eliminates time itself, 41 Baptiste is a kind of primitive artist working in pure material, liberating the form he sees within the wood:

He showed me that the lines of a good helve
Were native to the grain before the knife
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay
For the hard work. He chafed its long white body
From end to end with his rough hand shut round it.
He tried it at the eye-hole in the ax-head.
'Hahn, hahn,' he mused, 'don't need much taking down.'

And he works for pure joy, not for the dollar sign, knowing how "to make a short job long/ For the love of it."

The Greek ideal Frost adopted for this poem, in other words, is a proud self-reliance, the kind we find in Hesiod's Works and Days, a poem, said Emerson, "full of piety as well as prudence that the poet adapted to all meridians by adding the ethics of works and days." How like the rugged New Englander this Greek poet is, cutting the actual timber for his plow, dragging it home and hewing it into shape to work his fields; how like the New England matrons the women of his household are, spinning the very wool they will later use for weaving. Hesiod's warning to the reader, which could well be Frost's, is to go in fear of begging, for freedom comes from working at one's self-appointed task:

Gods and men alike resent that man who, without work himself, lives the life of the stingless drones, who without working eat away the substance of the honeybees' hard work; your desire, then, should be to put your works in order so that your barns may be stocked with all livelihood in its season. It is from work that men grow rich and own flocks and herds; by work, too, they become much better friends. . . .

Work is no disgrace; the disgrace is in not working.

The Greek opinion of work not only depended on what the particular job was but on how free it left the participant. The real difference between citizen and slave, who could conceivably work along side one another at the same job, was the

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42 "Works and Days," Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 365.
citizen's ability to stop when he wanted to; "he could knock off and go to the Assembly, and the slave could not." As Kitto tells us, Pistias, a craftsman, "could shut up shop whenever he liked: 'Back tomorrow.' He had an interesting trade, he could take a pride in his work, and if customers did not like his goods they could go elsewhere." Thus, not only was one to work at a job that sustained his independence, but one was also to be independent of his work, to be able to lay down his tools whenever he wanted, as Frost does, for example, in "A Time to Talk."

In this little-known lyric, the poet is the "citizen" in every respect, with his ability to "shut up shop" when he likes and to go to that most basic of assemblies, the meeting with a friend.

A Time to Talk

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

Work on his land has not tied him down but provided an opportunity to chat, a chance to further friendships. In fact, had he not been in the field to begin with, no visit would have taken place. The break he takes is a pleasurable one, not an act of desperation or exhaustion, and he will, we imagine,

44Kitto, p. 243.
return to his hoeing as happily as he left it. He looks at the hills he has yet to hoe with no anger or regret; they are simply there, to be worked at or left as he wills.

The break Frost takes in this small poem is not a pause made for the sake of work, made, that is, in order to work. He has not stopped working for any restorative pick-me-up that will refresh him and ready him for his labors because he does not feel a need for that typical cigarette and coffee, that week's vacation in the mountains. The very work is relaxing and is, in a way, leisure itself. Importantly, the Greek word for leisure is skole (the Latin, scola) from which we derive the English word, "school": school means leisure, an opportunity to learn. Leisure, in other words, was by no means "leisurely" for the Greeks who had little use for idleness. The Greek phrase skolen agein, "work for leisure," summarizes a central question for Aristotle in his Politics: "That is the principal point: with what kind of activity is man to occupy his leisure?" He who is a slave to his work, unable to lay down his tools when he wants, he for whom work is wages and nothing else is incapable of leisure in the Greek sense of a creative and meaningful experience.

Thoreau, like Frost a student of the classics, makes this same point in Walden, a book the poet knew well. That

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46 In The Early Years, pp. 549-550, Thompson gives Frost's 1936 list of his ten favorite books (from Books We Like—Sixty-two Answers /Boston, 1936/, p. 142). Walden
men lead lives of quiet desperation stems in large part from their inability to be anything more than machines. Receptivity and wonder at the world are lost to those consumed by labor, those who identify leisure with idleness:

Most men . . . are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. 47

Thoreau's own experience during his two year stay at Walden is itself an illustration of the Greek idea of leisure. Though considered impossibly lazy by his Concord neighbors (much as Frost was by his Derry friends), he did a great deal of creative work there, exploring nature and himself, completing the manuscript of his first book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Leisure for him was a time to work, to front essential facts, to dig deeply into his own life. Time never hung heavy on his hands as it did for some visitors to Walden:

Girls and boys and young women generally seemed glad to be in the woods. They looked in the pond and at the flowers, and improved their time. Men of business, even farmers, thought only of solitude and employment, and of the great distance at which I dwelt from something or other; and though they said they loved a ramble in the woods occasionally, it was obvious they did not. Restless, committed men, whose time was all taken up in getting a living or keeping it. 48

is listed third behind The Odyssey and Robinson Crusoe. The relationship between Defoe's novel and Walden is discussed in Chapter IV of this study.

48 Thoreau, p. 135.
This gladness at looking into a pond, or into snow-filled woods, comes from another attitude toward work and leisure than that held by those "restless, committed" neighbors of either Thoreau or Frost. To see a pond as "the eye of the world" and woods as "lovely, dark and deep" suggests a spiritual capacity lacking in the utterly practical, workaday world, the world that views water as so many units of hydroelectric power and trees as board feet of lumber. This is the world that needs vacations (an unknown concept for the Greek and colonist alike), that makes a clear distinction between work and time from it, that cannot understand work and leisure as parts of a rhythmic whole.

What saved work from being drudgery for the first New Englanders was this very spiritual capacity, their belief that what they did meant something more than material gain. So too did the Greeks see higher significance in work; it was a way of achieving self-definition and the leisure they so prized. In other words, in both traditions, work was not valued in and for itself but as a means to nobler ends.

But we must here make one very important distinction that relates directly to Frost's poetry. If self-reliance and leisure were the key considerations of the work experience for the Greek, community and effort were most important to the early settlers in New England. The Puritan ideal was the survival and advancement of God's community, and work was not to be profitable but rewarding.\(^{49}\) This ideal of interdependence

\(^{49}\)John Cotton's remark in The Way of Life confirms this point: "if thou hast no calling, tendency to publique good, thou art an uncleane beast" (Miller, p. 41). Miller concludes
was one Frost learned from his religious mother who believed deeply that the goal of one's work was what she called "dear humanity." This was not an aspect of the New England heritage that the poet readily accepted. Instead, it was one of his Greek values, in part, urged him to resist. The Greeks believed in the self—"It is from work that men grow rich and own flocks and herds"—and whether men should work together or apart Frost was never finally able to decide, as we shall see in Chapter V. It suffices to say now that these curiously complementary traditions, these products of the poet's out- and indoor schooling, are part of what Frost considered his, and man's, most difficult task: the keeping of balance. The problem of equilibrium is one he returns to constantly, that delicate balance between self and other, husband and wife, sanity and madness.

The New England and Greek dialectic and the work-leisure issue so central to it are an integral part of this balancing act. When the scales tip and work becomes an end in itself, when compulsion or circumstances diminish the balancing and positive qualities of leisure, when the spiritual capacity has vanished for whatever reason, the results are madness, loneliness, even death. A look at the many case histories of the overworked in Frost's poetry make this need for balance painfully clear.

that "no matter how much he outstripped his fathers in wealth, one would, by remaining an ascetic in the midst of prosperity, abide by the covenant—especially by the external covenant, within which the management, for public good, of external possessions so largely fell" (p. 41).

50 See Chapter V, note 3.
CHAPTER III

A TURN TOO MUCH

When should we stop work is a question Frost asks often in his poems. It is a question we shall examine closely in this chapter as we look at the many examples of overwork the poet gives us. When is there "danger of a turn too much," he asks specifically in "The Grindstone," a turn that makes more actually less, the blade thinner not sharper:

The thing that made me more and more afraid
Was that we'd ground it sharp and hadn't known,
And now were only wasting precious blade.
And when he raised it dripping once and tried
The creepy edge of it with wary touch,
And viewed it over his glasses funny-eyed,
Only disinterestedly to decide
It needed a turn more, I could have cried
Wasn't there danger of a turn too much?
Mightn't we make it worse instead of better?
I was for leaving something to the whetter.

"The Grindstone" is based on Frost's experience on Loren Bailey's farm in Salem in the summer of 1889. Bailey is the "Father-Time-like man" of the poem, a taskmaster in what he did, much to the young man's dismay who would have preferred to be elsewhere. Frost has more fun in the poem, however, than he had on the job. He begins it in winter, the grindstone sadly and comically out in the cold, all the other farm machinery safely inside. The poet consciously commits the pathetic fallacy here, playing on our sympathy for this rusting machine "standing outdoors hungry, in the cold," and teases us with the easy symbol of the "old apple tree" by which it stands. Indeed, the entire poem is a kind of spoof

45
of the conventionally poetic as Frost amusingly recollects
without tranquility his boyhood experience at the grind-
stone.

But as usual in Frost such parody of the sentimental
has meaning larger than laughter. It is Frost's way of
urging us to look beyond the quaint grindstone by the knarled
ol' apple tree in New England to the nature of work itself
and our attachment to it. The poet knows there is a time to
quit and the man on the grindstone (of whatever kind) does
not. Mounted at the wheel, he grinds away seemingly forever,
unaware of the diminishing returns of his labors, the blade
wearing thin. The poem suggests that there is a value in
stopping just as there is in doing. The grinder is "funny-
eyed," in other words, not only because he is near-sighted
but also because he is overworked. Caught up in the spinning
of the wheel, he loses proportion, forgetting that the purpose
of his work is to sharpen the blade, and works "funny-eyed"
and frenzied for the work itself.

Clearly, much of the poem is built around a boy's
rationalizations—he wants to stop work and looks for reasons:
"I could have found/ A better way to pass the afternoon/ Than
grinding discord out of a grindstone." He hits on a good one,
that "danger of a turn too much," one that the poet believes
in and himself turns to again and again with terrifying
seriousness. At times, we all need to be "saved from work,"
as Frost says in "Out, Out-," even for the half hour "a boy
counts /on7 so much."
The boy in "Out, Out--," one of Frost's darkest poems, is indeed "Doing a man's work," unlike the youthful poet in "The Grindstone" who plays at working, whose task is temporary, whose job is a summer one. In contrast, the atmosphere here is autumnal: the wood is being cut in preparation for winter, "day is all but done," light's brief candle burning out.

"Though a child at heart," the boy is trapped, those "Five mountain ranges" of Vermont more a wall around him than a source of beauty; instead of swinging from his father's trees, he is forced by the serious need for warmth to cut them down.

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts on so much when saved from work.

The need to be "saved from work" suggests that work is somehow the enemy, a villain one needs protection from. But there is no protection here. There is no father in the poem; in fact, there seem to be no parents at all. It is his sister who calls him to supper, not his mother, and it is he who does the "man's work" around the house. The young "couple" appear to live in an "exposed nest,"¹ too early introduced to hardship

¹"The Exposed Nest" is a poem that touches on this issue of the potential killing power of work. During haying, "the cutter bar" has laid bare a nest of young birds, "defenseless to the heat and light." The "mother-bird" is not there, and the fear is that she will not return to such "a change of scene." The young birds are faced with "too much world at once." The poet and his mate, most probably his wife, build
and isolation, too soon made to work. There is no leisure, there cannot be it seems, for to survive is indeed to do. The darkest irony, then, is that the struggle to survive can kill—by overdoing, the boy dies.

Unfortunately, he was never one of those who "lifted eyes" toward the mountain ranges around him, the distant vistas that might have given him a vantage point toward his work and life. The hillside, however, is where Robert Frost likes to sit with his sense of perspective toward the comings and goings of men. As he suggests in "The Vantage Point," his vision is whole, both tele- and microscopic enabling him to see the largest and smallest of matters:

If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
    Well I know where to hie me—in the dawn,
    To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.
There amid lolling juniper reclined,
    Myself unseen, I see in white defined
    Far off the homes of men, and farther still,
    The graves of men on an opposing hill,
    Living or dead, whichever are to mind.

And if by noon I have too much of these,
    I have but to turn on my arm, and lo,
    The sunburned hillside sets my face aglow,
    My breathing shakes the bluet like a breeze,
    I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
    I look into the crater of the ant.

"Reclined," in leisure, he seeks and sees, but those who are too well versed in country things, things like the early death of a boy at work, have a harder, less distanced, response to a "screen" and "give them back their shade," though neither returns to find out whether the small birds lived or died. Each "turned to other things," as do those at the end of "Out, Out-." "The Exposed Nest" suggests RF's worry over his responsibility for his children and the inevitable early exposure to the facts of life that "country things" result in.
life. For them, there is no time to dream of what might have been, for winter is coming and readiness is all: "And they, since they/ Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs."

This "country" response to death is precisely that feared by Amy in "Home Burial," one of several of Frost's poems involving an isolated couple. It is this response she sees and hates in her husband, that turning to "everyday concerns," as she calls them, in the face of death. Her way, in contrast, is to dwell upon what's happened, and the conflict between her passivity and his will to work is at the heart of the poem. While she retreats after the death of their child, he shovels the grave furiously, "Making the gravel leap and leap in air," suggesting that work itself is his brand of strategic retreat, his way to survive:

If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

The conflict is furthered, of course, by their lack of communication. He is blunt, unable to speak carefully, more at ease with shovels and axes than words which "nearly always give offence." His "rumbling voice" and seemingly callous remarks are what so upset her when he comes in from digging the grave:

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.
I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?

The rotting of a birch fence has for Frost a great
deal more to do with what is in that darkened parlor than it
does for either of his characters. The grief-stricken Amy
certainly sees nothing but cruelty behind her husband's words
and he, workhorse that he is, too busy even to notice the graves
the window "frames," is hardly a symbol-maker. He is, however,
clearly preoccupied with death and survival and unwittingly
chooses the very number of the graveyard's headstones, three
and one, for the time it takes to rot a birch fence:

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill.
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'

But his concern is utterly practical, with the actual rebuilding
of a fence, and not with what that process of building means,
its final significance. He is not, in short, a "synecdochist,
just a hard worker, a Puritan without vision.

For the poet, on the other hand, what appears an
"everyday concern" is really a much larger one. The fences
we build, whether of birch or stone or love itself, will always
rot in the end; the stays against confusion a man sets up to
save himself are forever breaking down. Here is why "Home
Burial" is so dark a poem: the death of the child means more
than the end of one life, sad as that is; it means the end of the couple's union. Love has failed. In short, as the title suggests, home itself is buried by the poem's end.

Though a kind of short-term salvation for the husband, work in "Home Burial" contributes to the couple's final destruction. His curse is to work without a sense of the significance of his work; he is tied to the grindstone, to will itself (which is his and the poem's last word), unaware of the dangers of a turn too many. Amy, in contrast, has too little will and seemingly no work at all to sustain her even temporarily. Both are, of course, more sinned against than sinning in this and are one of the several portraits Frost gives us of the isolated New England poor struggling to survive.

How close the story of "Home Burial" is to Frost's own life is a matter of conjecture. In his many public and private readings, he never once read the poem, telling Lawrence Thompson it was simply "too sad"² to read aloud. Frost always claimed that the genesis of the poem was the marital unhappiness that overtook their friends, Nathanial and Leona Harvey, after their first child died in 1895. But the connection of the poem with the Frosts, the death of their four-year-old son in 1900, and the consequent emotional strain on their marriage is too close to be ignored. As Thompson notes, Elinor's tendency was to withdraw into herself, away from her husband, when upset; she was a brooder, and after Elliott's death, as Frost became painfully aware, "his relationship with

²The Early Years, pp. 597-598.
Elinor had not developed as he had hoped. He was now convinced that he loved her much more than she loved him.""  

Elinor was also the worker in the family. Despite her warnings to friends (such as her letter to John Bartlett's wife on the need of learning "the art of 'letting things go'"), she was under constant strain:

'I... I haven't been feeling at all well for three or four weeks... quite worn out. The household and teaching and the excitement of meeting so many people constantly [in England], has almost been too much for me. Three weeks ago I felt that I was on the edge of complete nervous prostration, but I pulled out of it and am feeling considerably better now.'"  

Frost once said that everything he ever wrote he did under Elinor's influence, and one wonders how much of Elinor and his own guilt is in poems like "The Hill Wife" and "A Servant to Servants," poems that like "Home Burial" connect overwork, madness, and marital discord.

The situation in the last section of "The Hill Wife" parallels the overall one in "Home Burial." The emotional

3The Early Years, p. 261.

4The Early Years, p. 449. The full context of her advice is as follows: "'I hope, my dear, that you do not try to do too much housework. I think it is very necessary for you to take good care of yourself for several years to come, and you must learn the art of "letting things go" just as I had to learn it long, long ago. How could I ever have lived through those years when the children were little tots if I had been at all fussy about my housework? Do not try to cook much--wash dishes only once a day and use no rooms except kitchen, bedroom and sitting-room, and hire someone to come in and sweep up once in two weeks.'"

Elinor's life makes clear, however, that she had trouble taking her own advice. She may have left dishes in the sink on occasion but was never able to "let things go" emotionally.

5The Early Years, p. 449.
distance between the man and wife is described in terms of work. She is free, having no work to do and no family to concern her, but her freedom serves only to increase the loneliness described in the poem's first four sections—she has nothing to do but dream. In contrast, the husband seems always busy at his outdoor chores, having a masculine role to fulfill while she, without child, has no role at all:

It was too lonely for her there,
And too wild,
And since there were but two of them,
And no child,

And work was little in the house,
She was free,
And followed where he furrowed field,
Or felled tree.

Not only is she childless, she is husbandless too. Wanting companionship, she goes with him to his work, but throughout the poem, they do not talk. Sections I and III are the wife's lyric monologues, "song only to herself," and II, IV, and V are third-person narratives by the poet. Never once do husband and wife communicate, a situation emphasized at the end of the poem by the husband's call that she never answers:

She rested on a log and tossed
The fresh chips,
With a song only to herself
On her lips.

And once she went to break a bough
Of black alder.
She strayed so far she scarcely heard
When he called her—

And didn't answer—didn't speak—
Or return.
She stood, and then she ran and hid
In the fern.
He never found her, though he looked
Everywhere,
And he asked at her mother's house
Was she there.

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

The focus of this poem is emotional survival and the delicate balance needed to maintain it. Without work the wife is vulnerable, lonely and fearful, with no way to give her life shape, to ward off the winter's night. Overworked, the husband is unable to communicate, to sense the desperation of his wife, and learns too late of madness, that finality "Besides the grave."

Work, madness, and love are the dominant themes as well of Frost's powerful "A Servant to Servants." A dramatic monologue of the Browning stripe, the entire poem is a momentary stay against confusion for the speaker, a lonely woman condemned like Sisyphus to doing work that "wont' stay done."

Her rock to push is the feeding of hungry road hands, "hired men" who themselves can do nothing but work, a thankless job for which she gets little support from her husband Len whose life motto is "the best way out is always through." She lives in hell and speaks to the nameless listener, as Guido da Montefeltro does to Dante, from her torture of routine.

The poem is particularly effective as a monologue because of the dramatic context Frost establishes. We have a very clear sense of a listener as well as speaker in the poem; indeed, because the "personality" of the listener is so well established, the plight of the woman is that much...
more poignant. He is a foil to her, camping for a while on the couple's land by Willoughby Lake, able to "let things more like feathers regulate/ His going and coming." She, in contrast, is imprisoned, her only chance to get away from work a chance to talk to someone like him, with no real hope of escape itself:

I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going:
Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?
I almost think if I could do like you,
Drop everything and live out on the ground--
But it might be, come night, I shouldn't like it,
Or a long rain. I should soon get enough,
And be glad of a good roof overhead.

As her comments here suggest, her prison is as much a mental as a physical one. She herself is hell, for, more than anything, work has drained her of feeling not filled her with it, a condition the shattered iambs and sentence fragments of her speech make terribly real:

I promised myself to get down some day
And see the way you lived, but I don't know!
With a houseful of hungry men to feed
I guess you'd find. ... It seems to me
I can't express my feelings, any more
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did ever you feel so? I hope you never.
It's got so I don't even know for sure
Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong.

There is no "meaning" to her work, no sense of symbol behind fact, no romance to reality. The lake she sees from her kitchen window is hardly Thoreau's "eye of the world" but "some old running river/ Cut short at both ends." Her vision is shaped by the plates she has to wash and the endless biscuits she must bake; a slave to work and workers, she is
not free to dream, "To step outdoors and take the water
dazzle."

The woman lives on the verge of breakdown, and
madness is part of her family's past. Haunted by the story
of her father's brother, "crossed in love" and locked in a
cage in her parent's house, she knows her need for restful
change. Change was, in fact, the reason she and Len moved
to the lake, but "Somehow the change wore out like a prescrip-
tion./ And there's more to it than just window views/ And
living by a lake." The "more to it" is, of course, a change
in vision, not location, a new way of seeing one's life and
work, a fresh perspective that despite a Walden Pond or
Willoughby Lake no move to the country will ensure.

As the move he urged suggests, Len wants to help his
wife but is too busy himself, working as hard as she does,
"from sun to sun." "But work ain't all," she remarks, and
her concern with her mad uncle shouting "love things" in the
night to the ears of her mother, a young bride, suggests that
this particular servant to servants has herself been crossed
in love. As is the case with Amy and the hill wife, there is
no communication in her life either; there is no one there to
listen, Len forever working.

Here the role of the camper becomes most important;
he is the husband she lacks, able and willing to hear her out,
a better communicator in his silence than the husband in "Home
Burial" in his stumbling words or Len with his work ethic
cliches and simplistic solutions. She wants her guest to
stay because she needs him and "to be kept" from work; most
of all, she needs the chance to talk he provides. Having someone to listen is the best fence she can for the moment build, and the entire monologue is her latest in a line of "prescriptions" that help her to get by. The poem is that momentary rest from labor she desperately needs and that so quickly ends when the listener rises to leave:

But the thing of it is, I need to be kept.
There's work enough to do—I need to be kept;
But behind's behind. The worst that you can do
Is set me back a little more behind.
I shan't catch up in this world, anyway.
I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.

"There's work enough to do—I need to be kept," as she says, and such a desperate statement suggests that the break she takes here is more escape than leisure. Work is something she dreads, and fear of work makes genuine leisure impossible. While in poems like "Mowing" or "The Tuft of Flowers" work is akin to prayer, quiet and joyful, work in "A Servant to Servants" is routine, monotonous and eternal. The poem is, in other words, a masterful portrait of despair, and as the modern philosopher Joseph Pieper suggests, "despair and the incapacity for leisure are twins."6 The role of leisure in one's life, Pieper reminds us, was first expressed in Genesis, God approving of His work, resting on the seventh day of creation. Like Him, "In leisure man, too, celebrates the end of his work by allowing his inner eye to dwell for a while upon the reality of the Creation. He looks and he affirms: it is good." But there is no sense of this

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6Pieper, p. 27.
affirmation in Frost's dramatic monologue; the speaker, and her husband, are simply too overworked to possess that "receptive attitude of mind" and "capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation" that Pieper defines as central to the leisure experience.\(^7\)

Interestingly, Pieper's notions on leisure relate to "After Apple Picking," the poem that immediately follows "A Servant to Servants" in *North of Boston*. Pieper sees a connection between sleep and leisure that is directly applicable to the poem:

Leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene, but of those who are open to everything; not of those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reins loose and who are free and easy themselves--almost like a man falling asleep, for one can only fall asleep by 'letting oneself go.' Sleeplessness and the incapacity for leisure are really related to one another in a special sense, and a man at leisure is not unlike a man asleep. Heraclitus the Obscure observed of men who were asleep that they too 'were busy and active in the happenings of the world.' When we really let our minds rest contemplatively on a rose in bud, on a child at play, on a divine mystery, we are rested and quickened as though by a dreamless sleep. Or as the Book of Job says 'God giveth songs in the night' (Job XXXV, 10). Moreover, it has always been a pious belief that God sends his good gifts and his blessings in sleep. And in the same way his great, imperishable intuitions visit a man in his moments of leisure. It is in these silent and receptive moments that the soul of man is sometimes visited by an awareness of what holds the world together.\(^8\)

"After Apple Picking" is a kind of "song in the night," a "blessing" received from the day's activities. It is, in short, a celebration of work and rest and a poem very much like "Mowing." The speaker, presumably Frost, has enjoyed

\(^7\)Pieper, p. 28.
\(^8\)Pieper, pp. 28-29.
picking apples, and the fatigue he feels at the end of the
day is gratifying, not exhausting. There is still work to
be done ("My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a
tree/ Toward heaven still") as there is always work to do in
"A Servant to Servants," but the tone here suggests that the
poet looks forward to what he has left for tomorrow. He may
be "overtired" but is well on his way to sleep, hardly
haunted by dark dreams as is the hill wife. His dreams
instead are of what he has done; they are visions of the
day's reality, of the work accomplished:

But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.

His dreams, in other words, are literally the fruits of his
labors, "Magnified apples," fact and dream as one.

As the title emphasizes, the experience of the poem
is after the apples have been picked, when leisure as we
ordinarily think of it is possible. But again we must be
careful to distinguish leisure from idleness. As it was for
both the Greek and Puritan, leisure for Frost is the very
opposite of idleness; it is instead an opportunity to consider,
to see more clearly, to "magnify." It is a chance to unite
the disparate experiences of the day's work and to sort order
from chaos. It is in a sense a "momentary stay against con-
fusion," Frost's definition of poetry itself. Indeed, as
leisure grows naturally from work so too does poetry for Frost;
poetry originates from man's work and his tools, the scythe, the hoe, "the ax-handle of a French-Canadian woodchopper."  

In "After Apple-Picking" this connection between the dreams of leisure and poetry is especially evident. As some critics have noted, one of Frost's concerns in the poem is aesthetic; it is possible to read the poem as a statement on the origins of poetry. But our interest for the moment is not with aesthetics per se but with the value of leisure in one's life, a value demonstrated particularly by the contrast between this poem and the one that precedes it. Here, let us return to Joseph Pieper whose ideas on leisure are curiously close to Frost's.

Pieper is careful to distinguish between idleness, or acedia, and the leisure experience. Acedia is sloth and a cause for restlessness; it is also, according to Pieper, the ultimate cause of the "work for work's sake" ethic that "renders leisure impossible," for "leisure is only possible when a man is at one with himself, when he acquiesces in his own being." Certainly, the ease of rhyme and enjambment as well as the overall quiet of "After Apple-Picking" suggest this kind of acquiescence. There is an inwardness to the poem, a silence most unlike "A Servant to Servants" in which

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9 See Chapter II, note 40.


11 Pieper, p. 27.
the woman must talk—she is desperate to be heard. Leisure for Pieper is "a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality," for, as he says, "only the silent hear."\(^\text{12}\)

Above all, **acedia** is a man's renouncing "the claim implicit in his human dignity." As Pieper says, "he does not want to be as God wants him to be, and that ultimately means that he does not wish to be what he really, fundamentally, is."\(^\text{13}\) This is the despair that Kierkegaard identifies in *The Sickness Unto Death* as the "refusal to be oneself."\(^\text{14}\)

In Pieper's words, "the notion of acedia means that a man does not, in the last resort, give the consent of his will to his own being; that beneath the dynamic activity of his existence, he is still not at one with himself."\(^\text{15}\)

To be fully human and in touch with oneself is of central importance to Frost. Continually, he asks what separates man from beast, human from horse, a question inextricably linked to the work and leisure issue. Let us use "After Apple-Picking" as an example. The poem takes place in a fallen world as all Frost's poems do. The speaker like Adam is obliged to work, picking the mythical fruits of the knowledge of good and evil. But work has given him more

\(^\text{12}\)Pieper, p. 27.
\(^\text{13}\)Pieper, p. 25.
\(^\text{14}\)Quoted by Pieper, p. 25.
\(^\text{15}\)Pieper, p. 25.
than the innocent woodchuck will ever know; it has given him leisure and the chance to dream. As Richard Poirier says succinctly, "Labor...is both one of the unfortunate consequences of the Fall and a way of overcoming them, of transforming them into fortunate ones." Leisure, too, as it is part of work, is a result of that Fall. Thus, the poet's "trouble" in his sleep in "After Apple Picking" is not "trouble" at all. He uses the word ironically. He will dream, but his ability to dream suggests his human capacity to transform reality into vision, to see meaning in what is.

In contrast, the woodchuck sleeps soundly. Like Amy's husband or Len or Frost's neighbor lugging rocks "like an old-stone savage armed," he has only his daily task to perform. He forages for food and sleeps in his burrow. With no capacity for leisure, he will not, as it were, "go behind his father's saying" to ask what that saying means. Certainly, a woodchuck is not expected to ask questions but a man is, and man is but a woodchuck, according to Frost, when he will not seek the significance of what he does and sees. To ask, as Frost does in "Design," what a moth in a spider's web means is man's human obligation and his curse to know, a blessing.

Frost shares with Emerson especially this concern with what makes us man. For both, it is our ability to see. Frost's characters frequently suffer from what Emerson in a letter to Margaret Fuller called "ophthalmia," a deficiency in human vision. To see is paramount to Emerson, and the

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16 Poirier, p. 293.
most complete man, the poet, is he "whose eye can integrate
all the parts," who is very literally a "seer." In Frost,
overwork results in a kind of blindness, and the ultimate
result of turning the grindstone wheel too many times is a
vision that is "funny-eyed" not "magnified." Like the farmer
in the poem "The Mountain," forever plodding behind his oxen,
Frost's servants have neither time nor inclination to climb
the hill they have "worked around the foot of all [their
lives]" to "see new things."

Frost's version of Emerson's "seer" is the "seeker."
Whether searching a "saturated meadow" for "Rose Pogonias"
or the top of a mountain for "a view round the world," the
seeker is he who is willing and able to go beyond the cliches
of his father to ask why:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Work sustains and interests Frost's seeker; it does not, how-
ever, dominate him to the point of blindness. He is able, it
seems, to balance what he must do with what he wants to do and
to find time for both money and flowers, for lawyers and children,
as he seeks like the protagonist in "The Self-Seeker" for
meaning in life.

17There is an important distinction that must be made
here, however, between Emerson's and Frost's ways of seeing.
Emerson wishes to be "a transparent eyeball" when in nature;
that is, he wishes to be absorbed in nature, not to be at all
but to have nature flow through him, "each and all." Frost's
concern is with an angle of vision. He does not wish to merge
with nature but to stand back from it, to achieve "a vantage
point" from which he may see. The distinction between these
two ways of seeing suggests larger differences between Emerson
and Frost that are discussed in Chapter IV of this study.
The "Broken One," as the protagonist is called because of an injury at the mill, has a vision to sustain him beyond his work. Work, in fact, was nearly his destruction as it actually tried to devour him, both his legs being chewed off by the water wheel. But as he is saved physically from being a cog in his own machinery so too is he "saved from work," as Frost says in "Out, Out-," by an attitude that allows him to see more to life than toil and money. He is saved by a sense of wonder and mystery that makes him as much like the little girl Anne in the poem as either of the two men.

His nephew Willis, appropriately nicknamed Will (could this also be the name of Amy's husband in "Home Burial"?), sees only financial loss in the sale of the mill for five hundred dollars and the lawyer only gain. Neither sees anything in the flowers "the Broken One" loves but Anne who brings him a Ram's Horn orchid for a gift. She knows there is value of another kind in growing things and like the unseen mower in "The Tuft of Flowers" is careful not to cut them all: "I wanted there should be some next year." To the lawyer, Anne and her flowers are but "A pretty interlude" and to Willis, the flowers are nothing but another commodity his uncle is losing money on:

'But your flowers, man, you're selling out your flowers.'

'Yes, that's one way to put it--all the flowers Of every kind everywhere in this region For the next forty summers--call it forty. But I'm not selling those, I'm giving them; They never earned me so much as one cent . . .'
"The Broken One's" flowers are worthless in any marketplace, in a world, that is, that honors both the lawyer's and nephew's ambition. Their ambitions are, after all, the same, one wanting to gain, the other to save, each wanting to get ahead. Neither, however, has the receptivity to life and capacity for wonder that "the Broken One" shares with Anne. But he is not Anne, and his position in the poem, like that of the poet in "Stopping By Woods," is a mean between two extremes. A worker not destroyed by his work, having literally escaped such destruction, he is still not a child and knows he must sell the mill in order to live. But, like Anne among the flowers, he does not want more than he needs, the thousand Will urges him to hold out for. Practical and dreamy, his life is a healthy though difficult balance of need and desire.

As Lawrence Perrine has rightly noted, there is irony in both the protagonist's name and the poem's title. Broken in body though he is, the "Broken One" is whole in spirit, and in the usual sense of the word, is not a self-seeker at all. He refuses to waste his life squabbling over money. But in a deeper way, as Perrine goes on to say, he is indeed a seeker, seeking to preserve "his essential identity; he is literally a seeker of self." 18 Such a search, intimately

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18. Lawrence Perrine, "The Sense of Frost's 'The Self-Seeker,'" Concerning Poetry, no. 7 (1974), p. 5. Perrine goes on to compare in a note the poet in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" to the "Broken One": "The uniting of avocation and vocation is an ideal, something to be aimed at, not something often or easily achieved. One person out of thousands earns his living on what he would be doing anyway had he no living to make. For
connected with work and leisure as it is, is a recurrent one in Frost, one that is central especially to the three poems we shall conclude this chapter with, "The Woodpile," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "The Gum-Gatherer."

"Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day," the speaker in "The Woodpile" is uncertain of both his destination and location. What is certain, however, is his search for something, his desire to see:

I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. 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.

His is a journey out into the world, "'a little voyage of discovery,'"¹⁹ as Frost once called the act of writing itself. Indeed, some critics have considered "The Woodpile," like "After Apple-Picking," as a camouflaged statement by Frost on the origins and role of poetry in his life.²⁰ But

the poet who wrote 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' this unification would have meant earning his living writing poetry. He never perfectly achieved it: he partially supported himself by farming or teaching or lecturing for most of his life. For serious poets in the modern world, indeed, such unification has become impossible. No poet of stature in recent times has supported himself through poetry alone. The situation is hardly better for collectors and classifiers of wild flowers" (pp. 7-8).

Both the poet and the "Broken One," in other words, have chosen "something like a star" to guide them through life's confusion. This star is the uniting of what they have to do with what they want to do; its light is a source of solace in a dark world.


²⁰ See in particular Lynen, pp. 143-145.
the poem has another, equally important meaning; it deals with a way of seeing and living one's life. Receptive to the world around him, the speaker is "busy" at leisure, one of those "who are open to everything," as Pieper says, one who discovers the "handiwork" of another like himself, forever "turning to fresh tasks." Despite the uncertain footing in the hard snow, there is no terror in the speaker's voice, and though unsure of where he is, he is not afraid: "I was just far from home." He has that self-possession and vantage point that allows him to laugh not only at the frightened bird but at himself:

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. He thought that I was after him for a feather—— The white one in his tail; like one who takes Everything said as personal to himself.

Willing to wander and explore, the speaker is rewarded with a vision, the woodpile cut and stacked so carefully in the middle of nowhere:

It was a cord of maple, cut and split And piled——and measured, four by four by eight. 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. The wood was gray and the bark warping off it And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.

His appreciation of detail here, his sense of exactness in describing the pile so meticulously to us, suggests that the speaker is a blood brother to the woodchopper. They share an appreciation of work done for the sheer joy of the task and believe together that use is not all in life:
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 there far from a useful fireplace . . .

Indeed, we may even conclude that the speaker is the chopper, for certainly he is in spirit and vision, as the raker is the mower in "The Tuft of Flowers." Each is a separate eye making one in sight, both sharing in leisure and work a joy in what life brings them and what they bring to life. They hold spiritual hands out there in the wilderness, out in the world that is always running down, moving inexorably, Frost believes, to "the slow smokeless burning of decay."

In a way, then, "The Woodpile" is a love poem, one like "West Running Brook," that presents us with darkness and threat and a way to survive, albeit temporarily. The ground we walk on like the frozen swamp will give way at any moment; "The universal cataract of death/ That spends to nothingness" cannot be escaped. Our stay against confusion may be form as represented in the woodpile, it may well be poetry itself, but it is also the union with another that takes place spiritually in the poem as it does in "West Running Brook" and does as well at the end of Frost's famous "The Death of the Hired Man." Silas' death has brought the husband and wife together, has made their eyes one in sight.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is an inside-out version of "Home Burial." In both poems death is a catalyst revealing the degree of love between the characters, but while the child's death reveals tension and discord, Silas' dying shows union and harmony. Silas, in a way, is the child of Warren and Mary,
who treat him as a stern father and gentle mother might.
Warren will not have him back, having kicked him out of the
nest like a lazy son: "'I told him so last haying, didn't
I?/ If he left then, I said, that ended it.'" But Mary
accepts him despite, and because of, his faults. After all,
as she asks Warren, who else will take him back but those
who have provided a home in the past?

As has been noted by other readers of the poem, "The
Death of the Hired Man" involves a definition of home and the
dialectic of justice and mercy central to it. But the poem
also deals with work and work's role in one's search for
meaning in life. Silas is a hired man, part of that servant
proletariat so detested by the Greeks. But he has refused to
beg and is not detested by Frost who portrays him as one who
takes pride in the little tasks he is able to perform well:

'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'

"To save his self-respect" is his purpose in working, and the
illusion that he can still work is what keeps him going. He
has returned to the farm "to ditch the meadow" and "to clear
the upper pasture," chores he can no longer perform, for "His
working days are done."

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21 See Brower, pp. 157-163; Poirier, pp. 106-108. The latter includes a whole section on the theme of "home"
in Frost, pp. 87-172.
Silas is, then, a kind of seeker, making a poignant search for home, for self. But he is also incomplete. He has had nothing but work in his life and together with young Harold Wilson, who studied Latin and the violin "Because he liked it," is half of "a team for work":

'He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.  
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.  
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.  
He says they two will make a team for work:  
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!  
The way he mixed that in with other things.  
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft  
On education—you know how they fought  
All through July under the blazing sun,  
Silas up on the cart to build the load,  
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'

Silas and Harold are the comic reflection of Mary and Warren, the poem's more important team, whose union at the end is symbolized in their holding hands. The difference between this ending and that of "Home Burial" is obvious and the reason for it vital. "Will," if we may so call Amy's husband, is a servant and Warren a seeker. A servant to work itself, never at ease, "Will" cannot share his sorrow with his wife or she with him; indeed, one wonders if he has time for any sorrow at all. And though we have no hard evidence for it, we sense that work has not dominated Warren; harsh as he can be, he is willing to listen, to talk, to share. Importantly, the poem is a dialogue, not a monologue like "A Servant to Servants" or a series of halting, misunderstood fragments like "Home Burial." Warren's characteristic gesture in the poem is to return, coming back from shopping at the poem's beginning, coming back to Mary at the end. As she draws
"him down/ To sit beside her on the wooden steps" in the opening lines, he "Slips to her side" in the final. The circularity here suggests that Warren seeks to share, instinctively recognizing his own limitations and the need for the balancing stability of his wife whose eye is forever on the softening beauty of the moon:

Part of a moon was falling down the west, Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills. Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it And spread her apron to it. She put her hand Among the harplike morning-glory strings, Taut with the dew from the garden bed to eaves, As if she played unheard some tenderness That wrought on him beside her in the night.

Mary and Warren combine to make a whole. Their harmony is resolved discord, the resolution of two points of view into one. Together they are about the best match for death one can find in Frost. Theirs is the kind of stability one sees in "The Silken Tent" with its balance of "supporting central cedar pole" and "countless silken ties of love and thought" that enables it to withstand "the capriciousness of summer air." As one, they possess that "power of standing still" in "the rush of things to waste" Frost praises in "The Master Speed."

As John Lynen's The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost suggests, "The Death of the Hired Man" is an idyll, owing a great deal to Virgil's Eclogues especially. So too does "The Gum-Gatherer," a poem indebted not only to Virgil's first idyll, "The Dispossessed," but to Wordsworth's "Resolution

22 See also Brower, pp. 162-166.
and Independence" and Thoreau's *Walden* as well. Tityrus, Virgil's ideal shepherd, is the contented herdsman whose work of tending flocks is "happy leisure" in the E. V. Rieu translation. In contrast, Meliboeus, the evicted shepherd, cannot be at ease, for his work is endless. As Leo Marx says of his plight, "Divested of his land, he faces the prospect of unending anxiety, deprivation, and struggle." He is forced to work forever, never to relax, to experience "happy leisure."

A similar, though less extreme, contrast in life styles is present in "The Gum-Gatherer." The speaker is "coming home" from where he "lived in mountain land" for a short while; he has been on a kind of vacation from home whereas the gatherer's home is "higher up in the pass," not in the valley. His work is where his home is, at the beginning of things, where streams start not end; he lives by the "waters" and "watering place" of Frost's "Directive" where one can "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion":

He came from higher up in the pass
Where the grist of the new-beginning brooks
Is blocks split off the mountain mass... There he had built his stolen shack.

Like Wordsworth's leech gatherer whose vision allows him to triumph over his unpleasant work, Frost's gatherer, despite his thoroughly unsophisticated job of gathering gum, is happy. But as Frost's Puritan heritage taught him, it is

24 Marx, p. 21.
not the kind of work one does that matters anyway; what counts is the way one views that work and, as the poet learned from his indoor schooling in Greek values, how free that work permits one to be. Both vision and freedom are apparent in the gum-gatherer who finds his work in sources, in the very sap of trees:

What this man brought in a cotton sack
Was gum, the gum of the mountain spruce.
He showed me lumps of the scented stuff
Like uncut jewels, dull and rough.
It comes to market golden brown;
But turns to pink between the teeth.

I told him this is a pleasant life,
To set your breast to the bark of trees
That all your days are dim beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down
And bring it to market when you please.

Certainly, this gum-gatherer is someone Henry Thoreau would much admire, someone who realizes that "to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely." After all, as Thoreau continues, "It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow," a point Frost applauds. Too much sweat gets in our eyes, blinding us to the spiritual aspects of what we do, keeping us from seeing what life has to teach. Overwork, in short, destroys the quality of our lives, breeding madness, destroying love.

But if work alone and for its own sake can damage sight and dry up feeling as happens in "A Servant to Servants," the absence of work is equally dangerous, allowing in "The

\[25\] Thoreau, p. 74.
Hill Wife," for example, too much introspection. As we have stressed, without work leisure is mere idleness, acedia, that allegorical parent of despair, just as work without leisure is meaningless drudgery. Leisure is that time of reflection that gives work meaning, and the ideal for Frost is the balance of both, work and leisure pairing like eyes that make one in sight, or like love of man and woman, a child.
CHAPTER IV

A GATHERING METAPHOR

The characters we have just been discussing share another trait than overwork. Each is speechless, or in the case of Len's wife, a frantic talker. Each lacks what Frost calls in "Education by Poetry" "a gathering metaphor" to give his or her life meaning: "The only materialist . . . is the man who gets lost in his material without a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order. He is the lost soul."^1

Having no fluency, the overworked in Frost are such "materialists," such "lost souls"; none is able to communicate, to make that "philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity."^2 Like the two tramps in mud time, who, but for one ignorant remark ("Hit them hard"), remain silent throughout the poem, Frost's servants suffer a tunneled vision, lost without the light of language to guide it.

In contrast, Frost as a poet is a deft skater. He moves, like the water beetle he was so fascinated by, on the currents of language, able to change quickly with any shifts. His ease of movement, his ability to stay afloat in any company, is a result of his ease with language; he speaks

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^1Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 41.
^2Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 41.
with many tongues, able to say in the same breath in "Mowing," for example, "elf" and "fay" and "laid the swale in rows."

Equally at home in the classroom and barnyard, he was indeed the "literate farmer" in his life; both country and city bred, he is a pastoralist in his writing, as John Lynen's thesis makes clear. Language, and the lack of it, is, in other words, a vital concern to Frost, and we must ask how work and leisure relate to it. What, for example, is work's role in the origin of language and from what sources does Frost derive his ideas? Does language have a special use for Frost not only as a poet but as a man running scared? Of what value, finally, is "a gathering metaphor"?

With his gift for speech, it is not surprising that Frost became the nation's goodwill ambassador, traveling to South America, Israel, and Russia, for in many ways he was the Ben Franklin of his times. Yet while work was performance

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3Lynen's is a truly excellent investigation of Frost's point of view. In sum, his thesis is that while the "country" certainly provides Frost with his subject, it more importantly gives him a framework for picturing reality: "the rural world supplies not only the objects, the events, the characters he writes about, but also the point of view from which they are seen" (pp. 6-7). Frost came into his own, Lynen maintains, only when he adopted "the perspective of the pastoral and wrote from the point of view of an actual New England farmer" (p. 19).

4In addition to their gift for gab, Frost and Franklin share several traits: a sense of staging and self-promotion; the love of aphorism (which they both have in common with Emerson, an early admirer of Franklin); an interest in science and a genuine curiosity about the workings of nature; a belief that "it's knowing what to do with things that counts." Frost is not, however, what we think of as an "Enlightenment" man. His deep fear of death and the vengeance of God, as well as the many other characteristics discussed in this study, make him far more Puritan than rationalist. Frost did not believe, finally, that man was perfectible; this age, he said, is as dark as any has been or any will be (see "The Lesson for Today").
for Franklin, a way of self-promotion as he paraded that famous wheelbarrow through the streets of Philadelphia, work is a far more serious matter for the intensely Puritan Frost. It is important for what it yields in itself—the apples we pick, the hay we mow—and for what it yields as well in terms of metaphor. In Richard Poirier's words, "work is necessary if we are to get down to the grain of things, the lines in nature which we cannot otherwise know or see." Together with Thoreau Frost works on his hands and knees in the beanfield but harvests from that work so much more than beans. As Thoreau states:

It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over and selling them,—the last was the hardest of all,—I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o'clock till noon . . .

Those summer days which some of my contemporaries devoted to the fine arts in Boston or Rome, and others to contemplation in India, and others to trade in London or New York, I thus, with the other farmers of New England, devoted to husbandry. Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting . . . but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day.

To "know" beans is to make a language for them, and work brings two kinds of fruit—the thing and the metaphor for it—to be used someday "to serve a parable-maker," to make a poem.

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5 Poirier, p. 283.
6 Thoreau, pp. 141-142.
Frost's garden, like Thoreau's, is a source of knowledge, that mythic place, as the Bible says, where definitions first were made.

Indeed, work provides the very opportunity for communication in Frost. It supplies in addition to many of the words—words like "tote road," "swab," "jag," "swale," "stoneboat," "windrows," "shooks"—the chance for one man to get together with another. The work of mending a wall, for example, brings two men closer and gives them something to talk about, just as work does at a grindstone. So, too, does the making of an ax-helve permit a bookish farmer to share ideas with an ignorant woodchopper. "The Ax-Helve" even suggests that work is a possible link between cultures, not just individuals, a way of "speaking" that transcends language. The French-Canadian's way of making helves is, after all, more a source of our understanding him than his broken English is. For Frost, then, work provides at least the chance to speak; it is a kind of hearth around which men gather.

Yet work does not by any means guarantee communication, because it is not language itself but its source. Though the two men mending the wall share the same work experience, they do not communicate—one stays in the dark of his pine trees, the other in the light of his apple. So, too, in "Two Tramps" is the opportunity for communication never fulfilled, the speaker seeing far more to chopping wood than the utterly practical woodsmen ever will, for "Except as a fellow handled an ax/ They had no way of knowing a fool." And though two
cultures are almost bridged in "The Ax-Helve," they are not finally, the poem turning on a question that reveals the difference in background between the educated speaker and the ignorant Baptiste, that is, "whether the right to hold/Such doubts of education should depend/Upon the education of those who held them?" As Radcliff Squires puts it, "Whereas the two can meet over the beauty of hickory grain and the proper use of that wood, uncertainty arises over their ability to understand each other when the concern is less tangible. The limited man and the literate farmer understand each other perfectly when the subject is as limited as craftsmanship. But it is not enough." Indeed, as we find so often in this poet of balanced polarities, work tends to distinguish between men as much as it brings them together. Men work together and apart, it seems, work being at once the source of potential dialogue and the revelation of differences.

Work leads to "A Time to Talk," and as that small poem suggests, we have a "friendly visit" when we have laid down our tools. The overworked characters discussed in Chapter III have not risen above their work experience to shape a language that can deal with it. Without "a gathering metaphor" to order their existence, they rely on unexamined cliches to explain their lives: "Good fences make good neighbors," "The only way out is through." The man on the grindstone never talks and Amy's husband speaks only in fragments. Quiet

desperation is the curse of those who have no sense of leisure, for language is a product not only of work but of time from work that allows us to clarify and make sense of what we do. Leisure is "the basis of culture,"\(^8\) because without it, there is no language.

The way we speak and value words is thus, for Frost, an indication of our consciousness, of how far we have risen above the animal condition. Not only are we to be "seekers" of self, in other words, but "speakers" too, and it is no accident that the poet, who uses language most consciously, is Emerson's "seer." It is no accident, too, that Frost's "seekers" are his most articulate figures. Their wholeness of vision is indicated by their ability to use words well. They speak with a reverent accuracy, naming the precise features of the world they work in, the woodpiles "four by four by eight" and apples "with every fleck of russet showing clear." And, importantly, they are questioners, continually probing through language the meaning of what they do, never giving in to proverb, to easy answer.

In his concern for work's role in the origins and use of language, Frost is, at times, close to Emerson, but in his recognition and concern for leisure, he is far closer to Thoreau. It was never really Emerson's vision of life that appealed so much to Frost as his way of talking about it.

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\(^8\)This is, of course, the very title of Pieper's provocative essay. But Pieper's ideas are not new. He derives them from the great thinkers of Greece and the Middle Ages, which in itself suggests how fully his theories on leisure are in the tradition of Western civilization that Frost so admired.
Early in his address before the Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1959, the poet distinguishes his "melancholy dualism" from Emerson's "cheerful Monism", for which evil does not exist, or if it does exist, needn't last forever. Instead, what "got" Frost about Emerson was the Transcendentalist's remark in his journal for 1840, "Cut these sentences and they bleed," and "his burst of poetry" in "Monadnock":

Yet wouldst thou learn our ancient speech
These the masters that can teach.
Fourscore or a hundred words
All their vocal muse affords.
Yet they turn them in a fashion
Past the statesman's art and passion.
Rude poets of the tavern hearth
Squandering your unquoted mirth,
That keeps the ground and never soars,
While Jake retorts and Reuben roars.
Scoff of yeoman, strong and stark,
Goes like bullet to the mark,
And the solid curse and jeer
Never balk the waiting ear.10

Frost knew Emerson's *Nature* well and in large part ascribed to the ideas on language discussed there. Certainly, for Frost words are, as Emerson says, "signs of natural facts," though he is dubious that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." Instead, nature in Frost's vision may or may not reveal meaning to man, and man's quest as suggested by poems like "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" and "For Once, Then, Something" may or may not be foolish. Frost is always skeptical and Emerson, at least as Frost understood him, always positive.

9"On Emerson," *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 112.
10*Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 113.
Where Emerson and Frost seem to meet is in their common emphasis on the origins of language in facts. In F. O. Matthiessen's words, Emerson celebrated "'the vigorous Saxon' of men working in the fields or swapping stories in the barn, men wholly uneducated, but whose words had roots in their own experiences." ^11 "A fact is true poetry," Emerson goes on to conclude in *Nature*, and writes later in "The Poet" that "every word was once a Poem," for the poet is the Nameer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's. . . . For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. ^12

But Frost's vision is less sanguine. His poet is Adam after the fall not before, the world a darker place and the poet, like any man, alone, trying to find his way. Though he says that poetry is "gloating on facts," ^13 he is far less captivated by those "facts" of language than is the romantic Emerson. Far from identifying himself with the hired man or


^12 Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 231.

the neighbor mending walls, those "Rude poets of the tavern hearth," Frost uses the colloquialisms of their speech to distinguish himself from them. Indeed, he uses the speech of the back-country folk to show how limited they are in both language and vision.

His poetic strategy is far closer to Thoreau's by Walden Pond than Emerson's in his Concord home. The field Frost cultivates is what Thoreau calls "the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields," and he shares with Thoreau a familiarity that breeds both admiration and contempt. What Poirier terms "social snobbishness"\textsuperscript{14} clearly exists in Frost's poems, the political and moral implications of which we shall take up next chapter. Neither writer believes in Adam and the "good heart" of man, though both have been accused of urging a return to the Garden. Instead, the "Homeric" man is both wondrous and stupid—the woodsman an ignorant child for Thoreau, an illiterate immigrant for Frost.

Both writers are careful to separate themselves from such "Rude poets" by the language they, as writers, use—a language that is at once coarse and literate, a product, that is, of both work and the leisure that makes sense of it. What Thoreau said of himself holds true for Frost; "sensible of a certain doubleness," he was able to stand "as remote from \textit{him}self as from another," and was, in Matthiessen's words, "both participant and spectator in any event."\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14}Poirier, p. 281.

\textsuperscript{15}Matthiessen, p. 170.
As a worker in both the field and the factory, Frost knew first-hand the experience, and the words, of labor. "He took his lessons from the pains, not the prettiness of Ceres," as Herbert Howarth has said. In consequence, the word "turn" in "The Tuft of Flowers," for example, had a special meaning for the poet, one that grew out of the work done. He explained its origin to a Bread Loaf audience:

'I went to turn . . . before the sun.' And I might just say that in the old days we mowed by hand a great deal—more than we do now. . . . There was always a boy or somebody—some fellow around like me—to toss the grass, open it up, let the sun at it. The mowing was apt to be done in the dew of the morning for better mowing, but it left the grass wet and had to be scattered. We called it—the word for it was 'turning' the grass. . . . that was my job when I was young, to turn the grass after the mower. We called it 'just turning it.' It scattered it a little in the sun.17

Frost's language is often that of a pragmatist, and his notions on its origins and use are as much a product of reading William James as the Transcendentalists. "We play the words as we find them," he says in "The Constant Symbol," "We make them do."18 He had read and taught The Will to Believe and Psychology and knew full-well James' definition of a pragmatist as one who

turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction

17Quoted by Cook, A Living Voice, pp. 85, 179-180.
18Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 28.
and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth.19

Accordingly, language for James is not fixed because experience from which it derives is fluid, and definition does not arise prior to use, as, say, in the dictionary, but through the very use to which the words are put. As L. P. Jacks states in "William James and his Message,"

Unable to see in language anything but the dictionary meaning of terms, and pinning the pragmatist down to this, we accuse him of all sorts of doctrines which as often as not are the precise opposite of what he wants to convey; we flatter ourselves that we have understood him when as a matter of fact we are not even within sight of his position. We on our side are arguing about the face-values of words; he, on his side, is using these words as pointers, or as doors opening into a concrete whole of experience which contains within itself ten thousand things besides the abstract meaning indicated in the dictionary.20

But it is important to note that work is not Frost's only dictionary. When he hid away from his menial job as a light-trimmer at the Arlington Mill in 1893 to "a place apart" among the pulleys and wheels, he did so to read Shakespeare. His poetry is an echo not only of the grinding of factory


wheels and the cursing of foremen but also of the rich
language of Hamlet and the ponderings of Macbeth. His verse
is what Reuben Brower calls "a talking song," and his voice
is that of the oven bird "who says the early petal-fall is
past," who "says the highway dust is over all," and who "knows
in singing not to sing," but who is nonetheless "a singer
everyone has heard." Frost, in short, as participant and
spectator, makes music of our common labors, our workaday
speech. For it is not work alone he celebrates but also the
leisure that gives that work value, and man's art is not just
"raw material," not just the swearing of a gang boss, but
that swearing shaped by leisure's "measure" into song, "both
word and note":

The Aim Was Song

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

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

He took a little in his mouth,
   And held it long enough for north
To be converted into south,
   And then by measure blew it forth.

By measure. It was word and note,
   The wind the wind had meant to be--
A little through the lips and throat.
   The aim was song--the wind could see.

The complexity of Frost's language, its origins in
both work and skole, can be seen by comparing him briefly to

21Brower, p. 31.
one of his contemporaries, Carl Sandburg. The flatness of Sandburg's line is a direct result of his desire to be closely identified with the people, particularly the uneducated working classes. His language and syntax are never special, always common, in an effort to fulfill Sandburg's democratic values. His is a diction exclusively of work and the worker:

Without the daily chores of the people
the milk trucks would have no milk
the markets neither meat nor potatoes
the railroad and bus time tables
would be on the fritz
and the shippers saying, "Phooey!"
And daily the chores are done
with heavy toil here, light laughter there,
the chores of the people, yes.22

Frost did not believe that such stuff was even poetry, and his sense of poetry's special domain—its frequent use of many common, workaday words but not its domination by them—gives his verse a tension that Sandburg's lacks. Whereas Sandburg's diction is from the worker's tongue alone, Frost's instead is from both the farmer's and the professor's. As he explained to Reginald Cook about the origins of "The Death of the Hired Man," "I always wanted to do something about the kind of American hired man . . . that I'd lived with and worked with and been."23 What he did for this American worker was to write a pastoral eclogue in the mode of Virgil.

The collision of voices is frequently the drama of a Frost poem, and it is wrong to identify the poet's voice with

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22 Carl Sandburg, The People, Yes (New York, 1936), p. 151. All subsequent quotations from Sandburg are from this edition.

23 Quoted by Cook, A Living Voice, p. 144.
either one of the voices in poems such as "Home Burial" or "The Mountain." "The Ax-Helve," for instance, gives us an obvious case of such drama as it opens with an archaism and a pathetic fallacy, both of which Frost is consciously using as a way of portraying the speaker and distancing him from Baptiste:

I've known ere now an interfering branch
Of alder catch my lifted ax behind me.
But that was in the woods, to hold my hand
From striking at another alder's roots,
And that was, as I say, an alder branch.

"Ere," "interfering," and "as I say" suggest a character whose knowledge of the woods has come more from reading about it than working in it. He has not been fully "versed in country things" and seems to feel that trees protect one another. He is "poetic," a man whose time has been spent reading a good deal of sentimental poetry.

Baptiste is the opposite, his language thoroughly colloquial, his speech dialect. His is an ignorant voice with absolutely "no false curves/ Put on it from without." But it is a caution against, not a hymn to, a life led solely "native to the grain." Without "knowledge" we end up a block of wood like Mrs. Baptiste, speechless, illiterate, rocking to and fro, ever closer to the fire. In short, Baptiste's is the voice of work without leisure, without skole:

'You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off
Den where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair?'.
'Come on my house and I put you one in
What's las' awhile--good hick'ry what's grow crooked,
De second growt' I cut myself--tough, tough!'

Frost's use of language cannot be overemphasized. "It's how you say a thing that counts," and Frost's way of saying
is a way of staking out his own territory. It is his source of self-identity. Each of Frost's books is concerned, finally, with one character, Robert Frost. Even the most "other" of his books, North of Boston, is really a way of defining who he is through the separation of himself from others. He is neither, for example, the minister nor the old lady in "The Black Cottage," but someone who understands both their visions and who can speak in both their voices. As a kind of ventriloquist, he can hold varying, even opposite, ideas at once and be able to see the wisdom and foolishness in each. He who is adept at language can understand that working on walls both brings men together and separates them.

The word and the poem have a special use for Frost, an important and private one to which he put them. The poem, as he says, is "a figure of the will braving alien entanglements," and he associates the pen with the ax and scythe in particular because these are tools of clearing, of bringing light from dark. Agreeing with Emerson's idea that each word was originally a poem, Frost believes language is also a tool of clearing and a means of survival itself. Thus, his "play" with words and his ability to juggle voices, diction, and syntax are not play at all but a deadly serious business. The poem is a means of getting through the winter's night, as indeed it was for him on those cold nights in Derry, New Hampshire after the death of his small son. The poem that so often for him deals with work and workers Frost puts to work to keep the dark woods back from the clearing.
If the precise descriptions in any poem are a way of reminding us of the first speech of man and the act of word-making itself, of defining and ordering, such descriptions have a special poignancy in Frost whose sense of life's terrors is particularly keen. The darkness of his private life, so vividly displayed in the Thompson biography, is reflected in his belief that nature is predatory, that spiders make their webs even in the whitest of flowers ("Design") and that summer is actually the cruelest season, bringing "dark foliage on . . . To blot out and drink up and sweep away/ These flowery waters and these watery flowers" ("Spring Pools").

Instead of celebrating nature's cycles in any kind of Emersonian way, Frost sees only inevitability behind them. The tale of the book of nature is mutability, which Frost's real life on the farm helped him realize. As Nina Baym says in her excellent article, "he does not find in nature a transcendental unity or an assurance of rebirth, but rather the grim laws of change and decay." 24

How to "make snug in the limitless" is Frost's overriding concern and the main reason he was so attracted to books like Robinson Crusoe and Walden. "Robinson Crusoe is never quite out of my mind," he once said. "I never tire of being shown how the limited can make snug in the limitless. Walden has something of the same fascination. Crusoe was cast away; Thoreau was self-cast away. Both found themselves

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24 Baym, p. 716.
sufficient."25 Crusoe's continual wall-building is a metaphor for his search for order in the wilds of the island, a search matched by his meticulous articulation in the diary that kept him sane. And Thoreau's sharp words are also a tool, a scalpel in his hands, his way of "fronting" life. Puritans both, Defoe and Thoreau had a powerfully utilitarian sense of language, and so does Frost.

"Puritanism," says Larzer Ziff, "never relinquished its overwhelming insistence on the centrality of the word," for words, he says, were "a means of guiding man to his God."26 As such, they were certainly to be taken seriously as a way of knowing and coming to terms with reality. Thus, the meaning of a word was never arbitrary for the Puritan; instead, the word itself was a suggestion of essence, a point, as we know, Emerson made much of. The pun and anagram, for example, both characteristic of Puritan public poetry, were not done solely for play or ingenuity's sake but because the name of something revealed its meaning. Surnames such as Cotton (cloth), Stone (foundation of faith and shelter), and Hooker (fisher of spirit and men) were as utilitarian as epistemological, and remind us of Emerson's statement on the original meanings of words in Nature:

... the use of the outer creation /is/ to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced

25The Early Years, p. 549.

to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. Right means straight; wrong means twisted. Spirit means wind; transgression, the crossing of a line.  

But words for Frost do not exist in isolation any more than they existed solely in the Bible for the Puritan. Their efficacy is in the voice—in the pulpit for Puritanism, in the "sentence sound" for Frost. A poem must be dramatic, Frost maintains, one voice playing off against another; even the lyric is "the dramatic give and take . . . within oneself."

The "sentence sound" is thus language in use, in action. It is words themselves at work, jostling for position in the voice. Words mean little to Frost if they are not spoken, and as the Puritan associated a man's work with what he was as a man, so too does Frost link one's use of language to his essence. Language, like work, is a calling, and by one's sentences, Frost believes, do we know him. As he suggested in a letter to John Bartlett, "men have certain sentence sounds as birds have certain songs."

The very title of Frost's poem "The Code" suggests this link between the way we speak and what we are. As Lynen points out, the word "code" is double-edged: "It can signify either a system of communication or an ethical standard."

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27 Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 31.
28 Quoted by Robert S. Newdick, "Pinkerton Academy, Derry, New Hampshire" in Thornton, p. 79.
It, in fact, signifies both, for Frost, in Lynen's words, wishes "to show that the rural New Englander's way of communication and his ultimate beliefs are inseparable."^31

The poem is built on a simple frame, the story the hired man tells his boss, a "town-bred" farmer, a rough parallel of the relationship between the boss and James, another hired man. James has just thrust his pitchfork in the ground and "Marched himself off the field and home," reacting to a remark the farmer had made a half-hour before. Being "town-bred" the farmer-boss does not understand the "code" and in asking his hired men to "take pains" in cocking the hay has offended their dignity. He has yet to learn that "The hand that knows his business won't be told/To do work better or faster," and himself must be told a story by the poem's main speaker, a more enlightened hired man than James, who has stayed to help despite the insult because "I know you don't understand our ways."

The point is that any understanding of "ways" is inextricably linked to the telling of those ways: language and values are inseparable. Saunders, the boss of the poem within the poem, has offended the speaker's dignity by his remarks, but not being "town-bred" has no excuse for his violation of the code and nearly gets himself killed. Speech is in the poem a matter of life and death, and Saunders simply does not pay any attention to what he says and the way he says it.

Interestingly, overwork has blinded him, not ignorance. Like Len in "A Servant to Servants," he cannot

get enough work and treats others as well as himself like drawhorses:

'But work! that man could work especially
If by so doing he could get more work
Out of his hired help. I'm not denying
He was hard on himself. I couldn't find
That he kept any hours—not for himself.
Daylight and lantern-light were one to him ... He couldn't keep away from doing something.'

Saunders suffers from the kind of despair we have seen already in the previous chapter. Its symptoms are overwork and speechlessness. In his push to get more and more done, he ends up tongue-tied, his words giving nothing but offence. Shouting an unnecessary command to his hired man, he insults him, because, as the speaker says, "Never you say a thing like that to a man,/ Not if he values what he is."
The "town-bred" farmer does not yet recognize this relationship between the way you say a thing and values; he has not yet deciphered the code that brings language and essence together. Saunders, on the other hand, should know better, but overwork has left his vision and voice impaired.

The "code" by which Robert Frost lived was, of course, his poetry. Poetry was his calling, and as Richard Poirier and James Cox before him have so persuasively pointed out, one of his major subjects is the interpretive process itself. If man wages, in Baym's understanding of Frost, "an endless battle against the decaying flux [that] endures as long as existence endures," what is valuable is "the small gesture ... unremittingly repeated. The human life is not heroic in an
epic sense. It is a life of staying."\(^{32}\) The most important of these stays is the act of writing.

The poem begins as "a lump in the throat" in Frost's definition and ends, we presume, with the throat cleared. It works, in short, a balm applied to individual situations. But it is also a "momentary stay," as we know, and the problem of clearing the throat of lumps or the field of weeds is soon back. What Frost honors, then, is as much the process of staying as the product, the writing as much as the poem written.

If, as George W. Mitchie has argued,\(^{33}\) Frost has no prescribed pattern to his poems, no myth like Yeats to give them a coherence, his sense of the poem as a staying amidst flux is the reason. He takes joy in the writing process, and it is in process that work and leisure come closest together. It is the mowing of the field not the field mowed he celebrates, just as it is the mending of the wall and the picking of the apples. These present participles suggest on-going activity and work as its own reward. The poem is like "white water," moving the poet through his life, staying his emotions at the same time. The fun is in the saying, the doing of a thing—the "building" of the bundle, not its "bottles" or "buns":

\begin{quote}
For every parcel I stoop down to seize
I lose some other off my arms and knees,
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns—
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
\end{quote}

\(^{32}\)Baym, p. 722.

\(^{33}\)See Mitchie, especially pp. 189-223.
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast.

("The Armful")

Interestingly, Frost never "read" his poems to audiences. They belonged in his voice, not on the page, and he spoke them as if remaking them each time. As one listener, James Cox says, "he seem\seem\seem\seem to be remembering each poem as he moved\move\move\move through it," and the ending always brought with it "a sense of achievement and repossess.ion.\"\textsuperscript{34} Each "speaking" was thus a way of getting as close as he could to the original work, and joy, of the writing, and a metaphor for one man's work at holding his confusion. We conclude, then, that self-reliance is self-possession in Frost\textsuperscript{35} and that Emerson's "man thinking" is Frost's "man speaking."

"Directive" is Frost's most powerful poem on the work of survival and poetry's relationship to it. It is a poem in praise of the "gathering metaphor," of the language that enables us to find order in the chaotic fragments of our lives. "Directive" is made up of fragments, in fact, "pieces reclaimed from \textsuperscript{our} abandoned experience,"\textsuperscript{36} as Cox says, "a house that is no more a house/ Upon a farm that is no more

\textsuperscript{34}James M. Cox, "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," Virginia Quarterly Review (Winter, 1959), pp. 87-88.

\textsuperscript{35}See Cox, p. 80. Self-possession seems to become self-assurance in the later Frost, but, as the next chapter suggests, the poet's outspokenness may have been a disguise for guilt.

\textsuperscript{36}Cox, p. 88.
a farm/ And in a town that is no more a town." The search is for self as we are beckoned by a guide whose playful seriousness takes us down a road that was once "Someone's road home from work" to a "time made simple by the loss/ Of detail."

We travel, in short, past civilization to its source, the brook by which the house was built and the children played:

Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.

In its stripping to essence and returning us to watering places, "Directive" is close to Walden. Frost, like Thoreau, is making what S. P. C. Duvall calls "a directive to the perennial source of life,"\(^3\) which is not so much the water we drink as what that water comes to mean for both writers. Walden is, finally, a way of seeing that is intimately related to a way of speaking, and so is "Directive."
The "goblet" from which we drink, that brings us lip-to-lip with the holy water, is language, our "gathering metaphor." Language is how we taste experience and "know" it, and like the "goblet" is a thing of "make-believe" because it is not experience itself but a way of understanding. Without the bowl to hold and shape it, the water of life runs through our fingers.

But there are those who "can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't," for, as Frost interprets St. Mark, "It seems that people weren't meant to be saved if they didn't

understand figures of speech." There is, in other words, what Duvall calls "an exclusiveness in metaphorical expression"; there is always "the lost soul," that "materialist" who has no "gathering metaphor" to give his life "shape and order." Hell, as the Greeks knew, was a life without leisure, the silence of Sisyphus endlessly pushing his rock. In contrast, "Directive" asserts that to be "whole again beyond confusion" is first to have a way of speaking. "In the beginning was the word"--the first tool, the first poem, the first "momentary stay against confusion."

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38 Quoted by Duvall, p. 488.
39 Duvall, p. 487.
CHAPTER V

THE AGITATED HEART

The publication of *A Further Range* in 1936 represents a change in direction in Robert Frost's poetry. On the surface the book is Frost's attempt to comment on his times, particularly on New Deal politics. It is one man's reply to the corporate voices around him and as such is a very public book, Frost consciously ranging into the political arena. But it is also his most "interior" collection, containing some of his darkest and most private poems. As a book that seems to celebrate the individual against the masses, *A Further Range* also suggests the terrifying isolation such individualism can result in. Though Frost wished it to be otherwise, the book is a caution against, as well as a testimony for, radical individualism. It implies that though we make ourselves "a place apart," as Frost once said in "Revelation," there is no more security in the self than in Utopian social schemes: "But oh, the agitated heart/ Till someone really find us out."

The issue of work at this point of our study reaches a further range too, a political and moral one. The goal of man's work was always a question for Frost. With men holding hands in union halls across the country and singing together Wobblie work songs like "The Commonwealth of Toil" and Joe Hill's "Preacher and Slave," the millennialism was in the air.

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1See *Songs of Work and Protest*, ed. by Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer (New York, 1973), pp. 14-16, 155-157. "Wobblie" was
But for Frost, concerned as we have seen with the work of his own salvation, such Utopian visions raised more questions than they answered. In *A Further Range*, no longer content to assert "from the heart" that men work together "whether they work together or apart," Frost probes the very premise of that assertion. Not only does he ask whether men can work together but whether they should even try. Is the ideal community possible or even desirable? Should not the individual go his own way?

But the loneliness and terror that lurk behind many of the poems in *A Further Range* force us to ask other questions

The nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union of unskilled workers of the field and factory who first organized in Chicago in 1905. Whereas skilled tradesmen found strength in the American Federation of Labor, the large masses of workers, such as immigrant textile workers of the East, had no collective voice. Music was the life blood of the Wobblies, and "The Commonwealth of Toil," originally printed in their famous "Little Red Song Book" of 1909, expresses the Union's hope for a brighter tomorrow. Its chorus went as follows:

But we have a glowing dream
Of how fair the world will seem
When each man can live his life secure and free;
When the earth is owned by labor
And there's joy and peace for all
In the Commonwealth of Toil that is to be.

Joe Hill was the legendary poet-minstrel of the Wobblies. He sang his songs like "Casey Jones" and "The Preacher and the Slave" at union meetings, on street corners, and on picket lines throughout the country. The 1913 edition of the "Little Red Song Book" contained thirteen of his songs. His death by firing-squad in Utah in 1915, the result of a murder conviction that most union members believed was a frame-up (and probably was), made him a martyr to the Wobblie cause. Hill's body was brought to Chicago where more than 30,000 mourners marched in the funeral procession. Hill was cremated and his ashes scattered across the United States, every one but Utah. His, and the Wobblie, message is summarized in these two lines from "The Preacher and the Slave":

Working men of all countries, unite!
Side by side we for freedom will fight.
as well. Without community, in a world of nothing but "lone strikers" and "one-man revolutions," where does the individual really stand? Is retreat to self, no matter how "strategic" at times, the answer? Against Frost's conscious intentions, the book suggests that it is not, that the solitary life can be a terrifying one.²

We must ask too, as Frost and his contemporaries did, what the artist's role is in all of this. Is he to be the spokesman of the masses, giving his art over to social concerns, to the plight of the poor and the tramp, or is his duty solely to himself and his craft? Frost's lack of sympathy for the common working man troubled the reviewers of this book greatly, but contrary to popular thought, social responsibility was a problem Frost wrestled with continually and not one he passed off lightly. His social sense was deep, and his rejection of it produced a guilt he never got rid of. There is, in other words, a kind of "bond and free" tension in Frost and especially in A Further Range, one that we cannot understand fully without knowing the sources of Frost's ideas on the masses and on art's relationship to "the people." To provide a context for A Further Range, then, let us turn to the influences on Frost that may have given rise to the tensions in this most complex of his books.

Frost's mother was a woman whose deep religious convictions taught her that one's greatest work was service

²The terror of the solitary life suggests Frost's connection with Hawthorne and Melville more than with Emerson. Frost's place in America is discussed in the next chapter.
to others. Herself a poet, Isabelle Moodie Frost sold poems to her husband's newspaper in an attempt to supplement the family budget. One of these, "The Artist's Motive," was published just after Robert's tenth birthday in 1884 and was undoubtedly one of the first poems the boy ever read. In Thompson's words, "Part of her theme is that the artist is at his best when he is motivated to make his art reflect a transcendent and ultimate Reality, Truth, Love." This idea of "transcendence" obviously stuck with Frost, but the poem raises other issues as well. A clear picture of class struggle exists in "The Artist's Motive." The artist, his children starving, sells his work to the rich and eventually grows wealthy himself. But his real wish is to become "affluent in joy" as he struggles to paint pictures of suffering and poverty. He wishes to give himself over entirely to love of other as the artist should, Isabelle Frost believed. To be like the nun he tries to paint is his goal:

    Adorned in robes expressive of her life
    Of such sweet self-loss, she seems to walk
    With haughty mien: so, too, the child,
    In rags, she's leading by the hand . . .

"Self-loss" is set against the vanity of trying to achieve it in the poem as even the nun "Looks proud as any queen." But the artist's goal is "dear humanity," his ideal, the abandonment of self to "Love":

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3 The Early Years, pp. 488-490.
4 The Early Years, p. 490.
Thus labor took unto itself diviner form
Poured into molds of use for dear humanity.
So tasks grew easy, and there came
A time of wonder to my soul.
While working on a piece that all
Great artists love, "Christ blessing little children,"
'Twas there a new sense thrilled my soul:
For Truth with gentle hand had led
Me over rough, uncertain roads
Into a place serene with holy light
Where dwelt her fairer sister, Love.

Christ is the artist's mentor in the poem and his
lesson that of self-sacrifice, a lesson not lost on the young
Frost as we can see in one of his earliest, unpublished poems.
Filled with legends of Scottish heroes by his romantic mother,
Frost wrote "In Equal Sacrifice" in Lawrence in the early
1890's. A ballad, the poem celebrates "what of old the
Douglas did," giving up his "heart" in an attempt to serve
the Lord against "the too victorious Moor." The moral is
clear, and the poem obviously immature:

    That a man for God should strike a blow
    No Matter whose heart he may have in charge
    For the Holy Land where hearts should go.

The concern, however, is vital. A man's most important work
is not self-survival but self-denial, the abandonment of self
for cause.

This is also Isabelle Frost's answer to the question
of the artist's role in an unhappy world. "Love" as an answer
is not easy, however; it brings with it in "The Artist's
Motive" an unavoidable hesitancy, one Frost picks up in future
poems. The artist continually confronts his own vanity and
like Martin Luther is unable to escape self-love entirely:

^The Early Years, pp. 577-578.
I'll try once more! Oh, weary hours!
Oh, heartsick soul! In vain! In vain
I work—each form is born in pride.
And e'en the flowers, those fairest types of
innocent humility,
Flaunt proudly in the air.

The end of her poem, however, shows the artist
triumphing over his vanity in Christ, whereas self-concern in
her son's mature poetry, though questioned, is never rejected.
Indeed, it is often flaunted. Love for brother, for fellow
worker, in Frost is always balanced by a question, as one of
his most thematically important poems from A Boy's Will makes
clear.

Based on an actual episode on Frost's Derry, New
Hampshire farm, "Love and a Question" is a ballad having
curious echoes of "In Equal Sacrifice." Whether to let the
"Stranger" with his cool "green-white stick" spend the night
and disrupt the warmth of home and bride, "Her face rose-red
with the glowing coal," is a dilemma the bridegroom never
resolves. To give the man food or money is not the problem.
The question, importantly, is of total commitment of self,
of home and love, to other, and this the groom "wished he knew"
how to answer:

The bridegroom thought it little to give
A dole of bread, a purse,
A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God,
Or for the rich a curse;
But whether or not a man was asked
To mar the love of two
By harboring woe in the bridal house,
The bridegroom wished he knew.

The "woe" brought by the stranger is not only the reminder of
poverty and unhappiness he brings but the confrontation with
responsibility he presents. Is a man's duty outside or in?
The earlier ballad's answer for this was commitment, but "Love and a Question" backs off from any answer at all.

"In Equal Sacrifice" was, however, on Frost's mind when he wrote "Love and a Question." Though one is didactic in mode and the other dramatic, the issues raised are the same and some of the lines oddly similar. The "heart" of Robert the Bruce that the Douglas carries with him is "In a golden case with a golden lid"; it is this heart he must sacrifice in his hopeless fight:

The royal heart by a golden chain
He whirled and flung forth into the plain
And followed it irresistibly
And standing over it there was slain.

So many another do of right,
Give a heart to the hopeless fight . . .

The bridegroom, in thinking of his love inside, wishes "her heart in a case of gold/ And pinned with a silver pin." He wants to protect her; however, should he have to give up the fight for his personal "survival" and let the stranger stay the night, he will in effect be throwing the "heart" he cherishes away as the Douglas did.

Obviously, much of this golden case-heart imagery is a product of too much romantic reading and the work of a poetic amateur. The point in making this comparison of lines here is not so much to show indebtedness of one poem for another as to indicate how concerned Frost was in debating his mother's overriding belief that, in Thompson's words, "self-giving and self-sacrifice are the noblest and most heroic forms of human
effort."^ To what goal is one's work directed, his mother would want to know, and as a teacher herself, her interest was in the learning of others.

Her son, too, was a teacher, though of an apparently less self-sacrificing kind. As Sidney Cox reports in *A Swinger of Birches*, "At Bread Loaf in the summer of 1924 he told a little theater full of high school English teachers: An English teacher has three prime duties. He would state them, he said, in the order of their importance. The English teacher's first duty is to himself—then, with a questioning smile, herself. Her first duty is to herself. Her second duty is to the books. Her third duty is to her students."7 This curious role for the teacher is an idea the poet repeated later as reported by John Holmes in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1936: "Frost told that he had once startled a group of teachers by saying that one's first consideration should be for one's self, not to be self-forgetful, since there is one's own soul to save. After that comes the book. . . . After that, the students."8

How Frost went from believing with his mother that one's greatest work was helping others to questioning self-sacrifice and finally, as here, to the flaunting of self is a question we can never finally answer. In part, of course, he simply grew up and naturally rebelled. But his rebellion is

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6The Early Years, pp. 376-377.
8The Early Years, p. 579.
too harsh and particularly directed, here at least, at the ideals of his mother's profession. It is as if he were being deliberately outrageous and trying to hurt those images of his mother sitting in the audience, that change from "himself" to "herself" a psychologically revealing one. And perhaps he was striking back, feeling guilt at not being able to live up to the ideals of the heroic life his mother filled him with. As the biography makes clear, Frost continually put himself before others in his life, particularly those in his own family, and once said, "No artist should have a family." As we shall see in A Further Range, guilt was something he shouted down, but never out, by his many celebrations of self.

One of Frost's earliest work experiences seemed, however, to confirm the ideal of sympathy he learned from his mother. As a bobbin collector at the Braithwaite Mill outside Lawrence in 1891, he sided with the labor organizations in protesting the onerous work week. Like the others at the mill, he worked from seven until six with a half hour for lunch, six days a week. To paraphrase his biographer, never before did his mother's admiration of Bellamy's Looking Backward and her socialist interest in the doctrines of Henry George make so much sense to him. He cheered with the other workers when labor pressure forced the mills to close Saturday afternoons, reducing the work week from sixty-three to fifty-eight hours.

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9The Years of Triumph, p. 390.
10The Early Years, p. 106.
Frost enjoyed the company of the men and women at the mill much to the chagrin of his pro-management grandfather who saw in such labor unrest the beginning of doom.

But the Braithwaite Mill experience was a summer job for the young man, not one of absolute necessity— one, that is, he could drop when he wanted. Though his family needed the money, he had nonetheless a detachment from the job the other workers lacked, a detachment that made his meaningless chore bearable. So, too, did knowing he was off to college make his position as clerical assistant to the gatekeeper at the Everett Mill the next summer an easier one to hold. It was not until he dropped out of Dartmouth in 1893 that he was forced to confront the realities of factory life as one of the menials. He did not like what he found.

The whole episode at the Arlington Mill was a blow to Frost's pride and a direct contradiction of what work should mean in the Greek view of things. He was no longer special but simply another one of the workers with no important place, like school, to look forward to at the end of his stay. In fact, there appeared to be no end to that stay. His work as light trimmer was not difficult; what was difficult was admitting his commonness among the workers. In addition, the blow to his pride in becoming part of the crowd became even stronger when he realized several of that crowd were former students of his. (He had been a substitute teacher at the Second Grammar School in Methuen.) They were students he had treated roughly, and, as Thompson points out, "they lost no chance to keep asking him how he had fallen from his high
estate to a position far more menial and less remunerative than some of the tasks carried out by his persecutors.\footnote{The Early Years, pp. 156-157.}

Eventually, Frost was attacked on his way home from work and might well have been killed had it not been for two passers-by who broke up the fight. To rub salt in his spiritual wounds, however, one of the Samaritans was a member of Frost's graduating high school class who now looked upon its valedictorian as no more than a common mill-hand.

The Arlington Mill experience is surely an important one for understanding Frost's developing attitude toward his fellow worker and the worker's plight in general. Self-sacrifice and love-of-other became considerably harder when faced with the violence, obscenity, and utter ordinariness of the mill-worker. Though he admired the quickness and dexterity of the girls at the machines, he soon realized, as Melville had before him, how faceless they became in their work and how that work denied their humanity as they became like spiders drawing threads from their insides:

When the speed comes a-creeping overhead
And belts begin to snap and shafts to creak,
And the sound dies away of them that speak,
And on the glassy floor the tapping tread;
When dusty globes on all a pallor shed,
And breaths of many wheels are on the cheek;
Unwilling is the flesh, the spirit weak,
All effort like arising from the dead.

But the task ne'er could wait the mood to come,
The music of the iron is a law:
And as upon the heavy spools that pay
Their slow white thread, so ruthlessly the hum
Of countless, whirling spindles seems to draw
Upon the soul, still sore from yesterday.12

The "tread" of work in this unpublished poem has replaced human speech. All one can hear at the mill are mechanical voices. It is the "soul" that is "sore" in such work; it is the "spirit" that grows "weak." To save his own soul Frost read Shakespeare at the mill, carrying a pocket-sized book of plays with him to work. He hid away in a loft among the lights to read Hamlet, Macbeth, and The Tempest and filled the void of factory noises with the richness of Elizabethan English. Such reading was, in a way, an attempt to bring the human voice, and its values, back into his life.

The legacy of his days at the Arlington Mill was resentment at being a nobody, a man of the crowd. More than anything he felt himself a servant and saw servants all around him. What was needed was action, and one morning in February, 1894, being late for work and watching with humiliation the gate close in front of him, he quit. The poetic treatment of this event is, of course, "The Lone Striker," the opening and tone-setting poem of A Further Range. The very fact that "The Lone Striker" did not appear in a book for some forty years after the event suggests how deeply scarred Frost was by his several months among the people. His mother's "love" became much harder to practice when those around him in the mill were full of hate. He had come to fear the common man. Thus, when the real out-of-work stranger of "Love and a Question" came to

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12 The Early Years, p. 158.
his door in Derry some years later, Frost did indeed let him spend the night but did so more out of self-protection than pity: "It was late in the fall, the night was cold, and the tramp looked as though he might set fire to the barn, after dark, if the answer was no."

Frost's days at the factory with the common man were almost immediately replaced by nights with the pen. In March, 1894, he wrote "My Butterfly" which was soon accepted by _The Independent_, Frost's first important publication. His dreams of publishing suddenly became reality, and as they did, the budding poet sought to answer for himself what the artist's role should be. Should he keep to himself or be active in social improvement programs? Whom was his art to save?

In his earlier valedictorian address in 1892, Frost touched on this issue as he tried to clarify for himself as much as for the class the "aim of existence": "It is when alone, in converse with their own thoughts so much that they live their conventionalities, forgetful of the world's, that men form those habits called the heroism of genius, and lead the progress of the race. This, the supreme rise of the individual—not a conflict of consciousness, an effort to oppose, but bland forgetfulness, a life from self for the world—is the aim of existence."

The artist, Frost resolved, has to be selfish, an attitude confirmed in part by his Arlington Mill adventures

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13 _The Early Years_, p. 377.
14 _The Early Years_, pp. 130-131.
and corroborated later at Harvard by his reading of James' *Psychology*. Artistic selfishness is for James not so much a denial of others as the source of self-fulfillment from which all other behavior, including altruism, proceeds: "Each mind, to begin with, must have a certain minimum of selfishness in the shape of instincts of bodily self-seeking in order to exist. The minimum must be there as a basis for all farther conscious acts, whether of self-negation or of a selfishness more subtle still."\(^1\)

Selfishness is not only a "minimum" for James, it is the essential ingredient in will and effort and the basis of the mind's triumphing heroically over the dark facts of experience. It is, in short, a trait to be celebrated not denied, for only with it can one be one of "the masters and lords of life." With a firm sense of self, man is the world's "match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can stand this universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low."\(^2\)

Far from seeing any danger in James' words, Frost found them, as Thompson says, an "encouragement." They confirmed his increasing belief that the artist's responsibility must

\(^1\)William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course* (New York, 1892), p. 194.

\(^2\) *Psychology: Briefer Course*, p. 460.
be to himself and helped him make sense out of his disillusionment with the common man at the Arlington Mill. From his reading and experience, in other words, he came to develop a laissez-faire attitude toward others. In Thompson's words, "As he weighed the contrasting theories of let-alone versus protection, or of individualism versus socialism, he gradually became willing to admit that his artistic prejudices were helping to shape his social views. His primary sympathies for individualism were against any concept of the welfare state." ¹⁷

This is not to say, however, that he ever forgot the lesson of his mother. Instead, that lesson of self-denial became a backdrop to much of his future work, and his adamant assertion of the individual was always in tension with the religious voice of his mother and his New England heritage reminding him of "the publique good" to which all art should be directed. Nowhere is this conflict more marked than in two unpublished "Christmas" poems written in 1911 and 1912. The second poem is a clear attempt to resolve the guilt Frost felt at having written the first.

"My Giving" carries the Christian attitude of charity and love to an extreme. By pretending he is all in favor of giving, Frost makes the whole lesson of Christmas ridiculous. If there is suffering in the world, why should anyone be happy? If there are poor children who will not receive gifts, why should anyone's children be merry? Instead, Frost says cynically,

¹⁷The Early Years, p. 379.
he will suffer with them; his family's Christmas too will be
dark:

I ask no merrier Christmas
Than the hungry bereft and cold shall know that night.
This is all I can give so that none shall want—
My heart and soul to share their depth of woe.
I will not bribe their misery not to haunt
My merrymaking by proffer of boon
That should only mock the grief that is rightly theirs.
Here I shall sit, the fire out, and croon
All the dismal and joy-forsaken airs,
Sole alone, and thirsty with them that thirst,
Hungry with them that hunger and are accursed.
No storm that night can be too untamed for me,
If it is woe on earth, woe let it be!
Am I a child that I should refuse to see?
What could I plead asking them to be glad
That night?
My right?
Nay it is theirs that I with them should be sad
That night.

The bitter mocking of this poem must be seen, however,
in comparison with the gentleness of his next year's Christmas
piece. Written in England during a strike of colliers which
was then in progress and having marked effects on the laborers,
"Good Relief" focuses on two children who, because of the
strike, will have no presents. More sentimental perhaps than
Frost's usual Stoic poem, it reveals a side of Frost he was
never fully able to suppress. It expresses the need for help
and commitment; a man's work here is to alleviate suffering.
Though hardship will forever be, we can at least give some
"Good Relief":

... the two babes had stopped alone to look
At Christmas toys behind a window pane.
And play at having anything they chose.
And when I lowered level with the two
And asked them what they saw so much to like,

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18 The Early Years, p. 380.
One confidentially and raptly took
His finger from his mouth and pointed "Those!"
A little locomotive with a train.
And where he wet the window pane it froze.
What good did it do anyone but him—
His brother at his side, perhaps, and me?
And think of all the world compared with three!19

"My Giving" and "Good Relief" form a kind of unresolved
debate, arguing in tone and message two contrary notions on
the goal of human effort. This is essentially the same argu-
ment we find in "Love and a Question" and find as well in
"The Death of the Hired Man" in which "home" is defined by
Warren as "'the place where, when you have to go there,/ They
have to take you in!'" but is redefined by Mary as "'Something
you somehow haven't to deserve.'" It is also the core of "A
Masque of Mercy" as Keeper and Paul argue over man's responsibility
to others:

The revolution Keeper's bringing on
Is nothing but an outbreak of mass mercy,
Too long pent up in rigorous convention--
A holy impulse towards redistribution.
To set out to homogenize mankind
So that the cream could never rise again . . .

It was fear of a "homogenized" mankind, of course, that
led Frost to put together a book like A Further Range. But
his fear was also that the very debate between self-concern
and self-denial, so powerful in his own life, was being quieted
by New Deal politics and its attempts to incorporate the indi-
vidual into the masses. For Frost, the New Deal eliminated
choice; it decided for the individual how he was to think. As
a states-right Democrat, the poet meant his book as a kind of

19The Early Years, p. 431.
check and balance to such corporate movements. His own experience, reading, and artistic temperament led him to a different conclusion than that of the socially-minded times, though one that was always fighting against his mother's ideas of selflessness. Thus, the Mary and Warren debate over the fate of the out-of-work Silas went on in Frost's emotions as much as it did in the lines of the poem, and the political aspects of A Further Range can be looked at not as the work of a reactionary crank but as part of a dialogue, a way of continuing an argument that had been with him since his mother's first instructions about doing good for others.

The other part of that dialogue is best represented by Carl Sandburg's The People, Yes, which was published the same year. Frost was not, certainly, replying to Sandburg in particular with A Further Range nor did he have the Illinois poet himself in mind when he put together the book. Sandburg does, however, stand for a social vision and attitude toward the working man that Frost simply could not embrace. To The People, Yes, Frost said "the people, yes and no." Frost, in fact, could not believe Sandburg. He was a phoney, Frost felt, "probably the most artificial and studied ruffian the world has had." After all, how could anyone who had worked so closely with the common man as Sandburg had come away with such love? Frost agreed with Louis Untermeyer's description

20 Quoted by Cook, A Living Voice, p. 282.

21 The Years of Triumph, p. 180.
of his rival as an "emotional democrat." He was certainly not an "intellectual aristocrat," Untermeyer's summary of Frost. 22

But the two poets have, on the surface at least, much in common. Both are "American" poets, which is to say, their themes and interests are national and regional, not academic or "international." Both write man-centered poetry that deals with the real events of one's life and do so in a language that is accessible, that is democratic in its origins. And, importantly, both poets are concerned with work and man's relationship to it, though here we begin to see the central difference between them emerging. Whereas Sandburg sees labor as a force joining men together and praises it as such, Frost values work, as we have seen, for the definition of self it can result in. Sandburg's work is a merging process, a blurring of distinctions; Frost's is an act of clarity, of individualism.

There are no individuals in The People, Yes; there is one, and only one, individual in A Further Range. People are lost, not found, by what they do in Sandburg's book, in their "day's work in the factory, mill, mine." But if they are lost, they are lost in a glorious way. Power is in union, this biographer of Lincoln believed, and the people are in no way an abstraction but an intense reality (section 17). The people are the stones of an arch, able to support the nation, able to bear great weight. Thus, each person's having given himself to the larger cause of union is a reason for celebration.

22 The Years of Triumph, p. 180.
...the arch stands strong as all the massed pressing parts of the arch and loose as any sag or spread failing of the builders' intention, hope. "The arch never sleeps."
Living in union it holds.
So long as each piece does its work the arch is alive, singing, a restless choral.

The poet also, like the individual for Sandburg, does not exist. He is to be the poet of the people and, as such, speaks for the masses not in his own distinctive voice but with the voice of the crowd at work in the lumberyard, busy at the railway. The people's poet accepts uncritically the language of the street

breaking into jig time and tap dancing nohow classical

and further broken by plain and irregular sounds and echoes from

the roar and whirl of street crowds, work gangs, sidewalk clamor...

A Further Range, on the other hand, is a hymn to self, one of the most ego-centered books since Walden. It is a selfish book, containing one character, the poet himself, who finds his identity in the resistance to, not the joining of, collective movements. His strike is solitary and meant neither to solve any social problem nor to equalize the rights of labor and management. He strikes to find his own place, that vantage point from which he may view the world:

He knew another place, a wood,
And in it, tall as trees, were cliffs;
And if he stood on one of these,
'Twould be among the tops of trees,
Their upper branches round him wreathing,
Their breathing mingled with his breathing.

("The Lone Striker")
Such a place is also protective, "secure and snug," as Frost says in "The Drumlin Woodchuck," one where he can hide until "after the hunt goes past." A Further Range is a testimony to one man's avoidance of the hunt, "the double-barreled blast" of the world with all its "war and pestilence/ And the loss of common sense."

Frost's desire to retreat led to a less than positive response from the socially-minded critics. Horace Gregory called A Further Range "a further shrinking," and R. P. Blackmur labeled the poet "an easy-going versifier" deficient in vision. For Rolfe Humphries, Frost's hide-out is the college campus not the real world, his audience "a very select and upper class type of village." Interestingly,

25 Rolfe Humphries, "A Further Shrinking," The New Masses, Vol. XX (August 11, 1936), p. 42. The New Masses was the most outspoken and influential magazine of the Left during the thirties. The kind of poem it published suggests the kind of poem it praised in reviews. The following example by Genevieve Taggard, which appeared in the same issue as Humphries' review of Frost, is a good example and an obvious contrast to Frost:

0 People Misshapen
0 people misshapen, hugging bones in old coats,
Wavering as you walk, hurrying on mean streets and stairs,
Poor eaters, with bodies the clinics hastily patch
And push out into dark, dirt, roar and lack again . . .
Come close-up, faces, showing sunk eyes and skull forehead
Blinking with light and the horror of being seen,
Brothers, Comrades, pool the last strength of men
In party, in mass, boil into form, and strike.
We will see you change,—shoulders swing broad and slow.
Your coats will not change this winter, no. But you
In ranks no distant day, clad and alert,
As resolute as storm, born of this bad extreme. (p. 26)
Newton Arvin reviewed both Frost's and Sandburg's books. For him *The People, Yes* "is an eloquent and sometimes a passionate reassertion of the dignity, the fortitude . . . and unrelinquished hopes of 'the laboring many.'" Sandburg has kept open the channels "that ought to flow between the lives at the base of society and the literary consciousness." Frost, in contrast, lacks "militancy, positiveness, conviction, struggle." His place, Arvin claims, "has always been and still is on the sandy and melancholy fringes of our actual life." Such comments are generally accurate. To publish "Build Soil," for example, during the Depression was not only callous but an unbelievable affront to the struggles of working men everywhere. One could only conclude, as these reviewers did, that Frost with his naive ideas about a "one-man revolution" solving the nation's ills was short-sighted and remote. Whereas the writer in the 1930's was expected to find his place in the mainstream of history and to join "the revolution," Frost had ended up, as Malcolm Cowley said of Wordsworth, "bumbling in a garden."  

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28. Malcolm Cowley, "What the Revolutionary Movement Can Do for a Writer," *The New Masses*, Vol. XIX (May 7, 1935), pp. 31-34. This essay was originally read to the American Writers' Congress of 1935. The "movement," Cowley says, cannot give the writer "personal salvation" but can give him an audience and subject matter. Above all, it teaches him that "art is not an individual but a social product" and carries the writer "outside himself," away from the "inner world." Wordsworth is Cowley's example of what thinking, and not thinking, in "universal terms" can result in: "... at the height of the French
But what the reviewers did not recognize, or at least concern themselves with, are the terror and loneliness that are the very center of this collection.\textsuperscript{29} Blinded by their own political prejudices, they failed to point out the caution against individualism that Frost vividly displays with such poems as "Desert Places," "A Leaf-Treader," and "The Strong Are Saying Nothing." For what these poems suggest is a potent argument against the whole principle of the one-man revolution. They forcefully corroborate in an ironic way Emerson's statement that "nothing can bring you peace but yourself." They suggest that "agitated heart" which is only relieved when "someone really finds us out":

\begin{quote}
But so with all, from babes that play
At hide-and-seek to God afar,
So all who hide too well away
Must speak and tell us where they are.
\end{quote}

("Revelation")

The overall organization of A Further Range is instructive here. The dark and private poems like "Desert Places" are in the middle of the book; the public poems are on either end. We begin with "The Lone Striker" and "Two Tramps in Mud Time," in the world, that is, of "The Roadside Stand" and "Departmental"; we end with the most overtly political pieces,

\begin{quote}
Revolution . . . Wordsworth was filled with enthusiasm . . . he learned to think in universal terms—and then . . . he became disillusioned, turned his eyes inward, accepted the eternal rightness and triteness of British society, and spent his last years bumbling in a garden" (p. 32).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29}Darkness exists, of course, in earlier Frost poems. The distinction here is one of degree which itself is augmented by the strong contrast between the self-assurance of the public poems in A Further Range and the self-doubt of the private.
"Build Soil" and "To A Thinker," Frost's nasty poem on President Roosevelt. The shorter, more lyric poems are a fulcrum to these longer, more discursive works.

But we must be careful not to suggest that Frost has consciously set up this book in any kind of simple, means balancing extremes, kind of way. For what we find in the center of A Further Range is real terror, not a posturing of it for dramatic purposes. He is not simple-mindedly saying that there are dangers in individualism just as there are in collectivism. His motive for setting up the book this way seems more unconscious than that. The centering of the dark lyrics in the middle may well be Frost's way of focusing in on them and, perhaps, of punishing himself for having ignored the "publique good," for having selfishly mistreated his own family, and for having denied the artist's true motive, "dear humanity." The tensions in A Further Range, in other words, are not only political; they appear also to be the working-out of guilt. The pressures of the times corresponded to personal pressures in the poet, and his flaunting of individualism in the book seems as selfishly motivated as his remarks on "self" to the school teachers at Bread Loaf. Frost loved to be outrageous, but his outrageousness, like his skepticism, was

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30"To a Thinker" was originally published in the Saturday Review (June 11, 1936) as "To a Thinker in Office." The allusion to walking in the poem is especially cruel considering the President's paralysis. Frost later denied the poem was directed at FDR. His readers, Frost said, were responsible for this interpretation; he tried to cover his guilt this way: "But I am willing to let it go as aimed at him. He must deserve it or people wouldn't be so quick to see him in it" (The Years of Triumph, p. 443).
frequently a way of hiding a deep insecurity, a nagging guilt. This is why *A Further Range* can be seen as an ego-centered book, a way of exorcising the poet's own problems at the expense of society's.

Just how dark many of the book's poems are can be seen by comparing them to their earlier "versions" in Frost. The poet, unconsciously or not, "rewrote" several of his most affirmative poems and made them his most negative. "Desert Places," for example, is a terror-stricken version of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." In form the poems are essentially the same: four quatrains rhyming aaba, though the "b" rhyme in "Desert Places" is not carried into the next stanza as it is in the earlier poem. This small alteration in rhyme suggests a larger issue. The carry-over of the rhyme in "Stopping By Woods" creates a sense of continuity and harmony. The poem, as we said in Chapter I, is not as much about death and suicide as it is about health and the systolic/diastolic balancing of work and leisure. In contrast, the absence of the carry-over rhyme in "Desert Places" adds to the deep disharmony in the poem. We do not move easily through it; it does not flow, one stanza to the next.

Reality is stark in "Desert Places," the woods not "lovely" but partially bare, "a few weeds and stubble showing last." Animals are "smothered" in their lairs, not sleeping, and the dark pun of "benighted snow" implies the darkness of whiteness, not its beauty. This is not an easeful ride through the countryside but a hurried one as Frost, scared and alone, rides time's chariot as symbolized by the coming of yet another
winter, "fast, oh, fast." "Lonely" rings like a refrain through the poem suggesting that being a "lone" striker has its terrors. The "blanker whiteness" he sees around him is a reflection, of course, of the "desert places" within him—places, that, as he says, are "nearer home" and may well be products of having denied that home.

"A Leaf-Treader" begins with clear echoes of "After Apple-Picking." Fatigue and sense of work accomplished are characteristic of both poems:

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
God knows all the color and form of leaves
I have trodden on and mired.
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength
and have been too fierce from fear.
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

But the later poem carries with it a feeling of terror that the earlier does not. "After Apple-Picking" is a celebration of man's capacity for work and leisure, and the apples picked are desired things of beauty. The leaves in "A Leaf-Treader," however, are "threatening under their breath" and have "a will to carry me with them to death." Both are autumn poems, but while apples are a food and sustenance, the leaves, dry and falling, are obvious emblems of decay. They speak "to the fugitive in his heart as if it were leaf to leaf." They speak, that is, to the part of him that resists, that will not belong, and they speak of loneliness: "They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief."

"A Leaf-Treader" ends, however, with a muted affirmation. The poet will not give in to the "grief" he sees around him
and that speaks to the fugitive part of him. He will go on: "Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow."
But his sense here that the snow falls all year, not just in winter, implies that the loneliness of "desert places" has its grip on him. His life is one long winter, desolate, cold, lonely. The dramatic situation of the poem makes this clear: not actively picking apples anymore, not initiating action, that is, the poet is being acted upon, merely trying "to keep on top" of the leaves and all they symbolize. Life is not to be taken down and cherished in hand but endured. The work of "a leaf-treader" is a solitary one, without dream, without vision.

"The Strong Are Saying Nothing" makes the same stark point. The poem is a brutalized version of "Putting In the Seed," one of Frost's most affirmative marriage poems and itself a version of "The Pasture," as discussed in Chapter I. We have come a long way, however, from these poems of togetherness to this one of loneliness. "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" is more a burial than a planting that will bear fruit. The ground is "an open crease," not soft and rich, and seeds are anonymous in "a chain" like the men who plant them, not "smooth bean and wrinkled pea." "Men work alone," the poem says directly, "Their lots plowed far apart." There is little chance for new life in such a world, the weather "too cold/ For the bees to come," the wind going "from farm to farm in wave on wave,/ But carrying no cry of what is hoped to be." "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" is a denial of the message of love in "The Tuft of Flowers" and, with its obvious inversion of
"Putting in the Seed," a denial of marriage and its fruit, the child, "Shouldering its way and shedding earth crumbs."

**A Further Range** also contains in its dark center Frost's most famous "terrifying" poems: "Design," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," and "Provide, Provide." Each is a poem that questions and probes; none is a poem that answers. The rhythmic emphasis on "If" in "Design's" final line, for example, suggests that the speaker's investigation "of a thing so small" and his attempt to relate it to man's world may have been foolish to start with. We have no certainty that any "design governs" in the first place; thus, speculations about what this particular design means are without premise. The theme of "Neither Out Far" is also epistemological: how do we know what we know and may not our pursuit of knowledge in the uncertain sea be a waste of time? In the context of **A Further Range**, "The people's" search is by no means blindly celebrated in the poem; it is presented as much stupid as courageous:

> 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. . . .

> The land may vary more;  
> But wherever the truth may be—  
> The water comes ashore,  
> And the people look at the sea.

"The people," contrary to Sandburg's vision, are not very bright. "They cannot look out far,/ They cannot look in deep," yet they continue their "watch" despite an inability to see.

"Provide, Provide" is the darkest of these three poems, a sometimes cynical, always probing, statement of man's motivations. Interestingly, it was inspired by a strike of floor-
scrubbing charwomen at Harvard in 1934 but was not written in sympathy for them but out of disdain for the organizers of the strike, a group of Harvard reformers. Because he could not find them in himself, Frost questioned the motivations of these liberals; they were not concerned with anyone else's welfare, he felt, only with proving their own social theories. Honesty, truth, friendship are, finally, no more than ploys for one's own survival. All we may do for another is "boughten," artificial and false. Our concern is always with ourselves, Frost says, believing his own self-concern to be every man's:

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
If need be occupy a throne,  
Where nobody can call you crone.

Some have relied on what they knew,  
Others on being simply true.  
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred  
Atones for later disregard  
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified  
With boughten friendship at your side  
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

Considering our discussion in this chapter, the stark truth of a poem like "Provide, Provide" takes on a new meaning. Could Frost really be referring to himself with "boughten friendship"? Could this poem be an expression of personal guilt as well as a statement on the human condition? Is "Provide, Provide" a rationalization for his way of settling the question of the goal of man's work? All people are selfish, Frost says in the poem, so my manipulation of others is acceptable: I will provide for myself as best I can; I have "my own soul to save," no other.
To read Frost's poems in such a way is, of course, to stick another pin in the bubble of his public, grandfatherly image. It is also to commit the "biographical fallacy." Yet the biography is invaluable here; in addition to providing a new way of interpreting the poems, it explains why Frost wrote such dark poems at this time and why in 1936 he had trouble believing in any kind of love. His favorite daughter Marjorie had died from complications in childbirth in 1934. Irma, another daughter, and his son Carol were showing obvious signs of insanity by this time, signs similar to those of his sister Jeanie who had died in 1929 in a mental hospital in Maine where Frost had had her committed. He had been both unable and unwilling to take her into his own home. And his wife Elinor, who was to die only two years after A Further Range, had grown increasingly silent, increasingly distant. Theirs had become a union of hate more than love, a fact attested to perhaps by the pervasive villainy of "white," Elinor's maiden name, in A Further Range.31

Why Frost chose to publish these deeply introspective poems with the book's obviously public ones also relates to his life's trials. There was indeed for him a connection between his inner storms and the "outer weather" of the

31 "White" is deceptively dangerous in "The White-Tailed Hornet" and "Design" (originally called "In White") and obviously threatening in "Desert Places" and "They Were Welcome to their Belief." The coincidence of "white" in its various forms (snow, ice, aging) with Elinor's maiden name should not, of course, be made too much of, but it must have crossed Frost's mind that the cold villains in his life had his wife's name and she, theirs.
Depression and New Deal. This connection was guilt. Having staked out his own course as an artist, a course that led him to fight off his mother's values and to ignore the suffering of his family, he developed a simplistic, laissez-faire attitude toward the plight of the common worker. But he did not do so easily. His punishment was the brooding isolation we find laid bare in the middle of A Further Range. These are his most "honest" poems, confessional and tortured. But their confession is not of the naked style so popular in the late 1960's but, instead, is that of a man who does not want to be found out in his hiding game and yet whose "agitated heart" leads him to make his muffled call, the poem. Frost both hides and seeks in A Further Range. Its dark center is a testimony to anguish of the kind suffered by Hawthorne's Ethan Brand whose desperate desire to love was second only to his concern for himself.
"Two Tramps in Mud Time," the second poem in *A Further Range*, contains Frost's most direct statement on the value of work and leisure in his life. "My object in living," he says, "is to unite/ My avocation and my vocation." The poem also gives us, like the early "Love and a Question," Frost's ambivalent feelings toward the common worker, those migrant woodsmen who come upon the poet chopping wood for the sheer joy of the task. But "Two Tramps" is a richer and better poem than either its trumpeting conclusion or its politics suggest. It implies a whole vision of life, a very dark one, and, importantly, a way to survive that darkness. The poem will serve us, then, as a means of tying the threads of this study together and, as we shall see, as a way of suggesting Frost's place in America. In what tradition does Frost's sense of darkness put him? What, after all, is really American about Robert Frost?

"Two Tramps in Mud Time" was first published in the *Saturday Review* in October, 1934 but made a more noteworthy appearance at the University of Colorado Writers' Conference in July, 1935. Although Frost was reluctant to attend such conferences with other writers ("I only go/ When I'm the show," he said), he attended this one and indeed was "the show." He read "Two Tramps," Thompson tells us, as part of an announced speech, "What Poetry Thinks of Our Age," and used the poem to
illustrate his very conservative political ideas in front of a generally liberal audience. The true poet, Frost said, is not to waste his time weeping over unchanging social ills; instead, "because he sees no possibility of change, he may try to find what happiness he can for himself and be cruelly happy." In the speech Frost distinguished himself from the "proletarian" writers of his times, for "it is not the business of the poet to cry for reform." The last two stanzas of "Two Tramps" were meant to make this point clear:

Nothing on either side was said.  
They knew they had but to stay their stay  
And all their logic would fill my head:  
As that I had no right to play  
With what was another man's work for gain.  
My right might be love but theirs was need.  
And where the two exist in twain  
Their was the better right—agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.  
Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Poetry, like chopping wood here, is both work and leisure. It is not meant to carry the burden of social change on its back; it is not to be a slave anymore than the poet is.

But "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is a more visionary poem than its didactic last stanzas imply. These last two are, in

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1See The Years of Triumph, pp. 424-426.
2The Years of Triumph, p. 425.
3The Years of Triumph, p. 425.
fact, the weakest part of the poem. They represent Frost on the bandwagon, being less poet than performer. The strength of the poem is in its muscular midsection, not in its ending, where Frost's dark vision of life collides with his sense of the patient work needed to survive in that rush of things to waste. What separates the man chopping from the tramps who want his "job" is the whole notion of "job" itself. What work would provide for the tramps is "pay"; what it does provide for Frost is reverie:

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.  
You know how it is with an April day  
When the sun is out and the wind is still,  
You're one month on in the middle of May.  
But if you so much as dare to speak,  
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,  
A wind comes off a frozen peak,  
And you're two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight  
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,  
His song so pitched as not to excite  
A single flower as yet to bloom.  
It is snowing a flake: and he half knew  
Winter was only playing possum.  
Except in color he isn't blue,  
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look  
In summertime with a witching wand,  
In every wheelrut's now a brook,  
In every print of hoof a pond.  
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.

That he can respond in language to the world around him separates Frost from the silent tramps, who, like wood-chucks, come "Out of the woods" and are "Men of the woods." Like Baptiste, and all those in Frost's poetry who can only work, they are speechless and visionless. Their frame of
reference is solely what they can do; they judge "by their appropriate tool." They are only half man, what Thoreau calls "the animal man," who appear, it seems, seasonally, like the earth in its various disguises, "in mud time."

Frost's lack of sympathy for the common man is part of a larger issue in the poem. Indeed, the poem's politics are limiting, for what we find in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is a powerful sense of darkness more important in its implications than is its social snobbishness. Frost, as we have seen, is no blind lover of nature. Nature is threat, something to be subdued and controlled, and what the tramps represent is in a way nature itself, illiterate, animalistic and threatening. They wish to have his "job"; they will deny him what he wants to do. In an existential way, they will "kill" him.

Frost never suggests, however, that the tramps' desire to take is in anyway conscious. As all things in nature do, they simply wish to survive. They have, in fact, no consciousness at all but dumbly and persistently pursue their utterly practical goals. Frost, as we have stressed, wishes to survive as well, but this survival is distinguished from that of the tramps by the degree of awareness involved. Articulate, the poet has the capacity to dream, to find leisure in labor in a way the tramps, or other blind workers in Frost, cannot.

What Frost "sees" while chopping wood is as important as the fact of vision itself. "The sun was warm but the wind was chill," he says and places a rhythmic emphasis on "but." He breaks the iambic pattern of the line to force us to stress
the conjunction. His reverie suggests the deceptiveness of appearances—it seems like May but is suddenly "the middle of March." The bluebird has come back too soon, and "he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom." The reverie has meaning behind it, in other words; it is not pure "play" or mindless daydream but a way to truth, the kind of truth we find in the poem "A Boundless Moment" in which the beautiful flower "Paradise-in-Bloom" is in reality "A young birch clinging to last year's leaves." The water that vanishes in the heat of summer Frost warns us not to take for granted in spring. "Be glad of water," of life, that is, but do not forget "the lurking frost" that comes in the dark, "after the sun is set," that shows in the morning "its crystal teeth." The imperatives in these lines, the only ones in the poem, suggest Frost's urgency and seriousness on this point, his conviction that terror lurks behind experience.  

Frost's belief in the power of darkness is Lionel Trilling's reason for calling him "a terrifying poet," and for this reason, Trilling says, "quite as American as everyone thinks, but not in the way everyone thinks," Frost's place

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4 Melville's powerful lines in "Commemorative of a Naval Battle" (from Battlepieces) come to mind here: "The shark/ Glides white through the phosphorus sea." Frost shares with Melville a fear of depths and a probing of life's meaning. Frost, in fact, was a kind of Ishmael, a questioning observer. "For Once, Then, Something" and "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter in Moby Dick have many similarities.

is in the tradition of Melville and Hawthorne, and of Poe and Brown before them. This is the tradition of the isolated man who struggles not so much with the villains outside him in society, those tramps who invade his garden, as with the voices inside him that will not let him rest. These are the voices that lead him to see the newcomer as sinister and life as threat. The evil, Clara Wieland realized, was not in Carwin but in "the errors of the sufferers" themselves. The problem for both the elder Wieland and his son was "inner weather," as it was for Frost's own father, his son Carol, and himself.

Frost's workers, as we have seen, are almost always alone, and the poet's sense of social interdependence is minimal. Even in "The Tuft of Flowers" in which one job does involve another, the two workers never actually meet and work physically side-by-side. Their "spiritual" meeting is also qualified, for the mower did not leave the flowers for anyone else, he left them out of "sheer morning gladness at the brim." They were left, that is, to satisfy his mood, just as the woodpile was left in the woods to satisfy its maker's sense of task and no one else's. Poems like "The Pasture" and "Putting in the Seed" show Frost wanting company but nonetheless not with someone else at the time. Indeed, of all his work poems only "The Death of the Hired Man" shows two people actually together in mind and body by the end, although we must remember that Mary and Warren are united by a death.

The very tools Frost most admires suggest such isolation. The ax, the scythe, and the pen can be used by only one man at a time. The only cooperation needed is between the self
and the tool, not between man and man, as is needed at a grindstone, for example, one worker mounted at the wheel, the other turning it. The grindstone, in fact, is an object of ridicule in that poem about "a turn too much." Frost laughs at it out there in the cold and wishes he had had something else to do that summer of his youth. His tools, in other words, are not part of collective work, of the factory and union, but of solitary labor, of the back country farm.

The ax, the scythe, and the pen are more than just tools, of course; they are instruments of survival for Frost. Each is a "cutting" device, a means of clearing the landscape and the language. This is, as we know, the way Frost understood Puritanism itself. Puritanism cut through ornate religious practices and brought a renewal of meaning, a purification of words themselves. The land in Frost's poetry, like the wilderness the first settlers found, is to be cleared and owned; it is to be "ours" as he says in "The Gift Outright." The woods are to be defeated before they defeat us. To the end, man fights it out with nature as Frost's very last poem suggests:

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.
I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low.

At four o'clock I shoulder ax,
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.

I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow.
This is an old man's winter day and a picture of the single personality in an ever-darkening landscape, ever closer to death. His work is done "alone," but neither that work nor "Nature" dominates him as he makes his "retreat" back home, makes, that is, his "momentary stay" to return to his work of clearing tomorrow, we imagine, ax in hand.

Frost puts a premium on dominance, in other words, and believes in possession and triumph. His American heritage is "manifest destiny"; it is taking, not giving, his mentor Teddy Roosevelt, not Franklin Delano. His is not the land of Lincoln, Whitman, and Sandburg, for this is the America of myth and ideal, and Frost's focus is on the actual. "We love the things we love for what they are," he says in "Hyla Brook," not for what we can make them or for what they were. Indeed, part of Frost's power as a poet comes from this desire to "front" reality that he shares with Thoreau. Even with characters he likes, such as the burdened speaker in "A Servant to Servants," he is never soft. He asks us to judge her as much as to pity her. She is, after all, a bore, an endless talker who lacks that "will to believe" Frost found in himself the day he quit work at the Arlington Mill.

There is little color in Frost's poetry. It is black and white. There is no easy sentiment in it either, for it is not the poetry of simple America, of Hiawatha and Natty Bumppo, although it has been too often considered as such.6

6"Directive" would seem to be an exception here as RF guides us back to a time "made simpler by the loss of detail." But "Directive," as we have seen in Chapter IV of this study,
Instead, his tendency is to mock our sentimental inclination, our yearning as Americans for what was and what might have been. "The Road Not Taken," for example, is a chiding of man's perpetual regret at not having done a particular thing or gone a particular way. Both roads in this, Frost's most misread poem, are identically worn and choice does not make "all the difference." What counts is "knowing what to do with things," as Frost says elsewhere. We must keep our eye on the actual, our attention on the present, and not be always sighing for the past:

And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-- I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

As the political message of "Two Tramps in Mud Time" makes clear, there is no sentimental love for the common working man in Frost either. No "poet of labor," as he was called by a Russian reviewer, he is not "profoundly civic" and is hardly "a spokesman of the dreams of the progressive, democratic segments of contemporary America." Frost's concern

has no more nostalgic yearning to it than has Walden. Both are calls to vision, to the fronting of life, not the escaping of it. That both works ask us to cut frivolous detail from our lives does not mean that they wish us to run away from reality. Indeed, "Directive" and Walden suggest detail itself hides direct experience and clutters the language so essential to our knowing life.

7Quoted by Reeve, p. 70.
for the day laborer was more as a subject for his verse than as a celebration of democracy. "I didn't write to get rid of the poor," he said in "Poverty and Poetry," "I need them in my business." As he told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "I'd hesitate to abolish poverty myself. Too much good has come of it." Such statements are, and were, shocking and were meant to be. As Chapter V of this study stresses, this kind of remark was a smoke-screen that Frost hid behind. His feelings of guilt were apparently deep at having not fulfilled his mother's dictum, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Instead, Frost was a selfish poet, concerned primarily with the work of saving his own soul, of self-survival.

For this reason winning was an obsession with the poet throughout his life, from his earliest boxing lessons to his elderly sparring with international leaders. Winning is one of his most American qualities and a direct result of his sense of personal isolation and insecurity. "God seems to be something which wants us to win," he once said, "In tennis. Or poetry. Or marriage. Of course, somebody must lose." The way we survive on earth is to win; we "keep on top of last year's leaves." Frost seemed to believe, as the Puritans

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8 The Years of Triumph, p. 102.
9 The Trial by Existence, p. 21.
10 The Years of Triumph, p. 697.
11 The Early Years, p. 594.
did about work and success, that to win in this world suggested
that one was among the elect, a survivor in the next. Nobody,
including God, loves the loser.

Importantly, the areas of "competition" he mentions
here all involve a solitary, "one-on-one" situation. In tennis
one man faces another on the opposite side of the net. In
poetry the writer faces himself and in marriage the husband,
his wife—at least in Frost's dramatic view of things. He
seems to see each relationship we enter into as a power
struggle. Even nations, as he told Premier Khrushchev, must
be rivals: "'We're laid out for rivalry in sports, science,
art, democracy. That's the real test, which democracy's going
to win.'"\textsuperscript{12}

Nowhere is this sense of confrontation between rivals
better dramatized than in the poem "The Vanishing Red," an
example for Hayden Carruth of "the blackest, bitterest despair
in three hundred years of the New England tradition."\textsuperscript{13} The
powerful picture of the triumph of one man over another makes
the poem worthy of quotation in full:

\begin{quote}
The Vanishing Red

He is said to have been the last Red Man
in Acton. And the Miller is said to have laughed—
If you like to call such a sound a laugh.
But he gave no one else a laugher's license.
For he turned suddenly grave as if to say,
"Whose business--if I take it on myself,
Whose business--but why talk round the barn?—
When it's just that I hold with getting a thing done with."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12}Quoted by Reeve, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{13}Carruth, p. 34.
You can't get back and see it as he saw it.  
It's too long a story to go into now.  
You'd have to have been there and lived it.  
Then you wouldn't have looked on it as just a matter  
Of who began it between the two races.

Some guttural exclamation of surprise  
The Red Man gave in poking about the mill,  
Over the great big thumping, shuffling millstone,  
Disgusted the Miller physically as coming  
From one who had no right to be heard from.

"Come, John," he said, "you want to see the wheel pit?"

He took him down below a cramping rafter,  
And showed him, through a manhole in the floor,  
The water in desperate straits like frantic fish,  
Salmon and sturgeon, lashing with their tails.  
Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it  
That jangled even above the general noise,  
And came upstairs alone—and gave that laugh,  
And said something to a man with a meal sack  
That the man with the meal sack didn't catch—then.  
Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right.

This poem is straight out of Poe whose prose Frost,  
oddly enough, admired greatly.¹⁴ This is, in fact, "The Cask  
of Amontillado" reset in New England and with the American theme  
of white man versus red. The victory here is of man over nature,  
machine over instinct. The raw power of water has been harnessed  
by the mill like fish in a tank and the Indian's grunt replaced

¹⁴Poe's Tales was fourth on Frost's list of his ten  
favorite books (See Chapter II, note 46). That he listed Poe  
just after Walden and well before Emerson's Essays and Poems  
is undoubtedly accidental. Frost did have, however, an interest  
in "the supernatural, the horrific, and the pseudoscientific"  
words he used to describe Poe (The Early Years, p. 549). In  
addition to "The Vanishing Red," poems like "The Witch of Coos"  
and "The Draft Horse" suggest a gothic dimension in Frost that  
has never been critically explored. The "dark woods" in Frost  
are often a metaphor for the mind itself, much as the strange  
rooms and buildings are in Poe.
brutally by the white man's laugh. But there is no easy nostalgia for the Indian in the poem, no romance for the underdog, the minority. Indeed, if Frost sides with anyone in "The Vanishing Red," he seems to side with the Miller who must have had reasons for what he did. We "would have had to have been there and lived it" to understand. But we "can't get back to see it as he saw it," and the situation at the mill was more complex than "just a matter/ Of who began it between the two races." Not having been there, however, all we can know is who won, who lost. In short, the focus of the poem is on the winner and the fact of winning itself, not on racial issues, for perhaps all we can know of anything is who survived and who did not.

Winning was central as well for Frost in his favorite sport, baseball. "Some baseball is the fate of us all," he once said. "For my part I am never more at home in America than at a baseball game." Baseball is, of course, the "national pastime," but for the poet is not sport at all but a morality play in which he sees a "figure of justice" directing the men as they work and play together, and alone, on the field:

I saw the umpire as a figure of justice, who stood forth alone ... I was touched by his loneliness and glad it was relieved a little by his being five in number, five in one so to speak, e pluribus unum. I have it from high up in the judiciary that some justices see in him an example to pattern after. ... Let me celebrate the umpire for any influence for the better he may have on the Supreme Court. The justices suffer the same predicaments with him. I saw one batter linger perceptibly to say something to the umpire for calling him out on

\[15\] Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 89.
a third strike. I didn't hear what the batter said. One of the hardest things to accept as just is a called third strike.16

The political implications of this are clear. Frost puts highest value on the court of law. The Supreme Court, he believed, was the most important body in government, the final check and balance for all. The religious implications, too, are evident: we will all be judged in the end; the question is whether we may "Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight."

With his Emersonian eye, in other words, Frost has made what is play to most of us into something far larger. Baseball is allegory. It teaches us judgment and law, the fact of the third strike. This is the truth the batter must accept but to do so is to acknowledge his failure, his limitations. He did not hit the ball; he did not win.

As a game with a message, baseball is like poetry itself. Like the poem it is play but play always with an "inner seriousness." And to play well in both, to win, requires "prowess," and "prowess," Frost says, "of course comes first, the ability to perform with success in games, in the arts and, come right down to it, in battle." Athletes are "the nearest of kin to the artists," and "athletics are close to the soul of culture. At any rate the Greeks thought so."17 Frost's poetry is distinctly American for the same reasons baseball is the national sport. Both are involved with men working

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16 Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 89.
17 Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 91.
together as a team but, more especially, with each man's loneliness as he faces the pitcher and the inevitable third strike. The question in poem and sport is whether he will hit the ball and get "home" or at least to a base, to a place, that is, of retreat where he can put his foot solidly down and not be tagged out.

We are all tagged out in the end, however. "Don't forget/ The lurking frost" that shows "its crystal teeth," the poet reminds us. How to survive is the question; how to survive, that is, with dignity and sanity. Sanity has been, in fact, the backdrop of this entire study, for fear of his own madness was Frost's perpetual concern. In the midst of breakdown and family tragedy that stretched from his father's early death to the suicide of his only surviving son, Frost wanted to know how to maintain himself. The poem we began this chapter with suggests his answer:

The time when most I loved my task
These two must make me love it more
By coming with what they came to ask.
You'd think I never had felt before
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
The grip on earth of outspread feet,
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

The answer is in the swinging of the ax, "poised aloft" like a baseball bat. It is in the doing of the work with ax or scythe or pen, that "life of muscles rocking soft" like the iambs of the heart beat. The answer is the poem he never stopped writing.


