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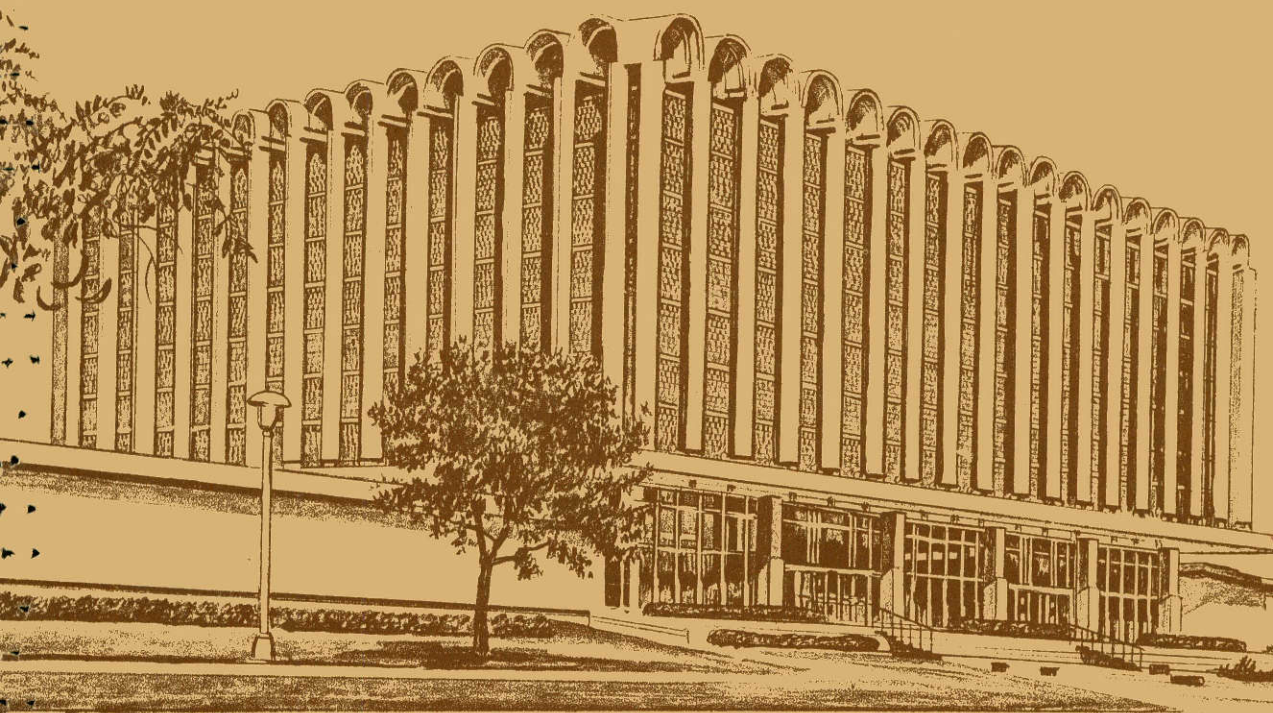
GRADUATE STUDIES TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Robert Frost's Imagery and the Poetic Consciousness

Dennis Vail

1976

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I. INTRODUCTION

When, by way of clarifying his assertion that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom," Frost wrote, "the figure is the same as for love,"¹ his way of putting things is more than merely charming. In part he means, of course, that the personal emotion and its development are similar in the two cases. But if by "figure" one understands not only "configuration" but also "metaphor," the statement becomes a subtle hint that the two human contexts are equivalent in some broader way, that the same metaphorical embodiment would be appropriate for both.

The question of the connection between love and art is in fact an important theme in Frost's poetry, and I will deal with it in some detail in Chapter III of this essay. I introduce it here because it provides an indication—one of many—that Frost was well aware of the larger implications present in his work, even though he was extremely reticent when it came to committing himself about them, to letting them be pinned down. Frost no doubt had a natural aversion to being pinned down under any circumstances, but his attitude toward this facet of his poetry would be largely justified by the fact that the critics generally made such a mess of it. Nevertheless, it is there, and a part of it forms the subject of this essay, which is, from one point of view, a selective study of the symbolic implications of Frost's imagery. I would agree, for the most part, with the following estimate of Frost by Lawrance Thompson:

His primary artistic achievement, which is an enviable one, in spite of shortcomings, rests on his blending of thought and emotion and symbolic imagery within the confines of the lyric. It would seem to be an essential part of both his theory and practice to start with a single image, or to start with an image of an action, and then to endow either or both with a figurativeness of meaning, which is not fully understood by the reader until the extensions of meaning are found to transcend the physical.²

Frost himself, in his usual cryptic way, was fond of calling this aspect of poetry "ulteriority," and he often spoke of his own work in such terms, though not in any consistent fashion. In another connection he went so far as to say that "metaphor" was not only "the height of poetry" but "the height of all thinking."³ The statement comparing love and poetry is itself, of course, a metaphor, and metaphor is the specific province of the imagination. Now, it may be that everyone lives mainly in the imagination and that art, with its truth, merely represents this faculty perfected or purified. Frost seems to suggest as much in "Carpe Diem":

But bid life seize the present?
It lives less in the present

1. Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," prefatory essay to the various editions of his *Collected and Complete Poems*. Also in Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, eds., *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 17-20.

2. Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost*, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 38.

3. Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry—A Meditative Monologue," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly*, 20 (February 1931):78-85. Also in *Amherst Alumni Council News*, 4(March 1931):5-15 (Supplement). Quoted here from *Selected Prose*, 33-46.

Than in the future always,
 And less in both together
 Than in the past. The present
 Is too much for the senses,
 Too crowding, too confusing,
 Too present to imagine.⁴

Part of the force of the last line, to be sure, comes from the fact that “imagine” has both its formal and its colloquial senses, but there is no reason why one should not play it straight. If responding meaningfully to one’s world is to be equated with imagining it, then it is certainly pertinent to know all we can about the imaginative faculty, and in this matter the artist—any artist—will be our natural guide.

I am neither an artist nor an esthetician, but only a reader of poetry. Nevertheless, there are involved in what I have done here certain assumptions about the nature of art that have influenced the essay and that I hope it will be found to support, and I ought to try to make those assumptions as clear as possible. In my view the two primary characteristics of art, the things that distinguish it from other products of human endeavor, are its self-awareness and its sense of independent life, of viability, of a self-contained, self-dependent and self-justifying adequacy. I would define it provisionally as the product of that activity by which the mind manifests its awareness of, by which it demonstrates, its own individual life. Not cleverness or subtlety, though these may be involved, but *life*. Subtlety may be adequately demonstrated in philosophy and cleverness in mathematics, but only art bodies forth the mind’s consciousness of its own living uniqueness. To an extent, accordingly, I have investigated the way in which poetry is always in some sense, as Stevens wrote, “the subject of the poem,” using Frost as a particularly tractable example. My chief subject is the poetry’s sense of itself, of its nature, its possibilities, its problems. My particular thesis is that in Frost’s poetry (the lyrics, especially) this theme is largely implicit and is carried primarily by recurring patterns of symbolic imagery.

In this assertion I have at least the general support of Allen Tate, who wrote of Frost’s “Birches,”

what seems at first sight the sentimentality, or even bathos, of asking us to take second thoughts about a boy swinging on a birch sapling, turns out (on second thought) to be not only a self-contained image but an emblem of the meaning of poetry: if we have got to be doing something, then let’s do something disinterested that has its end in itself. I should guess that more than half of Mr. Frost’s poems are little essays on the poetic imagination.⁵

I do not mean to deny, what seems to me obvious, that Frost is, if he is anything, a realist. “After Apple-Picking” is about apple-picking, and as such it is absolutely true to experience. But it is also about the artistic consciousness, and pro-

4. Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). Unless otherwise specified, all texts of Frost’s poems are taken from this edition, which is indexed by titles and first lines.

5. Allen Tate, “Reflections on American Poetry, 1900-1950,” *Sewanee Review*, 64 (Winter 1956):59-70. Also (as “Introduction to American Poetry, 1900-1950”) in Lord David Cecil and Allen Tate, eds., *Modern Verse in English* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 39-48.

foundly so. If I emphasize the second of these aspects, it is because I am convinced that the understanding of Frost's poetry suffers greatly by its general neglect—I would not be taken as implying that the first is somehow not really present. Frost is not Blake—he writes about no rose-trees that have existence only as symbols. Indeed, one of the marks of his stature as a poet is that he is realist and symbolist at once. He never falsifies the object for the sake of the symbol, but he orders setting and drama so that behind the visible world of his poems there is a world of the spirit, a separate, higher world, hidden but deeply felt, from which the visible world is observed but which is nevertheless tied to it, and in which the central fact is the mind's consciousness of its own capabilities, desires, fulfillments, disappointments, and limitations. Many of Frost's critics have sensed the presence in his poetry of this hidden world, but few of them have said much of real value about it. I propose to deal here with one important part of it—the part that concerns the artist's consciousness of himself as artist.

This essay cannot claim at all, then, to be a comprehensive study of Frost's poetry. If for no other reason, it all but leaves out of account his narrative and dramatic poetry—that is, his treatment of character—which is an important part of his work and in which the theme of self-awareness is handled rather differently (it is not hard to see, of course, in such poems as "Mending Wall," "The Self-Seeker," and "Two Tramps in Mud Time"). Still less can it claim to be an evaluation. I do not feel that Frost is understood well enough to *be* evaluated, and I can hope only to make a limited, though I think valid, contribution to the necessary understanding. But I believe that my method of analysis will be found applicable at least to the whole range of Frost's lyrics, and I doubt seriously that any thorough account of his poetry can ignore it or something like it.

Because I am interested here mainly in the *way* Frost's lyric imagery works, I have given particular attention to what seems to me to be the best example, because it is the most important, of these recurrent images—that of trees and woods—and especially in Chapter II I attempt to trace a rather extensive pattern involving it. For the same reason I have felt justified in concentrating, though not exclusively, upon the earlier poetry, where the patterns I am concerned with are clearer and where the theme of artistic self-awareness is more salient. Likewise I have attempted to show how Frost's images operate in individual whole poems. Indeed, anyone who reads this essay will perceive that it is little more than a series of individual commentaries strung together on what I hope is the sufficiently substantial thread of common theme and imagistic mode. Yet it represents a way of regarding Frost's poetry that is rather different from the usual view; and I believe that if one must make the choice, under pressure of time or because of one's own limitations, it is better to yield to a schoolboyish principle of organization than to do violence to images and phrases by tearing them from their context in particular poems.

My basic approach to the poetry can be well illustrated by reference to a poem that is central to my thesis and to which I will have more than one occasion to refer in the coming pages. The poem is "Into My Own":

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
 So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
 Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
 But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day
 Into their vastness I should steal away,
 Fearless of ever finding open land,
 Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
 Or those should not set forth upon my track
 To overtake me, who should miss me here
 And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
 Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Perhaps the first thing one notices about the poem is that the speaker wishes the world were different from the way it is, and this idealization might lead the reader to conclude that the poem is romantic. It is not romantic, however, for it does not affirm that the wished-for condition is possible. Nevertheless, it proceeds as though the wish had, or could, come true. Now, to detail what one would do in impossible circumstances is, on the face of it, mere idle fantasy. But the point is that the wish does come true, the imperfection becomes perfect, in the imagination; and this is one of the things that art is all about. The speaker realizes that the “trees” he sees before him are really only a “mask of gloom,” but he imagines a forest that stretches out as far as thought can follow. This imaginary forest then becomes the central image of the poem.

The title makes use of the common expression “to come into one’s own,” thereby suggesting the fulfillment of a potential, and the poem seems clearly to involve a fundamental commitment on the part of the narrator. That his wish is only “One” among, presumably, several suggests that the commitment has not yet finally been made—perhaps that it is continually in the process of being made—and also that the image is not to be taken as inclusive of all the important spheres of life. Still, it goes to something very basic—the core, I would suggest, of the speaker’s thinking—and seems to represent a state of mind, a kind of activity, and ultimately a way of life. And despite the qualification inherent in the several conditional verbs, the implied attitude carries great conviction. The speaker’s figurative wish, which is his real hope, is that the imaginary wood he proposes to enter will not prove to be of illusory significance, yielding only a meaningless (or perhaps self-indulgent) “gloom,” but will carry him “to the edge of” the ultimate human questions as well as lasting until the end of his own life.

The poem operates primarily on two planes of tension, which involve opposition between the solitude of the “trees” and the community of family and friends, and between the desirability and the uncertainty of the hope’s being fulfilled. The word “trees” includes both the individual tree and the collective wood, thus evoking a uniform region (almost a separate world) that is nevertheless made up of discrete parts—an image of variety, of particularity, within a vast sameness. The trees’ darkness (partially transferred to the wood as a whole) suggests the

seriousness, the gravity, of the matter concerned, and so an emotional value in the range marked by earnestness; the difficulty (along with the implied worth) of seeing clearly, and therefore access to the deepest secrets of human thought; and the presence, or at least the danger, of lurking evil, which must be confronted in any workable attitude toward reality. Their oldness and firmness present a picture of relative, though not ultimate, stability and permanence, with little response to any sudden and capricious "breeze" of change, suggesting metaphorically a firmly established tradition. (If these last two statements seem contradictory, it is precisely the paradox of art that they embody.) All in all, one would expect these "dark trees," rather than the "open land," to be a source of fear—if for no other reason, because they represent the unknown. Still less would one expect to fear a "highway," emblem of civilization and human company. But these things are antagonistic to the speaker's desire: here "open land" represents sterility, the lack of potentiality; and, as has been pointed out by Charles Henry Cook, Jr., the image of "the slow wheel" pouring "the sand" suggests an hourglass and therefore the inexorable passing of time.⁶ The forest provides protection against such insistent reminders of waste and mortality (and so, in a way, against the waste and mortality themselves), or at least keeps them from being sources of fear when they are unavoidably encountered. The mild paradox involved in the lines reinforces the feeling, established by the main image and the associated theme of withdrawal, that the speaker is a special kind of person.

The allusion to stealth does not necessarily imply deception, but merely a concern for the essentially private nature of the journey. Once the decision has been taken, it is up to family and friends to follow if they wish—and the poem implies that they can, if they will, or at least that the speaker himself is not excluding them. The new situation need not be a threat to them, if they can only perceive the fact. But their failure to do so, though it may cause the speaker sorrow, will not be sufficient reason for him to "turn back." The decision is too important for that: it involves his very being. And it seems clearly enough implied that the decision is objectively justified, in the speaker's view, by the implied worth of the result he foresees; that is, it points toward what is in some basic way a superior, a higher way of life. Moreover, the echo of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 is probably not accidental.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If the reference is intentional, then the speaker's attitude is being compared not only with that found in the work of the paradigm of English poets, but compared—even equated—with a kind of love, so that his capacity for responding to "those" "who" hold him "dear" will even be increased.

6. Charles Henry Cook, Jr., "Robert Frost, American Symbolist: An Interpretive Study," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1957, p. 49.

The poem is the first in *A Boy's Will*, Frost's first volume, and it has retained that position through all editions of his *Collected* and *Complete Poems*. The tentative nature of the poem's statement is thus Frost's invitation to the reader to survey the forest of his art and thought, and then to decide for himself whether the decision to go ahead has been vindicated. Indeed, one hardly can read much of Frost's poetry, particularly the early poetry, without being struck by the frequency with which this wood image recurs. The fact has certainly been noticed before,⁷ but I do not believe that the significance of the image has been realized fully, particularly with regard to the variation that it shows from poem to poem. Sometimes the fact of the speaker's presence in the wood itself is of primary concern; sometimes the meaning turns on its state or condition, or on certain of its attributes; sometimes the focus is on individual trees rather than (or in addition to) the collective wood. But in the great majority of all of these poems, the image, as the central element in a larger body of imagery (with which I will also be concerned), suggests, if only among other things, the private poetic world and what happens there. What does happen is the subject of this essay.

7. See, for example, James McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," *Yale Review*, 23 (March 1934):514-520; John T. Ogilvie, "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 58(Winter 1959):64-76.

II. THE ARTIST, HIS LIFE, AND HIS TRUTH

There are a number of poems that seem to embody Frost's conception of poetry's place in the modern world, what its possibilities are, and what it ought to be doing. Take for example "Pan with Us," unusual for Frost in that it is based on traditional mythology:

Pan came out of the woods one day—
His skin and his hair and his eyes were gray,
The gray of the moss of walls were they—
And stood in the sun and looked his fill
At wooded valley and wooded hill.

He stood in the zephyr, pipes in hand,
On a height of naked pasture land;
In all the country he did command
He saw no smoke and he saw no roof.
That was well! and he stamped a hoof.

His heart knew peace, for none came here
To this lean feeding, save once a year
Someone to salt the half-wild steer,
Or homespun children with clicking pails
Who see so little they tell no tales.

He tossed his pipes, too hard to teach
A new-world song, far out of reach,
For a sylvan sign that the blue jay's screech
And the whimper hawks beside the sun
Where music enough for him, for one.

Times were changed from what they were:
Such pipes kept less of power to stir
The fruited bough of the juniper
And the fragile bluets clustered there
Than the merest aimless breath of air.

They were pipes of pagan mirth,
And the world had found new terms of worth.
He laid him down on the sunburned earth
And raveled a flower and looked away.
Play? Play?—What should he play?

Pan is the god of forests and pastures, of flocks and herds and their keepers, and of pastoral poetry. I am not certain that I understand the poem; but it seems to me that Pan, here, personifies the spirit of poetry, particularly nature poetry, that the poem is primarily about the place of that poetry in the modern day, and that Pan's "pipes" represent, in part, the outmoded pastoral convention with its idealized Arcadian world.

From a technical point of view, having Pan come "out of the woods" facilitates the speaker's making him the center of attention: he comes onto the stage, as it were. But his purpose is simply to get a better view of "wooded valley and wooded hill"—to see how things are going in his part of the world—and the

surrounding "woods" remain the poem's controlling image. The uniform mossy grayness of his appearance is surprising, whatever conception of him one may have had: it suggests extreme age, long inactivity or neglect, and a kind of decay. The second stanza seems to present just such a scene as he might have beheld two thousand or more years ago: Pan's demesne has not been destroyed by the encroachment of social forms—at least not all of it—and he evinces a sense of reassurance at the discovery. Yet the word "naked," though it means "treeless" and therefore "affording a view," also suggests denudation and evokes a vague sense of poverty. And the spot is subsequently called a "lean feeding"—perhaps a hint that it is not frequented by men, and has not been appropriated by civilization, because it is not regarded as fertile or profitable. At any rate, Pan seems reduced to inhabiting the less desirable pieces of real estate, which may say something about the place afforded poetry in general by the modern temper. Here, as throughout the poem, the question for him is what to make of a diminished thing. The word "command," though it means "overlook," also emphasizes the diminution of Pan's authority by referring ironically to the kind of "power" mentioned in the fifth stanza. On the other hand he is able to make do without a large or impressive domain. "His heart" knows "peace" as long as there is reserved for him (even if accidentally) a spot whose frequenters are at home with the spirit that he represents. It is those who are, or can be, like "homespun children," close to nature and unsophisticated, who "see" what is important to Pan, and in the right way. Free from the socialized adult's accumulated preconceptions, they can be accepting of the unique without having to fit it into a scheme, and so without feeling bound to "tell" any "tales" about it. They do not really constitute an incursion of civilization.

Nevertheless, a basic change has taken place. Pan's discarded "pipes" recall the time when poetry was derived from, and consisted of homage to, the gods, who, whimsical and responsible to no one, walked the "earth" with the "power" of controlling reality as apprehended by men. Without pushing the idea too far, one can perhaps see in "the juniper" and the "bluets" the two essential components of poetry: the fruitful solidity of rational truth and the gratuitous fragility of esthetic beauty (the adjectives describing the two are linked by double alliteration). More specifically, the "pipes" with their "pagan mirth," which now seems irresponsible and heavy handed, suggest, for example, certain of the more grossly sensual idylls of Theocritus and their successors in ancient poetry. The "new-world" reference, with the associated "new terms of worth," calls to mind both the ennobling effect of Christianity upon human values and the relative naturalism, puritanism, and individualism of the American experience. Not that the earlier tradition was not vital in its own day, but its day is gone. Nor am I trying to make the poem into a history of poetry, but the loss of efficacy of Pan's "pipes" does seem to indicate the need for a revitalization. Any attempt to imitate the old songs—even, one may say, those embodying a Wordsworthian sort of pastoralism—is seen as futile. The fact is that nature itself, as perceived and responded to by men—and one must not forget that man is a part of nature—has changed. What is wanted is an appreciation of nature as informed by *human* values—the

kind of thing that Frost points to in "The Aim Was Song" and "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." The gods are now left out of account. It is the freshness of "the merest aimless breath of air" that the modern poet (and reader) follows through "the woods" of thought, and for him no "song" has any preexisting authority. The only acceptable stance left for poetry, then, even nature poetry, is that of realism, of dispensing with any "music" not derived from—contained in—what really exists in the world. Accordingly, in tossing away "his pipes" Pan gives up his divinity and makes, though perhaps reluctantly, the only choice that will permit him to stay "with Us"—that of becoming simply human, an observer of nature rather than a deification of it. On the one hand he is no doubt somewhat averse to giving up his prerogatives, but on the other he seems finally content with the situation, not resentful or morose. He is perhaps glad enough to get rid of those "pipes" and the responsibility that goes with them. Even "for him," after all, the "music" "of hawks" and bluejays is "enough." On the whole, I think, he should be seen as yielding with a grace—and even with some relief—to the inevitable. Only now will he be able to develop a relationship with "the world" (the natural world, particularly) that will be meaningful in modern "terms"; and it seems to me that Frost's lyrics generally constitute a demonstration of the possibilities that exist, the stance that nature poetry must now assume in order to be valid. And as I hope to show, the designation "nature poetry" turns out not to be a limitation at all, since Frost's nature imagery owes the unique quality of its life precisely to its organically contained analogies with universal human themes—specifically, as the subject of this essay, the operation of the poetic consciousness itself.

If such an empirical idea of poetry is accepted, it is up to the individual to arrive at his own conception of the nature and accessibility of truth. "The Demiurge's Laugh," which immediately follows "Pan with Us" in Frost's collections and is also overtly mythopoetic, confronts this question.

It was far in the sameness of the wood;
 I was running with joy on the Demon's trail,
 Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.
 It was just as the light was beginning to fail
 That I suddenly heard—all I needed to hear:
 It has lasted me many and many a year.
 The sound was behind me instead of before,
 A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
 As of one who utterly couldn't care.
 The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
 Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;
 And well I knew what the Demon meant.
 I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
 I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
 And checked my steps to make pretense
 It was something among the leaves I sought
 (Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).
 Thereafter I sat me against a tree.

The opening lines I take to suggest intense concentration, complete absorption in the things of the mind and a single-minded devotion to a particular intellectual pursuit, with consequent removal of the individual from direct contact with, or awareness of, the world's variety. "The Demon" that the pursuer hopes to capture clearly dwells in this "wood,"⁸ and represents, I think, the ultimate truth about the nature of reality.⁹ (He can also be seen as a sought-for substitute for the effectively deposed Pan, implying that man would still like divine sanction for his insights.) To limit the question to that of evolution, or even of science, as some have done, is to restrict unduly the poem's theme. At issue is the matter of an ultimate teleological principle, whether of scientific, religious, or other provenience.¹⁰ The speaker knows in his heart that his pursuit is vain—that the human intellect cannot arrive at a result that will be of really divine or ultimate authority (we recall that Pan no longer has dominion)—but he yields to a felt need for a final and absolute resolution of the tension of uncertainty inherent in thought, and the imagined prospect of success is cause for great "joy."¹¹ Then, "just as the light" is "beginning to fail"—as his perception is darkening because of exhaustion or despair of success or simply a change in mood, at any rate when a significant result would be least expected—he encounters what must serve as his answer. "The Demon" is surprising in more than one way, and the pursuer has passed him by without seeing or at least without recognizing him. He spends his time in a "wallow," in a close relation with "dirt," inviting comparison with a pig and certainly suggesting a less ethereal nature than might have been imagined. And his attitude toward the pursuer, to the extent that his interest is engaged at all, is one of scorn. These circumstances suggest that insofar as the kind of truth the pursuer hopes to find exists, the place to look for it is in the very substance of physical reality, and that one must accept whatever of the repugnant or evil one may see there. From a slightly different point of view they imply that if there is a teleological principle in the universe, it is not consonant or sympathetic with, and may even be hostile to, human nature and human needs as man himself understands them. The speaker's embarrassment reflects his perception of the essential simplicity of these facts, and consequently of the foolish misdirection and self-delusion that have characterized his efforts. His "pretense" is that he is in the forest for its own sake, examining its "leaves" for what they may yield—something that he has lost, or is only now in the process of finding. And indeed he finds it there, to the extent that it can be found. The poem's last line has been described as "bathos," and as therefore reprehensible, but that is to miss an essential point. After the chase has been given up as illusory, the forest

8. The word "demon" can refer "particularly" to "an attendant, ministering, or indwelling spirit; a genius" (*O.E.D.*).

9. "The Demiurge" is "the Maker or Creator of the world, in the Platonic philosophy; in certain later systems, as the Gnostic, conceived as being subordinate to the Supreme Being, and sometimes as the author of evil" (*O.E.D.*).

10. It is true that in the original British and American editions of *A Boy's Will* (London: David Nutt, 1913; New York: Henry Holt, 1915) Frost wrote of this poem in the glosses included in the tables of contents, "The youth resolves . . . to know definitely what he thinks . . . about science." But Frost omitted these rubrics from later editions, and they are not in fact very helpful for understanding the poems.

11. "Demon" can be "applied to the idols or gods of the heathen" (implying a false "god"), and "in general current use" it means "an evil spirit; a malignant being of superhuman nature; a devil" (*O.E.D.*).

and its trees remain and remain accessible. It is "the wood" itself, with its solidity and dependability, that is important in the human perspective, rather than any final answer that may be supposed to exist there. Ultimate truth simply cannot be captured, at least not through immediate human experience and effort. Man seeks truth and so defines himself in a process that is never finished. The speaker has finally found the proper resting place for the human spirit. Only now will he be able to involve himself in an intensity that will not be necessarily futile.

What, then, are the possibilities open to him? What *can* he find in the woods? The answer is provided by a general pattern of imagery that Frost's poetry displays. Perhaps the simplest case is that in which the speaker, out walking alone in the forest, comes upon something unexpected and significant. A good example is "The Wood-Pile," which, despite its relative simplicity of structure, is a difficult and rather enigmatic poem. It opens with the speaker isolated in the woods, in a place that cannot be located with respect to the ordinary world of the known and the nameable—a circumstance suggesting the kind of withdrawal deep in thought that characterizes "The Demiurge's Laugh"—but in this case the imagery of the place itself is sketched in some detail and establishes a mood that is important to the poem's meaning.

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
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.

The sense of a "frozen," dead world is reinforced by the cover of "hard snow," which prevents contact with the earth, the source of life, much as in "Reluctance." The "trees" are sharply outlined, but they lack individual character, so that the speaker cannot tell at all where he is, and they fail to display significant features of any kind. One may say that their unidirectional rigidity embodies an absolute so unmitigated as to be unmeaningful, at least in comprehensible human terms. And of course there is no foliage to function as in, say, "A Dream Pang." The absence of a perceptible relation to the rest of the world is hence felt as a lack, because the immediate scene seems to offer no compensation. In themselves, at any rate, the "trees" seem able to function only as background, against which any significant object will almost have to stand in contrast. One might also note that any meaningful encounter will depend on the speaker's having persisted against an impulse to quit—he has apparently found nothing of interest in his walk so far, and the situation certainly is not promising.

In the absence of anything more consequential the narrator's awareness follows a "small bird" that keeps retreating as he advances, the only evidence of life that he can see. This creature demonstrates the speaker's ability to make whatever is to be made, however little, of the situation at hand; it leads his attention and in a way seems to merge with his consciousness itself as it flits from place to place

toward the more notable object that follows. It is forgotten as his attention is fixed by

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.
 What held it, though, on one side was a tree
 Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
 These latter about to fall. I thought that only
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
 Could so forget his handiwork on which
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

Part of the force of this passage, as often in Frost, derives from its realism, from the poet's refusal to introduce anything in the least unlikely. And this same quality is importantly responsible for the poem's difficulty, for since the woodpile's presence cannot be denied or dismissed as imaginary, it asks to be explained, and that is hard to do. It is perhaps only after an explanation on the practical level has been given up as impossible (which I think it is) that the poem's actual significance, the more compelling for the realism of the description, begins to emerge. One should remark the fidelity with which the speaker recounts the series of actions that, as he perceives, has led to the presence of the "pile of wood," and the precise delineation of the object itself, both of which indicate the woodcutter's evident care. The woodsman, by operating only upon the "trees" of the forest, has produced a manifestation of purpose, of reality that is human and therefore unique, in the midst of the surrounding uniformity. Even though it is, or was originally, like the forest, a "view . . . all in" straight "lines," its property of identifiability, arising from the establishment of contrast and the acceptance of finitude, makes it meaningful, while the surroundings remain intellectually blank. The woodpile's isolation and the distance in time since its construction establish a separation between the creator and the product of his effort, which is endowed with its own independent principle of existence, difficult though that may be to apprehend. The object is separate also from its surroundings, in that its condition and appearance do not follow their seasonal variation. All in all, the image is strikingly reminiscent of Frost's characterization of the "artist" as someone who "snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic."¹² The "strings" of the clematis are indeed a kind of "ligature," but one that represents the establishment of a new "organic" relation with the world.

12. Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes."

Some connection is, after all, inevitable: one cannot imagine a woodpile in an otherwise vacuous space. The forest accepts the artificially formed object on the latter's terms, but embraces it in the only way it can, according to the forest's own nature.

There is in the image of the "strings," of course, an implied threat to the woodpile's continued existence, as the natural order gradually reassumes dominion over the works of man. But even as the forest seeks to reclaim its own, the "tree still growing" continues to support the former "trees" that have sacrificed that kind of growth in favor of a growth in meaning and mystery—in contrast to the artificial support, which is, at least according to all appearances, "about to fall." One almost feels that if the object had been fitted just right into its natural surroundings, it would be in no danger at all. But not quite. The image concerns that act by which the artist interrupts the continuity of natural causality in favor of recognizable form that is at once perceived and imposed, and the effort, ultimately unsuccessful, by which he seeks to minimize the harmful effect of the necessary disjunction. The work of art, skillfully placed in the natural order, resists reabsorption. But the most important threat under which it exists is internal. The really essential point about the woodpile is that in "burning," shifting, collapsing, it is *alive*, and, like all living things, it is dying. This is not at the moment true of the surrounding scene, the living progress of which toward death is temporarily in abeyance. In a precise reflection of art's real function, the "swamp" can be taken as representing the human consciousness in a temporarily all-but-lifeless state, being warmed by the steadfast and living work of art. The woodcutter and the narrator are associated with different aspects of the artistic act, one forming the work in his own mind, the other discovering it there. Or, to state the matter another way, one suggests the writer of a poem, the other its reader. The two acts are intellectually and emotionally equivalent, in that both take place in the same forest (the artistic domain), and both consist in apprehending the reality that the work of art represents. The primary "meaning" of the image is the meaning shared by all of art as a manifestation of the shaping intelligence that somehow imparts its own vitality to its product. The artist is indeed one "who" lives "in turning to fresh tasks," and whose life work is to have "spent himself" many times over "on" the objects of his "labor" (there is undoubtedly a sexual suggestion in the line, and this is not the only place in Frost that the "ax" is a phallic symbol), giving them their own life and leaving them to their own destiny, which is different from that of the materials from which they come and different from that of a utilitarian object. In a sense the woodpile is struggling to fulfill the practical function determined by its form. But if it had been consumed in "a useful fireplace," there would be no poem. It is not a "real" woodpile, in that this woodcutter's behavior is not realistic. Rather, having been animated by its ardent creator (or discoverer), it embodies, in the largest sense and more or less nakedly, the idea of warmth, with many possible ramifications; and its statement of that idea depends upon the "fireplace" analogy. For the work of art must be recognizable in the terms that describe the ordinary world, yet "far" enough removed "from" that world to be free of the

limitations of ordinary relationships, and so enabled to pursue a truth of its own. Art necessarily plays upon one's expectations, but at the same time transcends them. It is successful when the calm of the truth that it embodies more than compensates for the discomfort of the disorientation that it produces and the practical waste that it entails.

The choice that one encounters within the wood is not always simply that of going on or turning back. Sometimes Frost's *persona* makes a point of wandering "out of beaten ways," as in "An Encounter," which I will consider later; and in such a case he can presumably go anywhere he wishes. Sometimes, however, he makes a point of keeping to the road, as in "Closed for Good," so that his range of action is limited.¹³ The apparent contradiction can be explained, I think, as a reflection of Frost's characteristic refusal to go to extremes in affirming any insight. It can be said that his poetry as a whole balances the positive value of individuality and originality against the equally desirable qualities of reasonableness and a willingness to acknowledge one's debt to others. Somewhere near the middle of this range of values lies "The Road Not Taken," a poem in which going forward, progressing, means choosing between two roads that lie in different, though not opposite, directions.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

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.

That the "wood" is "yellow" indicates that the season is autumn, a time of changing configuration and so of newly uncovered possibilities for perception and discovery. The speaker's referring to himself as a "traveler" calls to mind the traditional metaphor of life as journey, but it also suggests that he is a person who keeps moving, seeing new places, looking for something different. The word "fair" describing the two "roads" no doubt means primarily something general

13. I am not speaking here of what Frost calls "the highway" in "Into My Own" and "Reluctance," which is outside the woods and often has connotations that are more or less unpleasant, but rather of roads in or through the woods.

like "attractive" or "pleasing" and is in fact brilliantly chosen to have the widest possible range of meaning in the context. But its basic etymological meaning is "beautiful," and since autumn "leaves" are traditionally associated with beauty, esthetic concerns are hardly absent from the poem's consideration. In any case it concerns the moment at which the speaker must choose between two desirable alternatives if he is to remain "one traveler"—if his integrity as an individual, his wholeness, is to be maintained. The newly fallen (and unfallen) "leaves" can be taken to suggest images, ripened on the trees of poetic truth, that have not been "trodden" into dead, drab clichés by the action of too many minds. (Frost is quoted somewhere as having told someone that after you say a thing twice, it is no longer true.) Both "roads" faced by the speaker have been marked out previously by men, so that the question is not one of absolute originality. It is nevertheless clearly one of individualism, of independence, and the choice is made on the basis of a slight advantage in that regard. The similarity of the "roads" in other respects suggests that the choice is a matter more of style than of substance, though of course the two are closely related. In any event the following of a clearly marked outline, but as independently as possible, describes very well Frost's actual poetic practice, both metrical and thematic.

Yvor Winters has attacked this poem (and "The Sound of Trees") as showing that "Frost . . . is mistaking whimsical impulse for moral choice,"¹⁴ and George W. Nitchie has cited Winters' argument more or less approvingly.¹⁵ Well, the alternative to informed empirical choice is adherence to a system of moral absolutes any given set of which can hardly lay a very authoritative claim to the intelligent individual's allegiance. Besides, such criticism ignores the facts that a basic choice, a basic commitment, has already been made (the man is *in* the "yellow wood"), and that both "roads" in the poem are in condition to permit fresh perception and significant effort. Anyway, an insistence on the integrity and independence of the individual, a willingness to forgo some things in favor of others, and a refusal to claim more credit than one can be sure of seem to me to constitute quite an adequate "moral" position. The word "long" in the first stanza implies great care in making the decision and a genuine regret at not being able to pursue both alternatives simultaneously, at knowing, really, that one is consigning to permanence the disappearance of "the first" "in the undergrowth." If the second stanza allows that the actual choices with which one is confronted are likely to be minimal and suggests the folly of imagining otherwise, the last stanza nevertheless insists upon the ultimate importance of any given choice and, by implication, of the series of choices that are made as "way leads on to way." The requisite quality for choosing wisely, the poem seems to suggest, is a consistent self-possession: if a person is able to accept, however reluctantly, without a sense of inadequacy, the fact that he cannot have or do everything, he will not spoil his real possibilities, either by refusing to choose or by exaggerating the importance of the choice in a desire to compensate for having to choose.

14. Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: Or, The Spiritual Drifter as Poet," *Sewanee Review*, 56(Autumn 1948):564-596.

15. George W. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), 167.

Out of a quiet assurance, then, the speaker looks forward to the time when, "with a sigh" both of satisfaction and of inevitable regret (the poem's title, after all, concerns the relinquished alternative), he will feel truly reconciled to this moment, and all other such moments of choice informed by a realistic preference for independence, as having been eminently worthwhile. Indeed, the verb tenses in the last stanza, supported by the speaker's air of assurance, create a kind of timeless present that includes past and future in a continuing moment characterized by the self-contained and self-aware sense of life, of a living present, that is the major mark of great art. By placing the poem first in his third volume, *Mountain Interval*, Frost announces both his awareness that he has developed an individual poetic identity and his continued preference for the "way" he has come.

Sometimes in Frost's "wood" poems the variation is important that the forest shows among its own elements. A good example is "Birches," which, by emphasizing the qualities of a particular kind of tree, suggests one of the important functions of poetry in the world, in life. The poem is interesting also for its structural display of the actual working of the poetic imagination. It opens by contrasting what the speaker likes to imagine with what he knows to be literally true.

When I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
 But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
 As ice storms do.

There follows a long exposition of the way the "ice storms" "bend" the "birches" "down to stay." It is as though the speaker, unable to put off the insistent demand of literal truth, is compelled to follow the matter through, if only in order to be done with it. Perhaps also he does not wish to seem to be yielding to fancy because he is incapable of dealing with literal fact. He gives evidence, in short, of a certain feeling of guilt about his imaginative response. At the same time he is so obviously enjoying what he is saying, as he sprinkles the natural explanation itself with figures of speech, some of which are outlandish, that it is clear he is putting on an ironic little demonstration for the reader's benefit, with an amiable disdain for those who would actually find the protestation necessary.

He continues,

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
 With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
 I should prefer to have some boy bend them
 As he went out and in to fetch the cows. . . .

There is an evident play here on the two kinds of "Truth" involved—the literal sort just described and the imaginative truth, which the speaker expressly prefers, that establishes the figurative or symbolic significance of the object. The reader sensitive to the patterns of Frost's imagery will have noticed at the outset the explicit contrast between the two kinds of "trees." Within the forest comprised by "those dark trees / So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze" of "Into My Own" there exist "trees" lighter in both color and degree of rigidity, and so

not only distinguishable but of less grave and less rigorous import. These "birches" are specifically associated with childhood and, moreover, childhood of a particular sort. The "boy" Frost's speaker has in mind is

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

Literally by situation, but also metaphorically and by nature, he is "far from" the gregarious pastimes that mark the conventional childhood and able at an early age to act positively in the sense in which everyone, whatever the current weather, must act "alone." There is no doubt something sad about the state of affairs, but, as becomes clear, it offers him an opportunity that more than compensates for the sadness.

The speaker himself, at any rate, voices no pity beyond what one may read into the description; and he enters so thoroughly into the imagined account that in rendering it he shifts to the simple past tense.

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.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.

The "boy" is not completely on his own: he evidently exists in a family situation sufficiently well circumscribed and sufficiently accepting to permit him to concentrate on making what he can of his capabilities. It also provides him with the means of doing so, though it affords him no direct assistance. Giving himself wholly, but deliberately and not compulsively, to the means at hand, the birch, he plies it so that it both carries him beyond the realm of the ordinary and is shapen to his will. He must take "pains" that go somehow beyond what can be described as complete, and certainly beyond the ordinary requirements of "play," to avoid a precipitate or compulsive yielding to the urge for release before he reaches the proper point, which is organically determined. Failure in this regard means not only failing to make full use of the vehicle but in some sense ruining it. (This latter idea is expressed in terms of an inappropriate contact with "the ground," which refers back to the trees' being "dragged to the withered bracken by the load" put on them by the "ice storms" and so suggests an essentially pernicious influence.) One can, I suppose, interpret as one wishes this self-induced transport that depends on the cultivation of a skill and leads to a cumulative sense of mastery; but surely one legitimate reading sees in the image the development of the nascent artistic intelligence.

At any rate the poem carries the “boy” only to the point where he has profited all he can by what the childhood situation provides. Then the speaker recalls with apparent nostalgia his own similar childhood pastime.

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.

On one level this passage is ironic, an expression of pretended self-pity climaxed by a wish that is manifestly impossible of fulfillment. But the image of the “pathless wood” is too true to be taken as even partly facetious. When “considerations” (necessary as they are for the responsible person, as “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” insists) so overwhelm a person that he not only can see no clear way out of his present confusion but is faced at every turn by obstructions that seem almost willful as they impede and punish any attempt at progress (thereby further diminishing his ability to see), then there is plainly a need to do something about the whole matter, and for the person who has no recourse the situation is indeed desperate. One cannot take everything into account, and the difficulty is really that of diminished capacity for the kind of perception and judgment on which selectivity and choice are based. It might be said that the man has been in the “wood” too long, so that cumulative after-sensations have destroyed his ability to discriminate. What is wanting is perspective, the power of seeing relationship so that everything does not crowd the senses (and, metaphorically, the mind) at once and with equal insistence.

What, then, of the remedy? In a sense the speaker's expressed wish proceeds from a desire to go “back” to the innocence and irresponsibility of childish “play,” an understandable if hopeless impulse. But the significant reference is to the imaginative ability (related, indeed, to childhood) “to get away from” the reality of one's immediate surroundings, even while the vehicle by which one does so is firmly rooted in that reality and ultimately leads “back to it.” In simplest terms one thinks of the experience of writing (or reading) a poem. After such a flight one can return with the freshness of a vision cleared of inessential scars and so with renewed ability to meet and to deal with the facts of one's existence. One manifests this ability largely in the difficult form of admitting priorities, of leaving some of those facts out of account without feeling bound to deny any of them.

Certainly there is no satisfactory retreat that is permanent, as the speaker emphasizes with a gibe at those who condemn the “earth” while eager for the perfect “love” of heaven.”

May no fate willfully misunderstand me
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

There is the humorous implication that those who really complain about the human lot deserve to be snatched "away / Not to return," and in the speaker's view that would be a hard "fate." Nevertheless, the poem suggests, the human situation can be made thoroughly endurable only if one is able "to get away from" it in the way that has been described, and of course the opportunity to do so is part of what the human condition itself offers. A person must be able to make proper use of the "birches" that he encounters in the "pathless wood." The image of "black branches" and "a snow-white trunk" refers back to and reinforces the light-dark contrast of the poem's opening, but it also transforms that contrast into a new one with its own significance. Viewed against the other "trees" the "birch" is relatively lighter; when attention is focused on it alone, it is seen to provide within itself an abstracted and heightened representation of the full range of reality, which lends a quality of absoluteness and completeness, and yet of simplicity, to the act of "climbing." One should also note the way in which the speaker's imaginative response has transformed the observed fact—that "birch" "trees" are bent—from a manifestation of harm into a symbol of positive value. This transformation, which puts things into another world, seems curiously related to one of the poem's central ways of working—the effect by which the speaker (and the reader) becomes again, in an important way, a "boy." The literal "swinging" of "birches" is appropriate for children and inappropriate for adults, for whom it represents a merely fanciful yearning that must not be surrendered to; but the poem is an imaginative statement of an idea that Frost later made explicit—the idea of poetry as "play."¹⁶ In the metaphoric sense that is important here, there must remain something permanently innocent and childlike in the adult view of things: a striving "*toward* heaven" even while one clings to the security of the earth, a yearning for the ideal that grows out of a "love" of the real, a capacity for believing even as one scorns credulity. Perfection is unattainable, but it is approachable as a kind of limit through a glad acceptance and affirmation of the imperfect that in its very innocence and lack of malevolence is able to transcend itself. The understatement of the poem's last line accords this disposition the highest of places. It becomes a kind of vocation; at the same time it is, by the very nature of the image, an avocation. The act finally becomes a symbol for the way of life envisioned by the speaker of "Two Tramps in Mud Time," the mode of being where "love and need are one."

For Frost art is a part of life even as man is a part of nature. The artistic intelligence cannot operate in a vacuum, although it attempts to create for itself a separate and self-sufficient world. The picture of the artistic life that emerges

16. Edwin Arlington Robinson, Introduction, *King Jasper* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), v-xv. Frost wrote, "Give us immedicable woes—woes that nothing can be done for—woes flat and final. And then to play. The play's the thing. Play's the thing."

from Frost's poetry is one of alternating—sometimes almost simultaneous—involvement in and withdrawal from the world and its values and impulses. The resulting complication tends to endanger the poet's creativity but is nonetheless necessary to it and sometimes constitutes a saving element in it. The conflict is part of the poet's life and so part of his subject matter. I will defer until Chapter III a treatment of the love relation, a special case of this conflict with its own values and problems. Here I would like to consider two other modes of thought that can complicate the artist's state of mind: the technological attitude that takes convenience as its ultimate end, and the pathological urge to destruction.

We have seen in "The Wood-Pile" the trees of the forest reordered by an act of human intervention and so endowed with a higher life. "An Encounter" shows the image of the tree in an altered but, in this case, potentially corrupt state. The poem opens with a passage of the finest naturalistic detail, which is nevertheless intensely symbolic.

Once on the kind of day called "weather breeder,"
 When the heat slowly hazes and the sun
 By its own power seems to be undone,
 I was half boring through, half climbing through
 A swamp of cedar. Choked with the oil of cedar
 And scurf of plants, and weary and overheated,
 And sorry I ever left the road I knew,
 I paused and rested. . . .

The scene gives a sense of energy turning inward, brooding, stifling even itself, creating an internal tension that threatens to explode in violent and unpredictable fashion; and it suggests an analogous psychological state on the part of the speaker. To be safe at such a time it is wise to keep to the proven, or at least accepted, ways of thought, for the substance of thought itself can become an obstacle almost impenetrable and insurmountable. On the other hand it is only by taking one's own way and persevering in it, under whatever conditions, that one can hope to arrive at any significant perception of truth.

The speaker has "paused and rested"

on a sort of hook
 That had me by the coat as good as seated,
 And since there was no other way to look,
 Looked up toward heaven, and there against the blue,
 Stood over me a resurrected tree,
 A tree that had been down and raised again—
 A barkless specter. He had halted too,
 As if for fear of treading upon me.
 I saw the strange position of his hands—
 Up at his shoulders, dragging yellow strands
 Of wire with something in it from men to men.

This is the "pathless wood" that figures in "Birches," and in each case the speaker's impulse is "toward heaven," the direction of ultimate and absolute truth, as a respite from the oppressive crowding of immediacy. One of the remarkable things about the present passage is the way the oppressiveness is lifted as the speaker's gaze opens into the cool "blue" expanse of the sky. But the reve-

lation that he is granted concerns not eternal life, but rather the living death that the phrase "barkless specter" clearly connotes. The speaker's newly met acquaintance is, of course, a telephone pole. Paradoxically it is the mark of humanity, the human touch, that kills even as it makes personification of the "tree" credible. There is surely an implicit reference here, an ironic comparison, to the central mystery of Christianity, in the threefold iteration of the tree's "resurrected" state and the image in which it is displayed, which partakes both of a cross and of one crucified. Indeed the "tree" is both cross and victim, the vehicle of its own sacrifice, and in its revived embodiment no more than a slave.

The equanimity of the speaker's note of recognition is perhaps surprising, then, as he addresses the "tree" almost as a friend:

"You here?" I said. "Where aren't you nowadays?
 And what's the news you carry—if you know?
 And tell me where you're off for—Montreal?
 Me? I'm not off for anywhere at all.
 Sometimes I wander out of beaten ways
 Half looking for the orchid Calypso."

The "tree," in its personified aspect, remains a sort of mindless automation, but the speaker seems not to be disturbed. He even evinces a certain sympathy for the kind of plodding effort, unaware of its own meaning, that the "tree" represents, or at least he in no way condemns it. It is manifest, however, that he himself is not subject to the same necessities, and that his character is largely defined by the fact. It is pointless to condemn technology (obviously the poem's main subject): the "tree" is doing something presumably useful, and it shows a concern for the speaker's well-being that seems sincere, if simple minded. At any rate technology must be taken into account: it cannot be avoided, even by one who pursues the most independent of "ways," since it pervades the very substance of modern man's consciousness. But there is grave danger in according it the status of a mythology, as the modern world tends to do, for that can lead only to dehumanization and brutalization, and ultimately to the mind's enslaving itself. The person who would remain intellectually free, the artist, must maintain a dualistic attitude toward a material progress that is at once beneficial and dangerous. He must avoid ascribing to it any greater capacity to provide for man's needs than it really has, while at the same time living comfortably with it. And, most importantly, he must carefully sustain in himself the independence necessary for finding and appreciating the rare and fragile manifestations of beauty that are inherent in the nature of things and affected neither by time nor by culture.

"The Line-Gang," closely related imagistically and thematically to "An Encounter," again deals with the relation between the technological and the natural:

Here come the line-gang pioneering by.
 They throw a forest down less cut than broken.
 They plant dead trees for living, and the dead
 They string together with a living thread.
 They string an instrument against the sky
 Wherein words whether beaten out or spoken

Will run as hushed as when they were a thought.
 But in no hush they string it: they go past
 With shouts afar to pull the cable taut,
 To hold it hard until they make it fast,
 To ease away—they have it. With a laugh,
 An oath of towns that set the wild at naught,
 They bring the telephone and telegraph.

The poem's point of view is characterized by a duality that is indicated in the first two lines. In popular American tradition, "pioneering" is an exciting and admirable thing to do, and this attitude is partially established toward the work of "the line-gang," who are, to shift the metaphor slightly, breaking new ground. But the term as used here is also partly ironic. Traditional pioneers would have established a creative ecology with "the wild," on which they would largely have had to depend for their existence. They would carefully have "cut" "down" the "trees" and made good use of both the clearing and the wood. The speaker is, in a way, such a person, since he is already established when "the line-gang" arrives. (One should be aware that cutting "trees," in Frost's poetry, can be an unequivocally positive thing. That splitting wood is one of his images for getting at the truth of the immediate human situation—as opposed to absolute metaphysical truth—is clearly suggested in "The Star-Splitter" and "Two Tramps in Mud Time." And the establishment of a clearing in the woods is related to the achievement of a workable intellectual position, as in "A Cabin in the Clearing.") These newer pioneers, with no regard for the value that the "forest" in its natural state represents, simply "throw" it "down," destroy it. But then—and here the second of the poem's main oppositions is introduced—they raise it again in such a way that, although "dead" with regard to its former being, it is endowed with a new kind of "living" reality. The tendency is toward a remaking of the truth of the world, a redefinition of what it means to be human.

The nature of this new life is important. First of all the "instrument" is inorganic: having no vital principle of its own, is "living" only as it answers to real human values, in this case communication. Secondly it is narrow and specific: doing only what it is designed to do, it lacks, no matter how complex it may become, the capacity for completeness. Thirdly it is "hushed," secret, uncommunicative of any meaning of its own: the essence of the reality that it represents does not follow from appearances and is not available to inspection, since its meaning is derived from without and is not organic to it. And finally it is "taut"—rigid and inflexible—residing in a growing structure to which the men who "bring" it continually transfer, by sheer force, the tension inherent in their way of life. It cannot be said that these men are uncommonly hostile minded or intentionally destructive: they seem, in fact, quite good natured, if rather coarse. They simply have no understanding, one can almost say no awareness, of the truth that they are destroying and replacing. They represent a self-defined and self-contained value that recognizes no gods and, more dangerously, no informing tradition. With boisterous self-assurance they crash a swath through the ancient reality, leaving in their wake the "dead" elements of that reality, reordered according to an alien purpose and reanimated by the mysterious filament that conceals its origin, destination and meaning, declaring only its presence.

It is, however, unavoidable, being set "against the sky" so that anyone who looks from a certain point of view toward heaven, the realm of ultimate truth, will see it in bold relief. It affects, that is, the sum total of truth in a way that cannot be neglected. Nor is it simply a hostile presence that must be dealt with as one can: the word "bring" in the poem's last line clearly suggests something useful and desirable. The ambivalence of the speaker's response is thus reasserted, and the attitude that the poem recommends is a balanced one. But the point is that the balance must be maintained. A person may give a qualified assent to technological values, but he must not give them his entire allegiance nor allow them to displace completely in his consciousness the ancient verities that are inherent in the nature of things and independent of time and place. Collectively speaking, the new values must not be permitted to usurp the whole of the intellectual realm. Going a step further, one can say that the "towns" represent all of man's institutional arrangements, of which technology is the outgrowth and symbol. It is ultimately these arrangements, and the kind of intellectual activity they engender, that must not be given undue sway, since they do not provide for the whole man. The individual must always have accessible, and substantially intact, the "forest" where he engages in that confrontation that involves only himself and fundamental truth.

Another threat to which the artistic mind in Frost's work is subject, perhaps because of its aspect of unsociability, is the will to power, an internal threat that derives from a sense of superiority over others and can lead if not controlled to the most self-defeating of all human impulses—the urge to destruction for its own sake—which negates everything the artist stands for. Frost's poem "The Fear of God" cautions against giving way to the kind of self-conceit that encourages this impulse, and "The Bonfire," which I would like to consider here, deals directly with the urge itself. Strangely, this is related to the persistence of, or a nostalgia for, a childish naiveté and capacity for wonder, the positive and permanently desirable side of which we have seen in "Birches." The poem's opening section sets forth, by way of the speaker's invitation to a group of "children" (whether his own or not is not clear, and the poem makes sense either way), the cumulative preparation that has led up to the lighting of a bonfire. In the image of gathering fuel one can see the group working itself up into a collective state of mind that is increasingly agitated.

"Oh, let's go up the hill and scare ourselves,
As reckless as the best of them tonight,
By setting fire to all the brush we piled
With pitchy hands to wait for rain or snow.
Oh, let's not wait for rain to make it safe.

The pile is ours: we dragged it bough on bough
Down dark converging paths between the pines.
Let's not care what we do with it tonight.
Divide it? No! But burn it as one pile
The way we piled it. . . .

Let's all but bring to life this old volcano,
If that is what the mountain ever was—
And scare ourselves. Let wild fire loose we will——"

Here recklessness becomes something to be admired, a desideratum, as the gathering enthusiasm progressively blots out considerations of restraint and safety. A sense of proprietorship in achieved results tends to justify, in the proprietor's view, whatever may take those results as its starting point, and gradually to displace in his consciousness the question of the general welfare. The "dark converging paths" suggest a collective monomania tinged with something secret and even diabolical. It is true that getting rid of "brush," analogous to purging the mind of obstructions to effective thought, is useful and even necessary. But that is not the motive here, and the fact points up the ease with which ordered needs can be forgotten in comparison with more basic and primitive impulses and, when it is necessary, can serve as rationalizations and guises for their indulgence.

The quality of this particular impulse becomes clearer after "the children" have asked quizzically whether the speaker himself will really be frightened.

"And scare you too?" the children said together.

"Why wouldn't it scare me to have a fire
 Begin in smudge with ropy smoke, and know
 That still, if I repent, I may recall it,
 But in a moment not: a little spurt
 Of burning fatness, and then nothing but
 The fire itself can put it out, and that
 By burning out, and before it burns out
 It will have roared first and mixed sparks with stars,
 And sweeping round it with a flaming sword,
 Made the dim trees stand back in wider circle—
 Done so much and I know not how much more
 I mean it shall not do if I can bind it.

He is disabusing "the children" (and the self-deceiving reader) of the idea, part of the outward face that the adult world presents, that one outgrows a liability to, and a fascination with, fear, or rather the seeming contradiction between these two tendencies. Indeed "children," and the childlike, to whom frightening situations come of their own accord, ordinarily have enough sense to avoid them. Adults often court them, as though to reassure themselves of both their bravery, which has become necessary to self-esteem, and their capacity for feeling, which habit may have dulled. This inclination arises from the need for a sense of personal power, as well as for getting beyond the merely human by standing in awe before forces greater than oneself. If a person has evoked these forces himself and can identify with them, his stature in his own eyes is correspondingly magnified. In this way he can break free of his human limitations and project himself to the "stars," the divine, the limits of being, and, like an avenging angel "with a flaming sword," make mere terrestrial reality take notice and recoil in fear. Of course, since order and conservation necessarily require control, giving in to the need for release from all restraint can lead only to destruction and chaos; and the speaker's use of the word "repent" strongly suggests that he is aware of something malevolent in his impulse. Indeed this tempting of disaster seems to represent an urge to destruction—including self-destruction—for its own sake, a longing for annihilation as a refuge from the irreducible tension of being.

There follows a comparison of the present situation to an earlier time when the speaker has built a bonfire:

Well if it doesn't with its draft bring on
 A wind to blow in earnest from some quarter,
 As once it did with me upon an April.
 The breezes were so spent with winter blowing
 They seemed to fail the bluebirds under them
 Short of the perch their languid flight was toward;
 And my flame make a pinnacle to heaven
 As I walked once around it in possession.
 But the wind out-of-doors—you know the saying.
 There came a gust. (You used to think the trees
 Made wind by fanning, since you never knew
 It blow but that you saw the trees in motion.)
 Something or someone watching made that gust.

The use of the same pronoun "it" in the first and third of these lines combines the prospective and the former "fire," and the combination, reinforced by the phrase "upon an April" with its expanded time sense, suggests a continuous burning that is never absent from the speaker's consciousness. Again there is the sense of personal "possession" in a reaching toward the divine—just possibly a pun, especially since the act of circumambulation is ritualistic in nature and the image suggests a sacrificial altar. The most rational explanation for the source of the "gust" is that it is induced by the fire's "draft," but the vague (and vaguely ominous) "Something or someone watching" lends added credibility to the purportedly childish fancy of the trees' "fanning" and hints at other presences, dark and unseen powers. In any case "the wind" that stirs the "flame" is a product of the system, the mind, itself. The "gust"

put the flame tip-down and dabbed the grass
 Of over-winter with the least tip-touch
 Your tongue gives salt or sugar in your hand.
 The place it reached to blackened instantly.
 The black was almost all there was by daylight,
 That and the merest curl of cigarette smoke—
 And a flame slender as the hepaticas,
 Bloodroot, and violets so soon to be now.
 But the black spread like black death on the ground,
 And I think the sky darkened with a cloud
 Like winter and evening coming on together.

The metaphors from the child's world serve as a continuing reminder that the speaker's nominal audience consists of "children," and the poem suggests obliquely that, in the matter at hand, its adult audience is likely to be equally unsophisticated. But there is also something violent, something dark and Satanic, in the metaphoric juxtaposition of evil and innocence. As the destructive "flame" is compared to fragile spring flowers, the time of new life becomes the time of "black death," and the "cloud" of smoke that rises is metamorphosed into a sympathetic darkening of the very atmosphere.

Then the speaker recounts at length his desperate and barely successful struggle to contain the spreading grass "fire" "by rubbing" with his "coat."

"I won! But I'm sure no one ever spread
 Another color over a tenth the space
 That I spread coal-black over in the time
 It took me. Neighbors coming home from town
 Couldn't believe that so much black had come there
 While they had backs turned, that it hadn't been there
 When they had passed an hour or so before
 Going the other way and they not seen it.
 They looked about for someone to have done it.
 But there was no one. I was somewhere wondering
 Where all my weariness had gone and why
 I walked so light on air in heavy shoes
 In spite of a scorched Fourth-of-July feeling.
 Why wouldn't I be scared remembering that?"

The feeling of elation at his victory over the "fire" is almost obscured here by the sense of accomplishment at having "spread" the plaguelike "black death" so quickly "over" so great a "space." Really it is both that constitute the achievement: having brought one's part of the world to the edge of disaster, and then having saved it. The speaker has created for himself the conditions of a solitary heroism, leaving for his neighbors the visible sign of a superiority over them that they cannot understand, since it consists of a knowledge that they do not share. His subsequent withdrawal from public view reflects, in addition, a feeling both of culpability at having nearly caused enormous destruction and of disappointment at having failed to do so. The dulled sense of touch that his feet exemplify and the lack of awareness of his surroundings implicit in the designation "somewhere" combine to suggest a kind of ecstasy proceeding from his consciousness of the sheer magnitude of the possibility that his act represents.

The "Fourth-of-July" reference has to do with more than hot weather. With the homely heroics it evokes, it slyly suggests that the real motive for that ritual, in which children and adults share in a childish resort to fire and explosions, is the same as the speaker's motive here. It also serves as a transition to the explicit statement of theme in the poem's final section. To the children's question,

"If it scares you, what will it do to us?"

the speaker replies,

"Scare you. But if you shrink from being scared,
 What would you say to war if it should come?
 That's what for reasons I should like to know—
 If you can comfort me by any answer."

"Oh, but war's not for children—it's for men."

"Now we are digging almost down to China.
 My dears, my dears, you thought that—we all thought it.
 So your mistake was ours. Haven't you heard, though,
 About the ships where war has found them out
 At sea, about the towns where war has come
 Through opening clouds at night with droning speed
 Further o'erhead than all but stars and angels—
 And children in the ships and in the towns?
 Haven't you heard what we have lived to learn?

Nothing so new—something we had forgotten:
War is for everyone, for children too.
 I wasn't going to tell you and I mustn't.
 The best way is to come uphill with me
 And have our fire and laugh and be afraid."

On its primary level the poem thus becomes a statement of the speaker's desire to prepare "the children" for the very real possibility that they may have to deal directly with "war" and to immunize them, so to speak, against the shock of a totally unexpected onslaught—and, figuratively, against the sudden explosion of the destructive impulse in themselves. But it also communicates to the reader (who may well, like "the children," stand in need of such instruction) an important truth about the nature of man. It is no doubt going too far to say that Frost perceived the presence of the gathering militaristic impulse that finally emerged as Nazism: any impulse to "war" under modern conditions is in fact a kind of vast pyromania. But it is fair to say that the poem, written and published during World War I, shows a keen understanding of the direction that modern warfare—and modern civilization—was to take. It is true that man has already passed the brief period when he could indulge himself in his newly discovered, or rediscovered, pastime of total war and retain hope of leaving anything undestroyed, and in that sense the poem is dated. But it has implications for the future that are, in the last analysis, deeply pessimistic, for it suggests that the inner tendency associated with the "fire" represents not an aberration, but a fundamental human need. If Frost's speaker, more self-aware and more candid than most of us, is subject to the operation of this motive—and he *likes* the high, numbing drone of the bombers—then who is immune? The only real hope that the poem holds out—and in this sense the "fire" is therapeutic—is that by admitting the destructive impulse in himself rather than repressing it, the individual can perhaps provide for it in a more or less nondestructive way and avoid its asserting itself in the guise of righteousness. Such an eventuality could result from the development of the inclusive artistic awareness on a large scale. But, at least collectively speaking, it is not much of a hope. It seems far more likely that men, builders of bonfires in their own minds and perverse seekers after equality with "stars and angels," will continue courting a conflagration even while making elaborate efforts to preserve the peace, and that sooner or later those efforts will fail.

In "The Wood-Pile," "The Road Not Taken," and "The Bonfire," as we have seen, the state of the wood itself, as determined largely by the time of year and/or the time of day, has been important in varying degrees. The more important it is the more clearly it tends to represent, in a given poem, a particular state of consciousness. In a number of poems it is central, and these can be taken, at least on one level, as comments on specific states or potential states of the poetic mind. A good example is "The Oven Bird," which is also one of a number of Frost's lyrics where songbirds tend analogically to represent the poet or the poetic impulse.

There is a singer everyone has heard,
 Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
 Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.

He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
 Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
 He says the early petal-fall is past,
 When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
 On sunny days a moment overcast;
 And comes that other fall we name the fall.
 He says the highway dust is over all.
 The bird would cease and be as other birds
 But that he knows in singing not to sing.
 The question that he frames in all but words
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.

"The bird" is to be encountered deep in the woods, a circumstance suggesting the kind of withdrawal deep in thought that is so often implied by the wood image in Frost's poetry. The "singer" is merely "heard," and not seen, so that the song seems to issue from the woods, "the solid tree trunks," themselves (the literal reference, I take it, is to a kind of resonant echo). That the "bird" is well known results, perhaps, not so much from his commonness as from the fact that he is virtually the only one "singing" at this season. His song is "loud," but not, apparently, especially melodious—a fact that fits very well with the state of the surroundings. The entire scene, substance ("leaves") and beauty ("flowers"), is an example of "diminished" vitality. Past is the fresh potential of "spring," with its fragile and shifting beauty, when life-giving "showers" from the suddenly darkened sky send "showers" of "bloom" to their death; still to come is the beauty of autumn's ripe fullness, which exists only because it is dying. The interim of "mid-summer," a kind of hiatus, lacks this tension between nascence and mortality that is largely responsible for meaning in the world. There is little change, little activity, little that is new; and the result is a tendency toward a stagnant dryness. The bird's self-chosen task is, surprisingly, to proclaim all of this, and the nature of his motivation is the key to the poem's main theme.

The rationale for this motivation turns on the meaning of the sonnet's twelfth line, which involves the bird's "singing" and "not" "singing" at the same time. The implication seems to be that he both "knows" how to do this and "knows" that it is called for. He is "singing," making a bird noise, by contrast with the "other birds," who have fallen silent; but his effort would not be called "singing" in comparison with the earlier and more musical renderings of those "birds," whose songs of spontaneous lyric beauty and hope are no longer appropriate. His function is to proclaim certain truths, none of them especially appealing, and then to pose a "question" about them that seems to have no completely satisfactory answer. His virtue is that he looks steadily, undismayed, at the ordinary facts of an unexciting and even discouraging situation; and in affirming them he declares his own essential soundness. This quality is conveyed and lent to the wood as a whole, and in this regard there may be a pun on "sound" in the poem's third line.

The possible applications are several. In a way the poem expounds the ordinariness of the state of affairs in which the artist (and, by extension, any of us) finds himself most of the time, the prevailing quality of the uncertain wood in which the individual is always more or less alone. In the widest sense one can

perhaps see a comment on the place of art in the modern world, after the glory of youthful gods and heroes has faded and before the advent of whatever mythological dependency may characterize the world's latter days. But most importantly, I think, the poem concerns the character of the mature artist as an artist, the quality that makes him what he is. Maturity is not, of course, a matter of chronological age, and the knowledge concerned is available to anyone who can see clearly enough. But the poem nevertheless concerns a certain kind of growing up, and it is organized as though the time element were the determining one. There is no lack, it seems to suggest, of those who can "sing" in the springtime of youth, when sudden moods obtain and radiant joy is darkened in the perception of "a moment," only to return as quickly. But as life moves on into the middle years, when the kinds of beauty and promise seen by the youthful eye have largely disappeared and the sources of renewed vitality have all but dried up, when the time of evanescent deaths is past and "the fall" that is final is not so very far off, most of the would-be poets fall silent. It is not so much that they are seduced by other enthusiasms (though of course that happens, as in "The Lost Follower") as that life no longer seems to hold anything worth celebrating or grieving for. Not particularly redolent of either birth or death, not exciting or even reassuring, but not especially menacing either, it remains persistently alien and unresponsive, threatening only the "ennui" of Baudelaire's "Au lecteur." The true artist is he who, eschewing withdrawal, self-delusion and anodyne, is able to regard squarely, with neither compliance nor hostility, this reality that is "diminished" to life size. Whatever he may be as a man, he must have, at any given time and as an artist, a relatively stable position from which to view the world as "from a middle distance." And in viewing it he sings—tentatively, perhaps, and quizzically, but loudly and unmistakably, though in a key that youthful delight or despair would hear as discordant. What he ultimately makes "of" the situation is another matter: there are many modes of response. But in posing the "question" he is implicitly accepting the world as it is, and thereby committing himself to a stance that is at least broadly realistic. That is the important point: to be a prophet neither of doom nor of ideal perfection, but "to sing" the world as one finds it, and "to make of" it what one can. It is an admonition that "everyone has heard" as the voice of reason within himself, but that too few are able to heed.

Sometimes the state of the wood is such—unpromising or even dangerous—that the protagonist declines to enter at all. Two good examples are "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Come In," both of which are important enough to my present purpose to be considered here. The first of these also illustrates the great importance in Frost's poetry of the image of snow, especially as combined with that of darkness. (It has a very similar import, or example, in "Desert Places" and "The Onset.") The poem, perhaps Frost's best known and surely one of the great lyrics of the language, has been commented upon so much that one hesitates to add to the jumble, but I believe that at least certain aspects of its meaning can be clarified. The familiar opening lines establish an extraordinary sense of immediacy, due in part to the elemental simplicity of the language and to the fact, unusual for Frost, that the narrator speaks in the first person present.

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 speaker evinces at least a certain satisfaction that the owner of "the woods" he has stopped to "watch" "will not see" him, and the implicit contrast between the two men that makes this assurance possible is important. It is implied that the owner is the kind of person not likely to be engaged in the speaker's present pursuit. "His house" is not with "his woods": rather than dwelling on his land, he is associated with (and limited by) "the village" and its values—he lives there figuratively as well as literally. He is not, apparently, subject to the kind of appeal by "his woods" that the speaker feels, a fact which leads to a distinction between two kinds of possession—that is, between owning, in the usual sense, and really knowing. Moreover, the speaker has the more inclusive awareness of the two in that he knows the owner and understands his place in the scheme of things, whereas the converse seems not to be true. The speaker respects the owner's property rights, but he also shows a welcome sense of security from nosy curiosity and meddlesome query—the kind of thing Frost's protagonist, as owner, barely avoids committing in the poem "Trespass." Indeed it is reasonable to assume that he has allowed himself to stop by "these" particular "woods," at least in part, precisely because their owner is not around. He is in fact appropriating someone else's property to his own purpose, somewhat after the manner of "The Gum-Gatherer," though in a more obviously harmless way, and is glad to feel safe from interruption.

The worth of his momentary and gratuitously provided spiritual dwelling is undercut, however: against the attractiveness of "the woods" his companion reminds him of other things. Robert Penn Warren points out that the "horse becomes an extension, as it were, of the man in the village, both [existing] at the practical level, the level of the beast which cannot understand why a man would stop" in such a place.¹⁷ But one also should remember that the "horse" belongs to the speaker, suggesting that he represents a part of the speaker's own awareness, a kind of "practical" (and social) conscience, and again the scope of the

17. Robert Penn Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost" (Hopwood Lecture, 1947), pp. 218-233, in *The Writer and His Craft: Being the Hopwood Lectures 1932-1952*, ed. Roy W. Cowden (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954).

speaker's awareness is emphasized. In "practical" (not necessarily beastly) terms it is indeed a "mistake" to waste the time involved in stopping. The speaker does not reject the validity of such an attitude, so far as it goes: he is himself aware of the claims of "practical" matters, which are not negligible. He certainly speaks affectionately enough of his "little horse," and he gives a just expression of the pragmatic objection to his stopping, with overtones far beyond what a literal "horse" would understand. On one side of him is the "frozen lake," which would be a symbol of vitality if it were not in a congealed and therefore inoperative state. On the other are the darkened and snowfilled "woods," where the "snow" will have blotted out any meaningful features, even if there were enough light by which to perceive them. The scene therefore seems to offer nothing that would warrant putting aside immediate "practical" needs.

But despite the unpromising condition of the surroundings, they exert a powerful attraction, to which it would be "easy" to yield; and the speaker's attention is drawn back one last time, by the voice of the "wind" and "snow," from the sound of the "bells" to "the woods" themselves. Warren gives a good analysis of the structure of the last stanza, though he is not sufficiently clear about its ultimate implications.

The first line proclaims the beauty, the attraction of the scene. . . . But with this statement concerning the attraction . . . we find the repudiation of the attraction. The beauty, the peace, is a sinister beauty, a sinister peace. It is the beauty and peace of surrender—the repudiation of action and obligation. The darkness of the woods is delicious—but treacherous. The beauty which cuts itself off from action is sterile; the peace which is the peace of escape is a meaningless and, therefore, a suicidal peace.¹⁸

The wonderful thing about the poem is that it does two things at once, and does them both so well. On one level it is true that, as most critics maintain, the "promises" referred to concern the speaker's obligations to others—the cluster of responsibilities associated with his own "farmhouse" and involving those who, having a smaller scope of awareness and therefore of possible "action" than he, are dependent on him in various ways, and of whom the "horse" is a representative. That is, the poem insists upon an acceptance of responsibility—however sensitive, aware, special one may be—in the ordinary world of "action." But it also concerns the speaker's obligations to himself, on the discharge of which all else is contingent: for him to yield to the attraction of "the woods" would be bad for those who depend on him precisely, in this sense, because it would be bad for him. It is also true, I think, that the kind of literal "death wish" John Ciardi sees in the poem is present there;¹⁹ but the more important "death" that threatens the speaker is spiritual.

Perhaps the best statement of the imagery's significance is that of Unger and O'Connor.

The woods are symbolic of beauty in general, of esthetic value. . . . If it were not for the promises and miles, what would the speaker do? He might watch the woods indefinitely—he might devote his life to the experience of esthetic value. Or he might enter the woods, for it is their interior, their darkness and depth, which is lovely, and which

18. *Ibid.*, 218-233.

19. John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," *Saturday Review*, 41(12 April 1958):13-15, 65.

thus suggests the peacefulness of death. In their fullest symbolic potentiality, then, the woods equate death with an exclusive commitment to esthetic value.²⁰

This statement implies—correctly, I think—that the phrase “lovely, dark and deep” is really a juxtaposition of two adjectival equivalents, rather than a series of three elements, or at least that that is one legitimate way of reading it;²¹ and it points up, though it perhaps does not sufficiently emphasize, the speaker’s temptation to “enter the woods,” to get lost in them, at least in imagination, rather than merely to sit and “watch” them. Even here, however, the reference to “esthetic value” is misleading. We have seen that to enter “the woods,” which are generally somewhat “dark,” is frequently, in Frost’s poetry, a positive and desirable thing: the darkness suggests the seriousness, the gravity, of the matter concerned, and also the relative difficulty (as with everything worthwhile) of perceiving the truth. But in the present poem the combination of night and “snow,” imagistically speaking, makes their appeal seductive and dangerous. With the added darkness of night the difficulty of seeing becomes an impossibility. And Warren rightly judges that the reality of “the woods” is a “sterile” one;²² in these “woods,” as is indicated primarily by the image of the “snow” (to which the meaning of the word “deep” is partially transferred), the generative principle is not operating. In other words what proposes itself to the speaker, and what he rejects, is a certain *kind* of estheticism—the overly romantic and indiscriminate yielding of the self, the will, to the inhuman—however harmonious—universal rhythms. For the speaker this is an emotional dependency or crutch that art cannot legitimately provide—the drowsy numbness of escape from the responsibility of awareness and the tension of emotional self-accountability into a kind of psychic comfort that can be had only at the cost of spiritual death. In refusing to yield to this sloth of the mind, the speaker maintains possession of his own consciousness until he can lie down to “sleep” without surrendering his will, having gone the psychological distance that he has promised himself he would go. The poem’s esthetic and social values are therefore not in conflict, but quite in harmony, since both lead away from these “woods.” In choosing against them the speaker provides not only for the fulfillment of his obligations to others, but also for the continuation in himself of the kind of life—the life of awareness—that is absolutely essential to the artist.

The second of these poems of refusal, “Come In,” makes use of the image of darkness, though not that of snow. The poem also illustrates the place of another important image in Frost’s poetry—that of the stars and heavenly bodies.

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music—hark!
Now if it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

20. Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor, *Poems for Study: A Critical and Historical Introduction* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 599.

21. There is a comma after “dark” in Lathem’s text—his emendation—that I have removed.

22. Warren, “The Themes of Robert Frost,” 218-233.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
 By sleight of wing
 To better its perch for the night,
 Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun
 That had died in the west
 Still lived for one song more
 In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark
 Thrush music went—
 Almost like a call to come in
 To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
 I would not come in.
 I meant not even if asked,
 And I hadn't been.

One may assume that the speaker is familiar with these "woods"—he is "out" alone "for" a late evening walk—and that his home is nearby is implied. Viewing the poem in its context, we may say that he has previously found much of significance within their confines. It is not the fact of "the woods" themselves, but, again, their condition, here that of simple darkness, that prompts his refusal to enter.

G. F. Whicher offers the following interpretation of the poem:

A poet of our time hears a birdlike voice from the dark wood (ancient symbol of error) singing of irremediable ills. The call to "come in to the dark and lament" awakens an impulse to become a modernist poet of the decadent school, to take the veil (or, as Frost once put it, "take the blanket") of calculated obscurity and imitate the fashionable lead of the French Symbolistes. The summons, however sweetly conveyed, can be resisted by a poet who has long considered it inappropriate "to write the Russian novel in America," and who prefers to keep on in the way he was going.²³

Several axes are being ground here, and the literary judgments are less than compelling. I believe that such a sweeping reference to "error" is largely out of place; at any rate it would apply to the wood image in only a few of the many Frost poems in which it appears. But Whicher does see a good bit about the way the imagery is working. Let us take the "bird" as suggesting the poet, or rather a certain kind of poet: both singing and wings are mentioned, and both have, traditionally, such connotations.²⁴ He cannot see what "perch," what point of view, would be most suitable, and so of course he cannot get there. Moreover, no "sleight of wing," no pretended magic of the poet's art, will avail to improve matters. This situation of the "bird" is potentially that of the speaker, who, if he should enter "the woods," would be no better off than the "bird." He *is* better

23. G. F. Whicher, "Out for Stars: A Meditation on Robert Frost," *Atlantic Monthly*, 171(May 1943): 64-67.

24. Robert Ornstein, "Frost's 'Come In,'" *Explicator*, 15(June 1957): Item 61, is probably not far wrong in seeing in the fourth stanza an expression of "romantic sensibility."

off, however: he is not bound to "the woods," and his difference from the "bird" resides in his being able to choose against them.²⁵

The poem seems to suggest that when certain mental states or objective conditions obtain (and both are probably implied), a person is not granted "the light" by which to perceive and to order the truth of the immediate situation, and if he attempts to deal directly with that situation he can only get lost or give way to a mere generalized "lament" of the circumstances themselves. In this connection Warren gives a perceptive analysis of the second and third stanzas, noting that

the darkness can still be conquered in the very lament. In other words, the poet is prepared to grant here that a kind of satisfaction, a kind of conquest, is possible by the expression, for the expression is, in itself, a manifestation of the light which has been withdrawn. Even in terms of the surrender to the delicious blackness, a kind of ideal resolution—and one theory of art, for that matter—is possible.²⁶

I am not certain that some of these comments are not less applicable to the imagery of "Come In" than they would be to that of "Stopping by Woods," and I feel that Warren exaggerates the speaker's temptation in the present poem. Nevertheless, the themes of the two poems are similar, though they are expressed in partially different terms, and what the speaker of "Come In" rejects is indeed a kind of "surrender"—the surrender of independent intellectual responsibility. The "pillared dark" suggests a kind of natural temple where homage is paid to darkness as well as "light," if only in the acquiescence that a "lament" implies. But the speaker is too tough minded to join in any such response, and such hymn, even though it seems to offer a sense of harmony with things as they are and presumably ought to be. As long as there is any original "light" anywhere, he will seek it out. Now, a number of poems besides "Come In"—"On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations," "On Making Certain Anything Has Happened," and "Take Something Like a Star," for example—suggest that for Frost the star image has a special significance. It seems to be associated with the existence of a body of truth that, if not eternal, can at least be called permanent by any measure that human history can apply. The critical intelligence must allow itself to be overwhelmed by local and temporary conditions, lest it begin to think *them* universal and eternal. Accordingly, if it is to remain functional under conditions like those described in the poem, it must turn from immediate reality, where its operation is temporarily made impossible, to contemplation of the unattainable but useful ideal of absolute truth, for the guidance it can give when one returns to the dim "woods" of immediate experience. In this regard it should be noted that the "stars" can be seen in great clarity but in little detail, characteristics more or less opposite to those of trees at their most visible.²⁷ And reflection will bear out that the conditions fostering communion with the two kinds of truth are in

25. Robert Penn Warren, in "The Themes of Robert Frost," remarks this fact, though I believe he over-emphasizes the literal human-animal contrast that it involves.

26. Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost," 218-233.

27. John T. Ogilvie, in "Woods to Stars," is certainly moving in the right direction when he says that woods in Frost's poetry tend to be "symbolic of the introspective life," whereas "the heavenly bodies of outer space" are "symbolic of more impersonal intellectual considerations," though he makes what seems to me a rather forced attempt to trace a pattern of chronological development by which stars displace woods in the later poetry.

some sense opposite, as they are suggested here by solar "light" and darkness. When the world of present fact is sufficiently illumined so that its features are discernible, even if only with difficulty, it claims the attention. At other times, as the only way of avoiding utter confusion or the surrender of intellectual responsibility, the awareness is drawn to the existence of permanent and unchanging truths, even though they may seem to have little immediate applicability. Both conceptions, with some kind of alternation between the two emphases, are necessary to a full view of reality. The poet who, like the "bird," can deal with only one kind of truth is at a distinct disadvantage in range of vision and represents something analogous to a lower form of life.

The little ironic turn at the end of the poem (along with the earlier qualifier "Almost"), a signature by which Frost is easily recognizable, shows the speaker's ability to reject the easy response, proceeding from the craving for emotional recognition and dependency, by which one is often led to imagine a mutual relation where none exists. The speaker will "not come in" partly because he is "out" and wants to stay there. These "woods," with their surrounding and limiting character, are like a substitute, though a specious and seductive one, for the home that he has presumably left behind for the time being.²⁸ In a sense, of course, "the woods" and the "bird" constitute a little world that is self-contained and viable, though at a relatively low level. The speaker is content to leave it that way, without intruding and without judging, since there is really nothing that he could add. Nevertheless, it is clear that he himself possesses a higher and more inclusive intelligence, and that his choice maintains it intact. On a different level the gesture is also Frost's repudiation of the Wordsworthian sort of transcendentalism, his insistence that his metaphoric use of nature be taken as no more than that.

Among the many other examples of Frost's nature imagery that I might consider, there is perhaps one that will give this chapter something of a sense of completeness and will serve as an appropriate transition to the next. Flowers, in Frost's poetry, tend to suggest the esthetic component or aspect of the artist's consciousness, as opposed to the rational, which often seems to be represented by trees or leaves. We have seen this kind of imagistic division operating in "Pan with Us" and "The Oven Bird." I do not wish to be overly schematic: by far the most important characteristic of the body of imagery contained in Frost's poetry is the tremendous sense of organic unity that it shows. Accordingly, the beauty of Frost's flowers is often combined with the awareness of a strong generative and, hence, erotic potentiality, as in these lines from "The Strong Are Saying Nothing":

To the fresh and black of the squares of early mold
The leafless bloom of a plum is fresh and white;
Though there's more than a doubt if the weather is
not too cold
For the bees to come and serve its beauty aright.

28. This opposition between the inclusive poetic consciousness and the home, here only hinted at but often explicit in Frost, particularly as it concerns the love relations, will be dealt with more closely in Chapter III.

The natural culmination of this process is, of course, the production of fruit; and my point is that Frost sometimes uses fruit gathered from trees to suggest or represent the work of art (also an idea alluded to in "Pan with Us"). The fruit analogy is significant, for it shows one of Frost's important ways of regarding poetry—the sense of the poem not primarily as something constructed, but as a living thing that is conceived, cultivated, and harvested. Here the wood has become an orchard, emblematic of a typical Frostian value—the cultivated consciousness that is nevertheless in harmony with the natural order. The specifically human act of intervention, the harvesting, seems almost a part of nature itself—nature as man informs it with higher values while at the same time not violating it—though "Unharvested" constitutes a caveat lest even this value begin to think itself all-inclusive. In Frost's later work the flowers-to-fruit idea becomes less important, as one might perhaps be led to expect from the elevation of a severer and less lyric beauty in "Leaves Compared with Flowers."

A tree's leaves may be ever so good,
 So may its bark, so may its wood;
 But unless you put the right thing to its root
 It never will show much flower or fruit.

But I may be one who does not care
 Ever to have tree bloom or bear.
 Leaves for smooth and bark for rough,
 Leaves and bark may be tree enough.

Some giant trees have bloom so small
 They might as well have none at all.
 Late in life I have come on fern.
 Now lichens are due to have their turn.

I bade men tell me which in brief,
 Which is fairer, flower or leaf.
 They did not have the wit to say
 Leaves by night and flowers by day.

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,
 To lean against and hear in the dark.
 Petals I may have once pursued.
 Leaves are all my darker mood.

Without considering the poem in detail, one can say confidently enough that it indicates a darkening of the speaker's conception of human imperative and possibility and points to a diminished importance of the generative-erotic principle. The poem itself, of course, in the words "may" and "mood," cautions against too absolute a reading, and one can make entirely too much of supposed watershed statements that occur during an artist's career. But as a matter of fact the fruit image does not appear as such after *A Further Range* (1936), where "Leaves Compared with Flowers" was published, though it is implicit in "Peril of Hope" and present, in an altered and more philosophical mode, in "Pod of the Milkweed."

The image, then, is characteristic of the earlier poetry, and the supreme example of its use is the poem "After Apple-Picking." Robert Penn Warren calls

this "Frost's masterpiece";²⁹ and indeed it is a notable artistic achievement, with its unfailing sense of balance and its unified but suggestive complexity. From the beginning the language and imagery suggest that the poem has a wider significance than its literal one.

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.

The first two lines intimate that, among apple-picking's other values, there is the seemingly incidental but actually integral one that it involves climbing at least *toward* "heaven" "through" the dense and fruitful life of the "tree." The adjectives, the verb, and even the length of the first line emphasize the ladder's property of extension and give it an almost conscious sense of direction. At the same time, one can perhaps see the ladder and the "barrel" as male and female symbols respectively, indicating a *human* completeness in the nature of the effort.³⁰ And of course one should not forget that the apple "tree" is traditionally the Tree of Knowledge, that its fruit signifies man's acceptance, by choice, of the whole truth without evasion. The task is unfinished, as the tasks of life always are, but there is a pervading and irresistible sense that it is time to quit. On the one hand there is the speaker's exhaustion, which, despite the hint of regret that is not to be ignored, is basically characterized by a feeling of pleasant fulfillment, the sense of a job well done. On the other, the combination of "winter" and "night" creates an atmosphere that makes resistance seem futile. And the word "essence" suggests an approach to fundamental truth as well as an exotic perfume. This "sleep" will, at any rate, be longer and deeper than the one that comes every night.

The changing season has also provided the agent that causes a distortion of perception.

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.

The effect of the newly whitened "world" that broke on the speaker's "sight" in the "morning," with its blurring of background distinctions, has lasted all day; moreover, it is caused by something quite beyond his control. The strange circumstance that he is "well" on his "way to sleep" soon after (presumably) hav-

29. Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost," 218-233.

30. One is reminded of Henry St. George's comment on the artist in Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master": "Hasn't he a passion, an affection, which includes all the rest?"

ing arisen produces a telescoped sense of time that sets the poem temporally somewhat adrift. With the fading of the distinction between day and "night" he is tied less and less closely to the ordered world as he passes from reality into the dream.

Then the "form" of this "dreaming" is specified:

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.

The "magnified apples," which are made probable in the first instance by the distorting "pane of glass," indicate a narrowing of the speaker's awareness from the overall scene to the tangible results in which his effort has culminated, which are seen in larger-than-life-size detail. The rhythm of the first of these lines, with its stressed beginning and extra syllable, supports the crowding effect on the senses that the image implies, and the whole process of growth is glanced at in the speaker's reference to the "blossom end" of the apple. Brooks and Warren note the psychological realism of the whole passage, as it depends on aftersensations associated with fatigue. They also point out that the gathering dream is based firmly on physical reality and urge an anti-Platonic inference.³¹ That is, I think, a legitimate emphasis, at least in the large view. But it is equally important to stress the progressive distortion of the speaker's sensations and the way in which the salient features of the past replace the present in his awareness. The direction of the reader's attention from the detached "apples" to the swaying "ladder" to the "the cellar bin" suggests that the full range of the speaker's mind, including, perhaps, the unconscious, is filled by the process that has become an undivided object of thought. He is climbing the "trees," gathering the "apples," living over the involvement of his whole being in the effort—an involvement sufficiently intense that it creates its own reality, which continues to provide the basis for a timeless sense of fulfillment that transcends the exhausted body.

Then there is a characterization of the individual act which, by prolonged repetition, produces, and indeed constitutes, "the great harvest."

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
 For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap
 As of no worth.

31. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 364-367.

The retarded rhythm of the second line, with its high number of verb phrases and stressed syllables, underscores the loving and absolute concentration that marks each of the acts in turn; and the use of "fruit" as a countable plural (rather than one ending in *s*) emphasizes the dual property of individuality and generic sameness. Any carelessness or failure of attention results in a product that is unacceptable because it is not as perfect as it can be. Even in the absence of a perceptible blemish, it is discarded if there is any awareness of a flaw in the conditions under which it was harvested. It must not come in contact with "the earth," but must be cherished up where the ladder (and the speaker) extends "toward heaven." The "apples," of course, depend ultimately on "the earth" for their sustenance, but only as they are lifted above it by the "tree." And the loving act that adds human artifice to natural process, the actual picking of the "apples," is properly seen as a part of nature—nature as heightened and transmuted—since it consists in surrender as well as interference. It is no doubt being unduly schematic (as well as yielding to the biographical fallacy) to say that Frost climbs the trees of his mind and picks poems, some of which are spoiled by contact with an unintegrated sensuality; but such a simplified statement of the imagery's significance is by no means absurd. I believe, in short, that the poem invests the "apples," at least on one level, with a more specific meaning than what Warren calls the "harvest of experience."³²

Before proceeding to the close of "After Apple-Picking," it seems pertinent to consider here "The Cow in Apple Time." This little poem, which is, in a way, almost a parody of the longer one, deals specifically with "apples" that are "spiked with stubble"—the danger that is present for the apple picker.

Something inspires the only cow of late
 To make no more of a wall than an open gate,
 And think no more of wall-builders than fools.
 Her face is flecked with pomace and she drools
 A cider syrup. Having tasted fruit,
 She scorns a pasture withering to the root.
 She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
 The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
 She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.
 She bellows on a knoll against the sky.
 Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry.

Literally the cow is drunk from having eaten the fermented "fruit." The word "inspires" no doubt involves a play on "spirits" (we recall that "the cider-apple heap" in "After Apple-Picking" stands for the reality that is "of no worth"), suggesting that supposedly inspired people are like drunks, as well as that mere drunks feel as inspired as anybody. A kind of drooling idiot, she represents, on at least one level (and her femaleness may be important here), the poet who is dominated entirely by instinctive urges and has within him nothing of the rational. This characteristic is manifest in an utter incapacity for discrimination and judgment. Horizontally constituted as she is, there is no part of her effective nature that tends "toward heaven," so that she is unable to appreciate the good

32. Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost," 218-233.

“apples” on the “tree” (and consequently to distinguish the bad on the ground by comparison), let alone being able to direct her efforts toward them in an ordered way. The nearest to “heaven” that she can get—and she does not realize it—is the top of “a knoll” (an ironically minute mountain), where her conspicuousness “against the sky” only serves to make her the more ludicrous. Nor can she understand the value of restraint. Not all “wall-builders” are “fools”—and Frost’s “Beech” stresses the necessity “of being not unbounded,” though “Mending Wall” emphasizes the need of considering well “what” one may be “walling in or walling out.” Such *inspirés* as the “cow” imagine that for them there is absolute freedom—endless “open” gates—or anyhow ought to be, because their bellowing is so important. “She scorns” the pedestrian “pasture,” which, even if “withering,” would provide her with what she really needs. (Moreover, the epithet itself may not be altogether reliable as proceeding mainly from the cow’s point of view.)

As a result of her lack of judgment the “fruit” that she find so exciting and in which she indulges herself is not only worthless but positively deleterious. Worse even that “apples” dropped accidentally by a picker, these are “windfalls”—a manifestation of merely random elemental forces of destruction and chaos, with perhaps an ironic reference to good fortune. Not surprisingly, then, a perversion of their essence has taken place, so that they are no longer what they seem to be. Their “worm-eaten” aspect seems clearly to suggest the presence of evil (worms are miniature serpents—again ironically so)—not the evil of true knowledge, to the extent that that is evil, but the evil of impairment and corruption. The “cow” shows all the bad results of the Fall and none of the good ones. For that matter, there is an important difference between the appreciation that picking and cherishing “apples” involves and the immediate self-indulgence of eating them. Indeed, the whole scene can be taken as a parody of the Garden of Eden, with the “cow” as a vatic and degenerate Eve, suggesting the likely outcome of any search for a pastoral paradise on earth (necessarily) uninformed by a critical intelligence. The effect on the “cow,” at any rate, is explicit: a lack of understanding of what is happening to her; behavior that is not only totally impulsive but totally without direction or completeness; expression reduced to a primitive, unharmonious, and meaningless bellow unrelated to external reality; and the telling consequence, a cessation of all productive activity, and hence a failure to live up to the poet’s responsibility for nourishing others. It is a tendency toward all of this, however remote, that the picker is carefully avoiding in rejecting “all” the “apples” “that touched the earth.”

The somewhat enigmatic ending of “After Apple-Picking” makes the poem as a whole rather difficult to grasp.

One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

The word "trouble," in its usual signification as related to "sleep," refers back half ironically to the speaker's imminent "dreaming" and to the aftersensations induced by his fatigue. But its pejorative sense, made functional by the immediately preceding passage dealing with the ruined "fruit," suggests an underlying melancholy associated with the memory of failure. Reading the second line above with emphasis on "whatever," and something of a sigh, one feels the persistence of an irreducible sadness. From this point of view it is the unavoidable responsibility of having failed to realize fully his possibilities—as well as the inherent uselessness, the impracticality, of a life of pure cherishing—tinged with the Christian (and Puritan) idea of sin, that "will trouble" the speaker in "sleep"—and, as seems clearly to be implied, in death. If one admits for the moment the personification of the "woodchuck," the question to be put to him is whether the speaker's "coming" "sleep" is to be merely a one-night affair or is to last all "winter." To make the question anything more than whimsical (which, of course, in one sense, it is, with reference to the speaker's extreme tiredness), one must take this "winter" figuratively: the only "sleep" a "human" undergoes that is in any meaningful way "like" that of a "woodchuck" is that of death. And the "woodchuck," for any help he can be, is inherently "gone," not available, since he is not "human," so that no one and nothing can give an answer. Moreover, the question itself has a further dimension. Will the speaker's death, when it comes, amount (as he half hopes) to utter annihilation, like that of the "woodchuck"; or will it be simply "human," troubled by the dreams that give Hamlet pause and so not representing a release from the tension of life? There is a complex play of ideas here, suggesting that immortality, if it exists, may be nothing more than a dreamless hibernation, and so actually of a lower order than the merely "human" with all its difficulties. Brooks and Warren reject death as a specific implication in the poem, allowing it as one of a number of examples and emphasizing, with the corroboration of other poems and statements of Frost's, the general anti-Platonic philosophical position.³³ But the distortion of the time sense, the dissociation of the speaker from his present surroundings as he puts his task aside, the emphasis on his aloneness (there is not even a "woodchuck" to keep him company), and the rich ambiguity of the closing lines combine to create a presence that hovers over the poem and cannot be dismissed. The fact is, I believe, that the speaker does not *know* whether he is dying; nor, in a sense, does it matter. For he has involved himself in a sustained endeavor with his whole being—the essence of the artistic act—until the body's limitations have overcome the will. And further than that a person cannot go; he can only repeat the process.

Another poem depending on an image like that of fruit is "The Gum-Gatherer." Here the wood has become again a forest; but it operates in some ways like an orchard, and the relation is thematically important. Jean Gould, perhaps following Sidney Cox, rightly infers that the poem involves "an analogy of the artist's 'pleasant life.'"³⁴ Cox provides a good explication of the poem, one on which I can hope to improve only in detail, though he does not show an awareness

33. Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 368-371.

34. Jean Gould, *Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), 182.

of its relation to the overall pattern of Frost's imagery.³⁵ It is clear that, as Cox implies, the gum-gatherer suggests the artist, and the poem's speaker the observer of his work.

There overtook me and drew me in
 To his downhill, early-morning stride,
 And set me five miles on my road
 Better than if he had had me ride,
 A man with a swinging bag for load
 And half the bag wound round his hand.

Art of any excellence always comes upon a person unexpectedly—from behind, as it were—even when he seeks it out. Cox comments that “the artist . . . wins you to his rhythm, and encourages you, leaving you to act.” There is a kind of irresistible gravitational force that art manifests. It carries the observer along, not by offering him a “ride,” but by quickening his own abilities and allowing him to accomplish something in the process. The artist's “load” is not ponderous or heavy, though it is significant; and although he is casual and even nonchalant, he knows where he is going.

Then the interchange between the artist and his audience of one is characterized:

We talked like barking above the din
 Of water we walked along beside.
 And for my telling him where I'd been
 And where I lived in mountain land
 To be coming home the way I was,
 He told me a little about himself.

The “relation must be somehow reciprocal,” says Cox, who interprets the phrase “where I lived” (and, by implication, “where I'd been”) in a spiritual sense. It is only if the beholder puts something of himself into the encounter that he can hope to gain anything from it. And what he gets is always, in a way, something “about” the artist: not in the narrow biographical sense, but as a personal awareness of the life of an individual mind. Meantime the “water” that suggests the source of the relationship's vitality fills the air with its “din,” effectively cutting off aural impressions (and, by extension, all external impressions) in favor of the loud communication between the two. The gum-gatherer

came from higher up in the pass
 Where the grist of the new-beginning brooks
 Is blocks split off the mountain mass—
 And hopeless grist enough it looks
 Ever to grind to soil for grass.
 (The way it is will do for moss.)
 There he had built his stolen shack.
 It had to be a stolen shack
 Because of the fears of fire and loss
 That trouble the sleep of lumber folk:
 Visions of half the world burned black
 And the sun shrunken yellow in smoke.

35. Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 94-96. The following comments attributed to Cox are taken from this discussion.

Again there is the reference to "brooks," this time in their pristine state, like the "lofty and original" stream in "Directive"; and the fact says something about the importance of mountains in Frost's poetry. The gum-gatherer's home is near the ultimate source of the mind's life, with the barest and most essential realities of existence, which only with difficulty can furnish the soil in which tractable truth germinates and grows. Cox notes that the "artist's raw materials, too, *look*" "hopeless." He also comments on "what bad risks artists" are "held to be," and suggests that the "artist *takes* his freedom," which is "neither provided nor approved." The artist always, in a sense, lives on someone else's property, stealing what he uses, and is considered dangerous and irresponsible by the representatives of the vested interest whose impulse he does not share. Often in Frost's poetry, as in "Christmas Trees," a sense of proprietorship, a commercial analogy, is employed to suggest the artist's sense of identity with his work; here the emphasis is on his freedom from the restrictions of ownership. In "After Apple-Picking" the implicit orchard metaphor expresses the loving care with which the artist tends and cultivates his material; the gum-gatherer works a kind of orchard provided by nature (or by "lumber folk"). The ambiguity, which is real enough, seems to reflect the ambiguous position that art occupies in the scheme of things—an enterprise yet above socioeconomic considerations, part of the real world yet higher. I am not certain that I agree with Cox when he infers from the poem that art is "originally partly destructive, iconoclastic that it may be iconoplastic," though the statement is sufficiently reasonable in itself; but he is no doubt right in seeing here the implication that the "artist genuinely and ironically sympathizes with fears he will later prove excessive." One might add that the "fears" themselves are part of his "raw materials."

Whatever the proprietary situation, the poem is not unaware of the necessity for making a living.

We know who when they come to town
Bring berries under the wagon seat,
Or a basket of eggs between their feet;
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.

Perhaps the contrast with respect to ownership is being continued here, the "eggs" representing the produce of the domestic farmer and the "berries" what is garnered wild (berries are certainly capable of such a signification for Frost, as in "Blueberries"), with the implication that for the artist the distinction is not really important, since he is able to comprehend both terms of the opposition in a single vision. In any case the basic "market" metaphor that informs "Christmas Trees" (and "Build Soil") is present here as well. With regard to the product, Cox stresses that the "lumps" are offered for sale "without heightening," in their natural state. As a matter of fact the phrase "uncut jewels, dull and rough" describes very well—and very slyly—the outward appearance of the typical Frost poem, which conceals under its colloquial diction and conversational rhythm a jewel of artis-

tic achievement. Cox also points out, perceptively, that property of the "gum" by which it undergoes "completion upon co-operation of the enjoyer," as the work of art completes its significance, often in surprising ways, only in the rumination of each beholder. The unpromising "blocks" of "mountain" stone have yielded a product equal to themselves in "rough" appearance, but with a hidden essence that declares itself, to those willing to test it, in a genuine transmutation. With ironic understatement the speaker makes no grandiose claims for this reality, satisfying himself with a teasing hint that one may find it well worth one's trouble.

The entire poem is epitomized in the last section, which Frost sets off with a space from the remainder.

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.

Everything after "I told him" can be taken, if one chooses, as a direct quotation. But it is not so punctuated, and one can legitimately think of its grammatical structure (we would expect "that was" instead of "this is" and "his" and "he" in place of "your" and "you") as a way of uniting the two characters and moving the entire action into the speaker's present. The poem's implications are thereby transferred to the speaker himself—reading biographically, one can say to Frost himself. The image of the "dim" forest where the unified character spends "all" his "days" specifically relates the poem to others like "Into My Own," implying a continuity of theme. Cox judges that the gum-gatherer, in the gentleness with which he removes "the resin" (the combination of words "reaching," "little," and "loose" has, effectively, such a connotation), is remaining "faithful to" its "real essence," and one remembers the solicitous care of the apple-picker. The "breast to . . . bark" image suggests the position of lovers, implying a close identification between the erotic and the artistic impulse—an identification that will be important in the next chapter. And of course such a relationship, depending as it does on personal desire, what Frost elsewhere calls a "passionate preference," cannot be made to produce results, as Cox says, "on order." When the artist has something to show, to offer, he is pleased to "bring it to market" for judgment, but he can have nothing to do with the ulterior and utilitarian purpose that an "order" would imply.

In an important way, then, the poem is a statement about the nature of art and the personality of the artist. Firmly committed, but carefree and not saturnine (to the extent that he is functioning as an artist, he has no need to be), the latter pursues a "life" that, though superficially lonely, is as "pleasant" as one could achieve. His product's only function is to declare its own essence, as a manifestation of the lofty inner reality of that "life." One might note finally that the gum-gatherer invites comparison with Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, suggesting, I think, that independence need not be so pathetic, nor resolution so terribly self-conscious.

III. THE ARTIST AND OTHERS

A particular complication of the poet's awareness—especially complex because it necessarily involves more than his own personal attitudes and values—consists in his relations with other people. The quintessential example of such human interaction is the love relation, an important theme in Frost's early poetry. Before going on to deal with this particular case, however, I would like to consider a few poems that seem to me to concern themselves with the general connection between art and society. I am not speaking here of ideas about how society ought to be organized—of the overt social and political comment that makes its appearance in Frost's poetry in *New Hampshire* (1923), subsequently tends to inform not only the more obviously discursive poems (of which "New Hampshire" is the first), but many of the lyrics as well, and reaches its peak in *A Further Range* (1936). Rather, I am concerned with an aspect of the purely personal—the relation that art and the artist bear to human society as a whole, whatever the nature of its institutions.

"The Vantage Point" deals broadly and rather directly with this question. Its first line seems specifically to recall "Into My Own" (or at least it makes use of a very similar pattern of imagery) and to suggest an opposite movement—in which, however, the return is only partial.

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.

The irony of the opening lines is sharper than it seems at first: the speaker seeks "mankind" in the company of "cattle." The word "lawn" is specifically transferred to a new situation and, according to the values associated with its usual context, apparently degraded. The ironic suggestion is one of scorn for the notion that in order to bear a meaningful relation to the rest of humanity, one must necessarily be constantly in direct contact with other "men." The speaker certainly perceives no individuality in the blank "white" outlines that he sees in the distance. Instead, the poem celebrates the large view of life and death, the view in which the distance between those terms is considerably diminished and is exceeded, contained, by the imagery of the natural landscape. The picture is one of physical laziness ("amid lolling juniper reclined"), and there is no sense of

the pressure of time (the activity—or lack of it—continues unaltered from “dawn” till “noon”). The point is that seeing involves its own kind of doing, which must not be judged according to ordinary pragmatic criteria. The artist as such is concerned with other “men,” but he need not, to be responsible, be involved in the specifically social causes that are internal to the “community” and its life. The original opposition between “trees” and “mankind” is largely transformed into that between “trees” and “lolling juniper,” which is no opposition at all. The change that the speaker describes is thus minimal and represents only a progression from a sort of introspective contemplation to contemplation of others but still from a distance. That is, it represents an ironically minute concession to what the socially centered attitude might set as a requirement for making the contemplation meaningful. One must be able to regard “mankind” without, at the same time, removing them from, or losing sight of, the surrounding natural order. That is to say, a consideration of the lives and deaths of individual “men” and their social institutions must not lead one to forget the existence of at least relatively universal and permanent truths that, in the nature of things, are the basis of each individual’s being.

The “turn” in the sestet, with its sudden magnification of scale, is, finally, toward immediacy, but of a sensuous sort that, again ironically, emphasizes its essential closeness to the speaker’s previous, and seemingly abstract, position. He is still in the midst of the “juniper”; moreover, he is involved with the reality that surrounds him—able to establish with it a relation of mutual effect—in a way that Pan, we recall, in his older aspect, was not:

Such pipes kept less of power to stir
The fruited bough of the juniper
And the fragile bluets clustered there
Than the merest aimless breath of air.

The important fact about this vantage point is that it permits a consideration of the natural and the social, the universal and the local, at once, or at least at will—it makes possible the stance that the artist must assume in order to view the world as “from a middle distance.” The poem rejects, for the person of vision, a total or excessive dependence on or involvement in the activities of groups of “men.” It asserts the prior necessity of cultivating a unified and individual response to reality in both its intellectual and sensual aspects. The social aspect is implicitly made subordinate to these.

“Pea Brush” has implications that, again, involve the relation between art and society. As with “An Encounter” and “The Wood Pile,” its main image consists of trees that are cut down and reordered according to a new purpose, and it might perhaps have been better considered in conjunction with those poems. But it seems to me to deal, like “The Vantage Point,” with the qualities that differentiate art from other kinds of human activity, and actually to say something about the place, the function, of art in human culture. Incidentally, it illustrates the intellectual ramifications that can attend seemingly insignificant things when one knows and considers their provenience, and in this respect the title itself is suggestive. The poem opens with an unusually familiar tone (for Frost) and at

once involves the reader in the situation, in that the speaker recounts something that is said to have occurred less than a week before:

I walked down alone Sunday after church
 To the place where John has been cutting trees,
 To see for myself about the birch
 He said I could have to bush my peas.

The speaker himself has apparently been to "church," though perhaps not in more than a routine way, since his brief, off-hand reference suggests that his real interest lies elsewhere. One can at least say that he is not very much involved in the institution of "Sunday" morning, a time for congregating in various ways. One of its important functions for him seems to be to insure that he can pursue his investigation "alone" while others are predictably occupied. John, for example, will be at home or with friends, not working at his current task of "cutting trees." In a way the speaker's familiarity with the reader takes the place of possible contact with others. An opposition, and at the same time a continuity, is set up here between the "cutting" of "trees" and the cultivation of domestic plants, so that life for the latter in some way depends on the former's being destroyed.

The second stanza firmly establishes this sense of destruction.

The sun in the new-cut narrow gap
 Was hot enough for the first of May,
 And stifling hot with the odor of sap
 From stumps still bleeding their life away.

There is certainly an atmosphere of death here, and not merely because of the graphic image in the last line. The "new-cut narrow gap" is itself a kind of festering wound. It admits the "sun" (that is, it takes away the shade), but the result, perhaps because any breeze is cut off by the surrounding "trees," is a sense that partakes of both putrescence and suffocation. In any case the contradictory, antagonistic ideas of death and springtime are rather violently juxtaposed. Then the speaker is seen in the character of an intruder:

The frogs that were peeping a thousand shrill
 Wherever the ground was low and wet,
 The minute they heard my step went still
 To watch me and see what I came to get.

Not "what I came to do," but "what I came to get," as though it were unimaginable, at least from the frogs' point of view, that the relation of a man to his world could be other than that of an exploiter. The speaker discovers

Birch boughs enough piled everywhere! —
 All fresh and sound from the recent ax.
 Time someone came with cart and pair
 And got them off the wild flowers' backs.
 They might be good for garden things
 To curl a little finger round,
 The same as you seize cat's-cradle strings,
 And lift themselves up off the ground.
 Small good to anything growing wild,
 They were crooking many a trillium

That had budded before the boughs were piled
And since it was coming up had to come.

The “boughs” are “enough” and more than “enough” for the speaker’s purpose, but from the point of view of the scene itself, the understatement in the word “enough” is ironic. Judged in the light of a particular kind of usefulness, they are “fresh and sound,” but the description seems somewhat bizarre in the present context, since the emphasis has been on their recent severance from life. That emphasis has been sufficient to establish the “ax” as an instrument of destruction, so that the second line above acts itself as a kind of contradiction in terms. The “boughs” are merely “piled,” apparently without order. Moreover, in their new state they are interfering with the ongoing process of life, as well as ruining the natural beauty of the scene. They simply no longer belong: not only can they not function themselves, but they have become a burden.

Yet, recalling the ax’s erotic connotations in “The Wood Pile,” involving a reordering of growth, of life, one is not so surprised at the paradox. The end of one kind of life marks the beginning of another. Having been torn from their natural place in the scheme of things, the “boughs” are useful as the means by which artificially cultivated life raises its head. They are not exactly endowed with a new life, as the woodpile was, but they serve it by supporting the “garden things”—as the telephone poles support the wires in “An Encounter” and “The Line-Gang.” Here, however, the new life is really life—it is organic—and that makes a fundamental difference, as the protagonist’s identification with his “garden” suggests. Nevertheless, one should not ignore the moral ambiguity of the result. The peas’ lifting “themselves up” by the “birch boughs” looks as innocent as a child’s game, and indeed is so. But one can remain as complacent about it as that statement would suggest only by failing to take into account the violent dislocation to which the process owes its being, or by positing an absolute moral disjunction between the two milieux. The ambiguity is emphasized by the words “curl” and “crooking,” belonging to the different contexts, which describe similar physical configurations but have quite opposite moral connotations. The poem makes clear that for everything that is gained by art, something in the natural sphere must be lost.

But there are redeeming factors. It is no doubt a fanciful and unsupported extension of implication to say that John has none of the speaker’s concern for either the “trees” or the flowers. At least he is not to be held in any specific way culpable: we are actually told nothing about his motivation or about what he supposes himself to be doing. Nevertheless, the poem’s assigning the “cutting” of the “trees” and the cultivation of the “garden” to different characters encourages an awareness of what the outcome would be if the action stopped with John’s part of it. The result, lacking completeness and a clear sense of purpose, would be mere disruption. The distinctive character of art (the “garden”) lies in the fact that, although it proceeds from an interfering with the natural order—as men will and must—it possesses its own organic completeness. It is man’s nature, so to speak, to interfere with nature, but a person should be certain that he does so only for a desirable purpose and that that purpose is fulfilled. In this respect art

provides a model for other human activities, and that is its way of being socially responsible or "relevant." It does not obviate the necessity for accepting the presence of evil in everything one does: even after the "peas" are happily growing, there will still be that gash in the woods. But, informed by the needs of its own life, which is true life, it does tend to minimize the harm that it causes, and even partially to repair the harm done by others. (It seems clear, for example, that the speaker is actually doing the flowers a favor, that his eagerness to see the "boughs" removed cannot be dismissed as mere rationalization.) Moreover, art has the advantage that for the artist (or for anyone who finds it valuable) it meets a need, in that it endows him with his own sense of identity and completeness. If it fails to furnish him with any social or humanitarian skills, it frees him—partially, at least—from the common necessity for proving one's existence by gouging a mark in the external world, with the attendant need for rationalizing self-justification that leads to an even further dulled sensitivity. Perhaps it is something like this that Shelley had in mind when he spoke of poetry's being a great force for moral good. It will be found, at the least, to conduce in that direction.

Art, however, like anything else, is subject to misappropriation and exploitation. The possibility arises in connection with the value of the work of art as defined by the artist on the one hand and by society on the other. It seems to me that Frost's "Christmas Trees" contains an analogy that involves this question. The poem's opening establishes an opposition that is important throughout:

The city had withdrawn into itself
 And left at last the country to the country;
 When between whirls of snow not come to lie
 And whirls of foliage not yet laid, there drove
 A stranger to our yard, who looked the city,
 Yet did in country fashion in that there
 He sat and waited till he drew us out,
 A-buttoning coats, to ask him who he was.

The repeated city-country opposition surely intends a significance beyond bare fact. The speaker shows a real, if tolerant, disdain for "the city," which has "withdrawn into itself" like a snail, or in a kind of hibernation, shrinking, no doubt, from the reality of the rural winter. His tone is sufficiently friendly on the surface, and he views the whole situation with a tolerant humor; but there is nevertheless an underlying antagonism that seems clearly enough to reflect opposing values. There is an indication of a kind of moral superiority on the part of "country" people, who are in direct contact with the whole truth of the yearly cycle; and the measure of relief in the speaker's "at last" suggests on the part of "the country" a certain feeling of exploitation by "the city." The "country," it seems—regrettably—can be "left" alone only during the season when it appears to have nothing that "the city" wants—specifically, the soothing, sentimental pastoralism that the tourist mentality seeks there during the summer (or autumn). This suggestion of exploitation is strengthened by the following passage, for the "stranger"

proved to be the city come again
 To look for something it had left behind
 And could not do without and keep its Christmas.
 He asked if I would sell my Christmas trees;
 My woods—the young fir balsams like a place
 Where houses all are churches and have spires.

These lines show clearly that “the city” is the less self-sufficient of the two, since it depends on “the country” for a kind of life—natural growing things, evergreens—that only the country has, and indeed for the well-being of its own institutions. It would take the “trees,” however, from their organic setting (a kind of orchard, after all) and transport them to a situation where they only appear to be alive and natural. Again we have the image of “trees” being reordered according to a new purpose. In this case, however, the new life comes dangerously close to being a false life, and whether it is so turns on the validity of the idea of “Christmas” as celebrated in “the city” and as represented, in part, by this visitor. Moreover, the speaker’s “woods,” which would be destroyed, are not merely that, but suggest a kind of holy “city,” “the city” as it ought to be, where one can conceive of “houses” that grow naturally, like “trees,” into “churches,” blessed every one. This ideal “city,” or the appropriate image of it, exists only in “the country,” where it corresponds to actual fact. One decision the speaker has to make, then, is whether this particular spiritual reality, of basically religious significance, ought to be given up in favor of another one. And good-natured though it may be, there is surely an implicit comment here on the kind of “Christmas” that “could not” be kept without such purely conventional trap-pings.

The speaker himself, one feels, would not have to depend upon such a gratuitous provision, and not merely because he has a lot of “Christmas trees” available. Indeed, he says immediately,

I hadn't thought of them as Christmas trees.
 I doubt if I was tempted for a moment
 To sell them off their feet to go in cars
 And leave the slope behind the house all bare,
 Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon.
 I'd hate to have them know it if I was.
 Yet more I'd hate to hold my trees, except
 As others hold theirs or refuse for them,
 Beyond the time of profitable growth,
 The trial by market everything must come to.
 I dallied so much with the thought of selling.³⁶

The basic thrust of this passage is a rejection of the attitude toward the “trees” that has already been implicitly disapproved—an exclusively commercial conception of them that amounts to betrayal of their value and prostitution in their use—and a progression to a legitimate “thought of selling.” If the metaphor seems persistently economic, however, it is intentionally so. There is no way that any productive effort can be effective, in more than a purely private sense (and

36. I have restored the comma after “growth,” which Lathem emends to a dash. It seems to me quite possible that “trial” is the direct object of “refuse.”

perhaps not even thus), unless the product is submitted to the interpretation and judgment of others.³⁷ If, in a given cultural system, that judgment takes the form of buying or refusing to buy in a "market," there is nothing especially pernicious about the fact. To accept such a premise does not at all mean that one is primarily concerned with making money, as the dual sense of the word "profitable" (here almost a pun) emphasizes.³⁸ It is in this spirit that the speaker dallies "with the thought of selling" (though the word "dallied" suggests a continuing danger of seduction). The buyer's interest in his "trees" has caused him to wonder whether they may not perhaps be at the maximum point of improvement. If they are, then "to hold" them longer can lead only to atrophy, or, at best, to ineffectuality. That is the speaker's fundamental concern; if others wish to think "of them as Christmas trees," they are free to do so. Of course it is because of the newly suggested meaning that the question of "selling" arises at all, so that the two are not completely independent. Again the speaker must make two decisions at once.

At length, having inspected them closely, the buyer makes an offer of "thirty dollars" for the lot of "A thousand trees."

Then I was certain I had never meant
To let him have them. Never show surprise!
But thirty dollars seemed so small beside
The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents
(For that was all they figured out apiece)—
Three cents so small beside the dollar friends
I should be writing to within the hour
Would pay in cities for good trees like those,
Regular vestry-trees whole Sunday Schools
Could hang enough on to pick off enough.

By this time the speaker himself has been infected with the Christmas-tree idea, but his conception of that idea becomes a significant part of the reason why he rejects the offer without so much as bargaining. The smallness of the offer is a measure of the smallness of the buyer's true regard for the "trees," as well as of his lack of sensitivity for the meaning of the tradition in whose service he himself is supposedly engaged. Letting go what one has nurtured is inevitably painful (though necessary), and the attendant denudation of spirit must be compensated by a prospect of real appreciation, of which money is inevitably one symbol. That is, the speaker refuses to regard his "trees" as a mere commodity, though he will not reject completely the commercial aspect of his conception of them. A "dollar" for each would show proper appreciation of the potential weight of significance that, given the Christmas-tree interpretation, they would be able to bear. This significance is, again, basically religious, as the Sunday-School allusion emphasizes. Whatever may be made of it by those to whom it presents itself, the opportunity for derived value is there and must be acknowledged if parting with the "trees" is to be justified.

37. Indeed, "the trial by market" for a product may be regarded as entirely homologous to "The Trial by Existence" for a man.

38. John R. Doyle, "Some Attitudes and Ideas of Robert Frost," *English Studies in Africa*, 1 (September 1958): 164-183, provides a good discussion of this aspect of the poem's theme.

Then the speaker appears to accept the Christmas-tree idea completely, but transforms it by infusing into it a spirit in keeping with the valid meaning of the "Christmas" tradition, that of generosity, as opposed to the purely commercial spirit that the buyer represents.

A thousand Christmas trees I didn't know I had!
 Worth three cents more to give away than sell,
 As may be shown by a simple calculation.
 Too bad I couldn't lay one in a letter.
 I can't help wishing I could send you one
 In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas.

If the commercial mechanism will not provide adequate recognition of the value of the products of one's effort (and money in itself is not sufficient, though its amount is symbolically important), then it is better "to give" them "away than" to sell them, and in this case the money foregone becomes the measure of value (they would be "worth" nothing if sold). There is still the amicably ironic gibe of (not entirely) feigned sorrow for "friends" who must go out and buy single "Christmas trees," but in a more important sense Frost, in sending the poem, has precisely laid "one in a letter." One can imagine, perhaps, a commercial firm's offering to pay Frost for the use of his poems on, say, Christmas cards. (I am not suggesting that any such offer was ever actually made, but only that that is the kind of thing the poem is dealing with.) If one accepts the artistic illusion at face value, the poem's first readers received, in the poem itself, a specific manifestation of the attitude espoused in the closing section.³⁹ The poem could, at the least, have been sold to a magazine. But any such dealing would have tended to destroy its value as the embodiment of its own most important meaning—the fact that, in the most significant sense, art, even if it is sold, must be given away. From the point of view of the artist as an artist, the money is only a mark of regard, and other such marks are equally valid. The poem's irony is finally transcended in the intimation that anyone, with the proper disposition and regardless of where he lives, can have his own inexhaustible supply of "Christmas trees," in the realm where having and giving are one.

There remains to be considered the question of love in its relation to art. An important and generally overlooked statement of Frost's on the subject is "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same":

He would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.

39. See W. Shubrick Clymer and Charles R. Green, *Robert Frost: A Bibliography* (Amherst, Mass.: Jones Library, 1937), 51. I speak of what the poem declares about itself (it is subtitled or labeled "A Christmas Circular Letter"). Actually, it was first printed in *Mountain Interval* (1916). It was sent separately as a Christmas greeting in 1929, but by three of Frost's friends and by his publisher, rather than by Frost himself.

Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds' song be the same.
 And to do that to birds was why she came.

The poem's basic assertion, as qualified by the protagonist's attitude toward it expressed in the first line, is a fine balance between myth and metaphor and clearly intends to be taken as symbolic truth. The "garden" is, of course, the Garden of Eden, but one is not immediately aware of the fact, and the revelation of awareness that the reader experiences parallels the experience of awareness on the part of Adam as protagonist that the poem is about. This initial ambiguity and, as Reuben A. Brower observes, "The tact shown in not naming Adam"⁴⁰ tend to make the poem universally representative. It is obviously about love and the way it transforms one's awareness of everything; what seems not to have been noticed is that "the birds," on one level, represent art, the esthetic, that in the world which is "song" (Frost's favorite word for poetry). (In many of Frost's poems the bird song functions as a representative of poetry or the poetic impulse; one thinks, for example, of "The Oven Bird," "Our Singing Strength," "A Minor Bird," "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep," or "Come In.") Eve personifies the primal erotic experience, characterized by its effect on Adam's perception of the world. The poem's reticence about her "soft" "eloquence" makes the eroticism all the more intense, and the reference to "crossed" "voices" subtly maintains the underlying theme of generation and fertility and places the poem's subject in the context of the growing complexity of the world. The poem's avowed purpose is to interpret the significance and meaning of this experience, and my point is that it does so in terms of the esthetic. The word "aloft" is partly metaphorical (as is "oversound"): "the birds," as esthetes, are not subject to the influence of the *merely* carnal, and though the "eloquence" to which they are susceptible is of the earth, it is yet higher than the earth. It is in turn this loftiness that, through the medium of "the birds," so profoundly influences Adam: "their voices" are the vehicle that preserves hers and gives it its full significance. (Incidentally, the reference to Eve's "tone of meaning . . . without the words" is another argument for a direct allusion to poetry, since, as both Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant and Jean Gould point out, it is directly related to Frost's theory of overheard tones of meaning in speech.)⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is "she," and not simply "her voice," that is "in their song": henceforth esthetic expression is informed by the living presence of the principle that Eve represents. This persistent and insistent presence thus passes into the nature of things and comes not to depend on any particular individual. The word "lost" points up this reality's answerability to human need and desire (it is not something that Adam would willingly see die); at the same time the word keeps us mindful of another kind of loss—the loss of simplicity (of innocence, if one likes) that the new awareness involves and that lies at the center of the myth. In this connection the penultimate line, if read in a

40. Reuben A. Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 184.

41. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 387. Jean Gould, *Robert Frost: The Aim Was Song* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1964), 289.

particular way, suggests a certain inevitable regret. What we have here is a complex view of innocence and experience. The Edenic setting prevents us from associating the new awareness with evil, but the poem's final section bridges the still future Fall and suggests that the esthetic, with its erotic component—this "tone of meaning" intimately involved in what it seeks to convey—is as it were a remnant of Eden in the fallen world, which is another way of saying that it is one means, perhaps the means, of transcending the inevitable imperfection of the human condition. Accordingly, the progression from "garden" to "woods" in the designation of the setting represents a fine shift in point of view from the pastoral toward the realistic. The last line takes the poem's truth out of the realm of the ephemeral if charming and makes of it something essential and inescapable. To inform the esthetic becomes not merely one among many functions of the erotic but its primary function.

The esthetic interest in Frost's poetry, then, particularly in the earlier lyrics, is often combined with the love interest. In a sense this is to state no more than is obviously to be expected: nothing is commoner than the dedication of a poem, as poem, to someone loved. But in Frost the connection is more important thematically, and more complex, than one would necessarily expect. On the one hand the two interests proceed from much the same impulse. They are metaphorically analogous, so that one can be expressed in terms of the other, and in the ideal they are complementary, even virtually identical. On the other hand they compete, each in its own right, for the artist's time and attention, giving rise to a genuine conflict. "A Late Walk" illustrates the general relationship:

When I go up through the mowing field,
 The headless aftermath,
 Smooth-laid like thatch with the heavy dew,
 Half closes the garden path.
 And when I come to the garden ground,
 The whirl of sober birds
 Up from the tangle of withered weeds
 Is sadder than any words.
 A tree beside the wall stands bare,
 But a leaf that lingered brown,
 Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,
 Comes softly rattling down.
 I end not far from my going forth,
 By picking the faded blue
 Of the last remaining aster flower
 To carry again to you.

What we have here is an excursion outside the domestic situation in order to find something, and the thing found is then returned to that situation in a kind of emotional reinvestment. One might note at the outset that "the garden ground" is the walk's destination, so that the more or less conventional metaphor of the garden as source of poesy is present in an underlying way. But played off against it is the imagery of the poem itself, the imagery of autumn and (presumably) evening, of decay and death. The "headless aftermath" of "the mowing field" makes a con-

trast with the fruitful vitality of other poems such as "Mowing," an essential aspect of which is the presence of something that asks to be garnered. (Mowing fields occur fairly frequently in Frost's poetry, often as a place apart, suggesting metaphorically a place for withdrawal in contemplation.) The "sober birds" are emphatically not singing: they express the reality that surrounds them, and their "whir" is a kind of unharmonious speech, an antipoetry, with sadness beyond what mere "words" can convey. Even the "dew," ordinarily something gentle and refreshing, is here seen as a weight, a burden, and as tending to close off access to "the garden." At the same time one should note the careful progression and symmetry of the opening stanzas. The first serves as a "path" to the second, and the two are closely congruent. The "mowing field" and "the garden ground" occupy corresponding positions, the one reduced to a lodged and "headless aftermath," the other to a chaotic "tangle of withered weeds." That is, an esthetic object is growing out of what seem to be antiesthetic materials, and the negative emotion of melancholy sadness is given a positive value (as explicitly in "My November Guest," in which the personified "Sorrow" is seen as a guide to a kind of beauty that might otherwise be missed). This sadness reflects in part the temporary separation that the walk entails, and the walk can be seen as a metaphor for the emotional excursion during which the poem itself is discovered.

The "bare" "tree" continues the theme of desolation. The "leaf" is "disturbed," as were the "birds," and its "rattling" is, again, a kind of speech. The word "disturbed" has, in part, its pejorative connotation: the speaker's "thought," as expressed in the first two stanzas, *is* disturbing, and he is seen as an intruder. But he is also rousing the scene from its torpor and lending it animation, so that the poem is being stimulated into being, as well as discovered. Moreover, there is a slight turn in the word "softly," which suggests, this time, a sympathetic response and begins to soften the poem's emotional tenor. The last "leaf," associated with the speaker's "thought," becomes an introduction to "the last . . . flower," as "thought" in the poem leads to an apprehension of beauty. The walk culminates in the "flower," which is both a flower and the poem itself. This identification is supported by the use throughout of the present tense, which gives a sense of the flower's being conveyed *now*. The word "again" suggests that the process is, after all, usual, and that the reality it represents is in fact ever present, or at least recurrent. There are many "last" flowers, and the least promising of situations will always provide material for the truly creative person, nor must he go "far" to find it. The word "carry," with reference to something so light, suggests a careful cherishing: the walk has been informed by love, and in a sense its whole purpose has been to offer its realized product to a loved one—or to the reader. The poem thus contains, *is*, a resolution of its own tension, the tension of separateness. It is its own product, an embodiment of the creative process, most isolated, most shared.

But the tension between love of beauty and love of person is not always so easily resolved, and "Flower Gathering" shows a more persistent example of the conflict.

I left you in the morning,
 And in the morning glow
 You walked a way beside me
 To make me sad to go.
 Do you know me in the gloaming,
 Gaunt and dusty gray with roaming?
 Are you dumb because you know me not,
 Or dumb because you know?
 All for me? And not a question
 For the faded flowers gay
 That could take me from beside you
 For the ages of a day?
 They are yours, and be the measure
 Of their worth for you to treasure,
 The measure of the little while
 That I've been long away.

Whereas the world of "A Late Walk" is contained entirely within the boundaries of a single domestic establishment and its associated surroundings, "Flower-Gathering" represents a reaching out into the indefinite world beyond. The poem's subject is immediately introduced as a disharmony, in that "morning," the time of unfolding possibility and of becoming, is made a time of separation. For whatever reason, the loved one is unable (or unwilling) to accompany the speaker more than a certain "way" on his journey. Moreover, the poem requires us to regard this fact as something necessary and inevitable: surely it is not adequate, even if it is reasonable, to say that she has to take care of the children.⁴² The infinitive "To make" of the fourth line expresses both result and purpose: the loved one is asserting her claim, though demanding no more than what the poem accepts as just—that an awareness of the fact of the separation, and regret for what must thereby be foregone, what "the morning glow" might have brought to the two together, accompany the speaker on his excursion. The regret is eminently justified, since upon his return the "day" is dying, and with it the possibilities that it represents (the words "glow" and "gloaming" are probably meant to be contrasted). His own appearance, unkempt and with a suggestion of emaciation, emphasizes waste. In his "roaming" his concern has been with something not only other than his beloved and their relation, but other than himself. The very twilight, with its uncertainty and blurring of distinctions, almost seems to emanate from him, to follow from his behavior. And the change in appearances merges into a virtual change in identity. In a sense it is true that the loved one does "not" "know" him, does not recognize in him the man illumined for her "in the morning glow." But the rhythm, the rhyme, and the stanza, by their emphasis on the last word, suggest that she does indeed "know," and by leaving the object of the verb unspecified the poem hints at the myriad inexpressible things that she knows. She knows, at the least, that what she sees is of so deep a truth that she could not change it if she would. There is simply nothing to be said: only acceptance is imaginable.

42. I trust that I will introduce no substantive distortion by adopting the conventional man-woman pair as the subject of discussion, though of course the poem's implications are more general than that.

There is, nonetheless, feeling. I prefer to think of the second stanza's "All for me?" in accord with what has just passed, as implying questioning looks, rather than words—of tender solicitude, perhaps, and an effort at understanding, and a need for reassurance. But the speaker directs her attention away from his person and toward the impersonal "flowers" as the really important thing, in which he offers himself as summed up and represented. The love between the two people is unquestioned, taken for granted; indeed, the poignancy of the separation, which the speaker himself clearly feels, is made "the measure / Of" the flowers' "worth." Conversely, his offering her the "flowers" without reservation indicates the depth of the love. Nevertheless, one should not forget that she has no choice in the matter. There is, in fact, a quite conscious substitution of the "flowers" for the possibilities that the "day" might have represented, and the poem's unresolved conflict resides in the fact that the substitution could not have been the other way round.

In "A Dream Pang," though the imagery is different, the basic conflict is much the same, and even more overt. The poem at least implicitly refers back to "Into My Own," dealing more closely with the situation in which another person—a loved one—may "set forth upon" the "track" of the speaker, and the conflict, unforeseen in the earlier poem, that can result.

I had withdrawn in forest, and my song
Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away;
And to the forest edge you came one day
(This was my dream) and looked and pondered long,
But did not enter, though the wish was strong:
You shook your pensive head as who should say,
"I dare not—too far in his footsteps stray —
He must seek me would he undo the wrong."
Not far, but near, I stood and saw it all,
Behind low boughs the trees let down outside;
And the sweet pang it cost me not to call
And tell you that I saw does still abide.
But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,
For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof.

The first two lines evoke a picture of a self-contained, closed world. The odd phrase "in forest," with no article, suggests a universal category rather than a locatable object (though this aspect of the image is modified later in the poem). The feeling is reinforced by the speaker's failure to say what he has "withdrawn" from (the implication is "from everything else"). This puts the emphasis on what he has withdrawn *to*, and the act of withdrawal is made to look forward, rather than backward, and so given its own positive value. This world contains its own dynamic principle, manifest by the "leaves" that are in constant motion. (The speaker's "song," in being "swallowed up," can perhaps be seen as contributing to the dynamics.) Moreover, given its exclusive nature, some combination of the "forest," the speaker, and the "song" itself must be the song's subject. This interaction, approaching identity, strongly suggests the self-contained character of the artistic mode of thought, where the "song" is always in some way its own generator, subject, and vessel.

But the spell is broken by any external intrusion on the artist's consciousness, even by a loved one, and the rest of the poem is concerned with working out the tension that results. Each of the two people is aware of the other's position (though the awareness is greater on the part of the speaker as artist)—there is in some sense a confrontation—but each refuses to cross the emotional boundary represented by “the forest edge.” The unspecified “wrong” is one of Frost's characteristically vague but suggestive references, and the poem may be reasonably read as dealing with a situation of prideful obstinacy following any mild disagreement. Yet there is nothing specific in the poem to suggest that “the wrong” goes beyond the original act of withdrawal, and so to limit it is surely legitimate. Then the speaker's only means of reconciliation would be to reverse that withdrawal, if only by calling out to the loved one. But that would tend to deny, even to destroy, whatever positive value the withdrawal and the “song” have had. At any rate he shows himself unwilling to do so, despite (and indeed partly because of) “the sweet pang” that results.

The poem does not end by solving the problem, which simply evaporates. The dream-wood, disappearing, is transformed into a fully conscious one in which, as it “wakes,” the two people find themselves together in a *shared* solitude. (Literally, of course, they are in bed, and “the wood” is part of the “dream,” but there is also the suggestion of a literal surrounding “wood” coming alive with morning.) The speaker pictures the state of separation as only something dreamed, something that *might* happen—and yet, one feels, it reflects a distinct reality, or at least a very real threat. For one thing, “the sweet pang” carries over into the awakened state. For another, the turn at the end succeeds in being more than a trick, I think, only because the psychological situation presented earlier in the poem is too convincing simply to be conjured away. Its residue remains with the reader, who is left with the feeling that it represents an underlying problem likely to be recurrent. Moreover, even the poem's ending is not altogether conciliatory. The speaker seems to be hinting, if only just, “I am very happy that you are here with me, but if you should ever decide to leave, I would not be able to go along,” or “If the kind of thing I have described should ever become necessary——!” The best hope the poem ultimately holds out for resolution of the conflict is that the two will somehow, after all, be able to enter “the forest” together; and that would clearly give rise to a more perfect state.

The possibility is, in fact, realized in “Going for Water,” which, incidentally, provides a good example of the importance of water, especially streams, in Frost's poetic universe. (In some ways the poem can be regarded as an early version of “Directive.”) The first two stanzas set the scene:

The well was dry beside the door,
 And so we went with pail and can
 Across the fields behind the house
 To seek the brook if still it ran;

Not loth to have excuse to go,
 Because the autumn eve was fair
 (Though chill), because the fields were ours,
 And by the brook our woods were there.

A persistent undercurrent in the poem's opening suggests that the pair are leaving something undesirable behind as well as seeking something positive. The first line indicates a certain aridity at the center of the domestic establishment, requiring for its amelioration a journey beyond the immediate bounds of the household. (One recalls the excursions of "Flower Gathering" and even "A Late Walk.") The feeling is reinforced by the fifth line, and in his elaboration of this idea the speaker protests perhaps a shade too much. Happily, there is available beyond the confines of "the house" a reserve of the means for renewal that is somehow "ours," and here the "woods" have the place of emphasis as defining the world to be entered. The "fair," "chill" evening (implicitly contrasted with the presumably warm but perhaps less lucid atmosphere of "the house") evokes a felt clarity and sharpening of sensibility that give prospect of deep and vital refreshment.

The third and fourth stanzas elaborate the pattern of imagery:

We ran as if to meet the moon
 That slowly dawned behind the trees,
 The barren boughs without the leaves,
 Without the birds, without the breeze.
 But once within the wood, we paused
 Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,
 Ready to run to hiding new
 With laughter when she found us soon.

The first image for the journey's goal is that of "the moon," bringer (when the time is right) of a serener dawn than belongs to the day, which is left behind with all its concerns. In accord with the conventional significance of "autumn" as a harbinger of sterility and death, the "trees" are initially reduced to "barren boughs"—a lifeless tangle, an impediment interposed before the face of clarity and perfection. By the same token, however, that face illumines the lineaments of "the wood," which is accessible, while "the moon" remains an "as if." Once that function has been fulfilled and the pair have entered the forest, there is an immediate change in focus to "the wood" itself as the source of the thing desired, and its barrenness is no longer significant. Autumn's becoming a time of regeneration emphasizes the independence of this spiritual journey from the ordinary cycles of terrestrial life. As for "the moon," it is, despite its inaccessibility, a part of everyone's world, and it is as a representative of that world that it now becomes an observer to be hidden from, a reminder that not everything can be utterly left behind. The pair are able to make a game of it because of their freedom from uncertainty as to what they are about, an idea made emphatic in the poem "In Neglect." Still, the comparison with "gnomes" (who are supposed to know of hidden treasure and who keep themselves hidden) emphasizes the quest's difference from the usual sublunary effort and lends it the grotesqueness it will certainly have for ordinary eyes. It is, in short, a highly personal matter not to be intruded upon.

In the final two stanzas the poem returns to its original focus:

Each laid on other a staying hand
 To listen ere we dared to look,

And in the hush we joined to make
 We heard, we knew we heard the brook.
 A note as from a single place,
 A slender tinkling fall that made
 Now drops that floated on the pool
 Like pearls, and now a silver blade.

In the heart of “the wood” (and now this becomes the really important fact about it) exists “the brook,” the object of the quest. The inevitable uncertainty about its continued efficacy, the need for periodic (or constant) renewal of belief, suggested in the first stanza and reiterated here, is finally dispelled. The pair’s unity of purpose and action, emphasized throughout, is made complete in a final ritual, a sort of close-your-eyes child’s magic, that serves as a prelude to the ultimate revelation. Then the image of “pearls” and “silver” vaguely suggestive of the Grail (disclosed, I take it, as soon as the pair have “dared to look” and the auditory image has become visual as well) gathers liquid and container in a fragile symbol of the deepest source of true life. The “pail and can,” linking this scene to “the house,” have effectively disappeared, like Una’s lamb. The poem itself has become the vessel in which the vital waters of “the brook” that it both discovers and creates are transported back to the ordinary world. Here the poem simply stops: the quest for the regenerative source has been successful, and nothing further is needed.

A poem that presents from a different point of view the impulse that motivates “Going for Water”—shows, in a way, its obverse—is “A Line-Storm Song,” though both involve leaving the home at least temporarily behind. Where the former seeks a renewal of the life of the emotions in a delicately balanced ecstasy, the latter pursues the same goal through agitated and passionate involvement.⁴³ The first two stanzas establish the controlling imagery:

The line-storm clouds fly tattered and swift.
 The road is forlorn all day,
 Where a myriad snowy quartz-stones lift,
 And the hoofprints vanish away.
 The roadside flowers, too wet for the bee,
 Expend their bloom in vain.
 Come over the hills and far with me,
 And be my love in the rain.
 The birds have less to say for themselves
 In the wood-world’s torn despair
 Than now these numberless years the elves,
 Although they are no less there:
 All song of the woods is crushed like some
 Wild, easily shattered rose.
 Come be my love in the wet woods, come,
 Where the boughs rain when it blows.

The upheaval in nature presented here is conveyed in language of considerable, and increasing, violence—“tattered,” “torn despair,” “crushed.” Normal function

43. Other Frost poems show a similar need, but as it concerns a single individual—“To Earthward” and “The Wind and the Rain,” for example.

is suspended and the signs of ongoing life and natural value are inoperative, as nature turns inward from the onslaught. "The . . . flowers," as they must, "expend" themselves in a gradual death, but the productive (and reproductive) potential of the process is cut off. Set against this barren and inhospitable landscape, the refrainlike invitation seems at first surprising, even contradictory. (Indeed, "The road is forlorn all day" because other people, normal people, are staying inside, like the "birds.") But this is the way that nature provides for its own renewal, and man is a part of nature. He has, that is, analogous needs, being subject to desiccation and stagnation, though he must consciously choose to take advantage of the remedy, accepting its dislocation and discomfort. It is precisely the violent (though temporary) destruction of the controlling spirit, the tyranny, of normalcy, a kind of entrenched death, that permits the pair, through the exercise of human volition, to enter the scene, to become its center of attention, and to appropriate it to their own needs, and so makes possible the renewal of the higher life of "love." The "hoofprints," signs of the human activity that has taken place in time and is alien to the natural scene, are obliterated, leaving the pair with a kind of temporal and geographical *tabula rasa*. With the sweeping away of ready-made, routine value, the imagination is freed, and the silence of the "birds" can, through logical sleight-of-hand, be turned into an argument for the presence of "elves" that leads back in time to the innocence and wonder of childhood.

The final two stanzas specify the relation of the individuals to the scene, explaining and justifying the invitation:

There is the gale to urge behind
 And bruit our singing down,
 And the shallow waters aflutter with wind
 From which to gather your gown.
 What matter if we go clear to the west,
 And come not through dry-shod?
 For wilding brooch, shall wet your breast
 The rain-fresh goldenrod.

Oh, never this whelming east wind swells
 But it seems like the sea's return
 To the ancient lands where it left the shells
 Before the age of the fern;
 And it seems like the time when, after doubt,
 Our love came back amain.
 Oh, come forth into the storm and rout
 And be my love in the rain.

Here the "singing" of the pair replaces the normal "song of the woods," so that they dominate the natural occurrence and become its center of meaning. But at the same time they surrender to the natural process, as "the gale" (which rises in the "east," the direction of origins, and urges "to the west," the direction of new discoveries) sweeps them along and takes over the noise of their "singing." In going "clear to the west" they leave ordinary concerns completely behind. They become part of the landscape, and the upheaval in nature is identified with the internal upheaval that is their need. The line "From which to gather your gown"

may signify a hesitancy, countered by the agitating "wind," or it may mean "from which to gather material for your gown," suggesting an even greater becoming at one with the storm. In any case, whatever hesitancy there may be is overcome by the pervading wetness that is one of the poem's two chief symbols (the other being "the woods" in which the whole imagined action takes place). The speaker's desire is that they commit themselves to a situation where reticence is of no avail and there is absolute contact between the individual (or pair) and the elemental forces, where the interpolated clothes, representing the insulating effect of the convention that life in society makes necessary, are rendered ineffectual. This is not a social matter: it concerns the identity of the individual with respect to the universe and to one other person (at a time), and social values are at once undercut and transcended. It is an attempt to go back to the most basic external and internal realities, those that have not been invented or contrived by man (the "wilding brooch" represents the specific replacement of a man-made ornament by what is naturally provided)—to go back even in geological time to be drowned in the primordial sea that "swells," is pregnant, with life. The recapturing of this primal impulse is closely identified with the renewal of "love," in the process that involves stripping away, washing away, the layers of civilization that make a person forget what, in essence, he is, enabling him to respond again to himself and to others in the way that is truest and most real. And the invitation throughout, while clearly addressed to a woman, can be taken in a secondary sense, without much semantic violence, as addressed to the reader, suggesting again that the erotic and the artistic impulse are closely related, if not, in their purest manifestation, identical.

The reader knows, of course, that the situation presented in the poem is temporary and that other things are important. But the last stanza, in its evocation of a wavelike, recurrent awareness, suggests the desirability, even the necessity, that the process be repeated as often as possible for reinforcement of its effect. And the single act is characterized by the speaker's proposal to "go clear to the west," with no mention of a return trip. The expression "to come through" rather suggests a completion of the effort in the original direction, wherein the progressive course of action will be determined in part by the discoveries that are made enroute (in its psychological sense it points to the condition of the two after the experience). One can perhaps see here the image of a journey completely around the world, in which east and west, the absolutely old and the absolutely new, are united in the place of origin, and the effect given at least an intended permanence. It is to be hoped, then, that the core of internal and external reality, the discovery made and renewed in this repeated journey that, if not circumnavigational, at least leads back home without denying itself, will continue to provide the basis for each individual's underlying consciousness and fundamental being, and so for communication between individuals. Unless these are satisfactory, no social question can have more than minimal importance.

The love relation is at least implicit in Frost's "October" and is in fact importantly responsible for the poem's quality, which depends on a sense of shared

beauty. Again there is the withdrawal from ordinary concerns, though in this case it takes more the form of an arrest of time than of isolation in space.

O hushed October morning mild,
 Thy leaves have ripened to the fall;
 Tomorrow's wind, if it be wild,
 Should waste them all.
 The crows above the forest call;
 Tomorrow they may form and go.
 O hushed October morning mild,
 Begin the hours of this day slow.
 Make the day seem to us less brief.
 Hearts not averse to being beguiled,
 Beguile us in the way you know.
 Release one leaf at break of day;
 At noon release another leaf;
 One from our trees, one far away.
 Retard the sun with gentle mist;
 Enchant the land with amethyst.
 Slow, slow!
 For the grapes' sake, if they were all,
 Whose leaves already are burnt with frost,
 Whose clustered fruit must else be lost —
 For the grapes' sake along the wall.

The poem is about the precarious equilibrium of the moment of "ripened" perfection, and it seems clear that within that general idea its most important concerns are esthetic. There is a strong sense of beauty as something organic, living, and therefore subject to death. The specifically human act is an intervention, an attempt to arrest the moment and to give its content permanence. At the same time the human consciousness contributes to that content, and in a sense the whole poem can be seen as an attempt to achieve and to maintain a state of mind. The objective reality of the scene is no more important than the way in which it is perceived through the "mist" that suggests the imagination. The almost religious invocation at the poem's beginning is a prayer that "the land" will be enchanted and the observers "beguiled" (the two effects amount to much the same thing), a nominally preternatural end that can be achieved only through the active cooperation, indeed the instigation, of the observers themselves. The "leaves" can be seen as representing images on the "trees" of poetic truth. In part voluntarily, the situation has "ripened" to a mildness and equanimity that permit its essential unity to be realized, and to the extent that the effort at insulation is successful, "the sun" stands still and the moment is beyond time. The *we* implicit in the speaker's monologue can be taken either as involving someone conventionally called a "loved one" or as comprising the writer and the reader. The distinction is not an opposition, since in either case the relationship of love both depends on and makes possible the thing shared.⁴⁴ That thing, the poem it-

44. See Thomas Whitbread, "The Poet-Readers of Wallace Stevens," pp. 94-109, in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, eds. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962): "The breaking of the bread of faithful speech, together, between poet and reader, between two humans as poet-readers, is communication, is experience shared, which, as a kind of love, kindly as love, makes life, for the sake of such speech, 'prodigiously worth living.'"

self, the bond between the two and the product of their joint effort, becomes in an important way the subject of the poem.

Time is the enemy, time and chance. "Tomorrow" "may" be too late—*will* be too late, if one takes the word as implying an essentially different moment, for tomorrow and its "wind" can come at any time. The "leaves" will, of course, spend themselves in "the fall" anyway, but that "fall" need not have been useless. Death is the mother of beauty, but beauty is worth the price only if it is enjoyed. The danger is, on the one hand, that gratuitous disturbances not under the artist's control may destroy the atmosphere; on the other, that the sustaining will may at any time collapse. The half-successful, self-promoting endeavor to extend the present moment, to escape from time, proceeds from the desire to hold in suspension that delicate vision of reality that, as Wordsworth says, we "half create" and half "perceive" until it can be fully realized in the artist's mind (and, one may assume, committed to form).

To be sure, the poem has certain implications that are more or less social. In a sense it is a plea for an atmosphere of moderation, lest the "wild" "wind" of change "waste" the ideas that have been carefully brought to maturity before their benefit can be realized. The reference to those "trees" that are "far away" can be seen as uttered in the hope that the inevitable current of destruction will be spread as widely, and will therefore proceed as slowly with respect to "our trees," as possible; but it also involves recognition, and willing acceptance, of the fact that equal treatment for alien groves is inevitable and therefore implicit in the request. It is thus the atmosphere itself, rather than the specific provenience or tendency of its content, that is important, and the attitude voiced is ultimately one of tolerance. Despite these social ideas, however, the poem's world, as so often in Frost, is basically self-contained. The controlling agency, the quasi deity to be prayed to, is the "morning" itself, whose capacity for glorious self-realization is made precarious by the threat of its own storms. This is, importantly, the poetic consciousness addressing itself, in one of those states of grace that are, at best, too "brief" and too few; and there is recourse to no other god, though one might wish there were. The poem's social implications may, in the end, be limited to advocacy of those conditions that make poetry possible as the highest and most real basis for a relationship of sharing.

The reference to grapes at the end, a slight turning aside and narrowing of focus to a detail of the scene not noticed until now, is subtle and complex, and I am not certain that I can explain it adequately. The preceding admonition "Slow, slow!" may be read simply as a restatement of the main plea of the whole poem. But it may also be a response to an apprehension of the speaker's—evoked by a sudden disturbance, perhaps—that the situation is threatening to get out of hand, that the favor he seeks is in danger of not being granted (this reemphasizes the precariousness of the whole matter). The "leaves" of the grapes ("burnt with frost") pretty clearly contrast with those of the "trees" ("ripened to the fall"). Actually the two manifest the same effect: the vulnerable ripeness, having exhausted its life energy, contains the principle of its own destruction. There is, perhaps, a real difference in esthetic effect that follows from a difference in

appearance. But most importantly, I think, the contrast points up the function of the grapes in providing a more tangible benefit for those—including, it may be, the powers being invoked—who would consider *all* the “leaves” of autumn, by themselves, as merely “burnt with frost” and so not worth a great deal. And since these powers are basically the speaker’s own, this suggests that he is being reminded that the grapes and what they represent are necessary to the proper functioning of his own consciousness. In his repetition of “For the grapes’ sake” he certainly gives feeling assent to their inclusion as having “already” suffered harm—perhaps in part the harm of having been left out of account till now. And they constitute, after all, an image more nearly like that of the “apples” in “After Apple-Picking,” more fully organic, more Frostian. On the other hand grapes suggest wine and wine suggests a theory of poetry that Frost would not likely accept (compare “The Cow in Apple Time”); but the reference perhaps provides balance by ending on a somewhat Dionysian note a poem that has been a bit too Apollonian. We know, and the speaker has been at some effort to make clear, that the grapes are *not* “all.” At the same time I cannot help seeing in the image of a bunch of grapes various sexual connotations associated with juice, seeds, tumescence, the tactile sense, the somewhat rounded shape, and the “clustered” state. This may be extravagant, but at the very least the effect of the grapes is more *physical* than that of the trees’ “leaves,” and the emphasis on fruitfulness can be seen as reasserting the physical basis of both the poem and the love relation that, after all, permeates it. The turn recalls the reader to earth from his ethereal flight and sharpens the poetic theme, and in the end it seems largely responsible for the poem’s sense of completeness.

The last few poems discussed have all been from *A Boy's Will*, where the love relation and its significance for the artist constitute one of the important overall themes, as one might expect from poetry much of which is basically youthful. The theme is sustained in Frost’s later work in such poems as “The Telephone,” “Two Look at Two,” and “The Thatch”; but it remains true that those poems in which the withdrawal into the private world is both successful and successfully shared tend to be either poems of renewal (as “A Line-Storm Song”) or poems that emphasize the fragility of the moment (as “October”), suggesting that resolution of the conflict between love of person and love of beauty, while among the most rewarding of human accomplishments, requires constant effort and tends not to be successful for very long at a time.

Two poems from *A Witness Tree* (1942) consider the question in retrospect; the first of these is “November.”

We saw leaves go to glory,
Then almost migratory
Go part way down the lane,
And then to end the story
Get beaten down and pasted
In one wild day of rain.
A year of leaves was wasted.
Oh, we make a boast of storing,
Of saving and of keeping,

But only by ignoring
 The waste of moments sleeping,
 The waste of pleasure weeping,
 By denying and ignoring
 The waste of nations warring.

With its similar imagery involving the "leaves" of autumn and its verbal echoes ("wild," "waste," "day"), the poem seems, intentionally or not, to be a particularly appropriate companion piece for "October," and there is some circumstantial evidence that Frost intended it so. The original title of "November," when it was published in 1938, was "October." No doubt because his collected work already contained a poem of that title, Frost retitled the later poem for inclusion in *A Witness Tree*. But he need not have used the name of another month, and the evident fact that he had the earlier poem in mind when he retitled the later suggests that he meant the two to be taken as a sequence—indicating, perhaps, the vast difference in one's perspective that can come about over a span of time so short that it seems only a month.

In a note to "November" in *A Witness Tree* and subsequent collections Frost also dated the poem 1938. In general he followed the practice of appending dates infrequently, only when he wished to make clear either that a poem had been composed a number of years before and so did not represent his current work (as "My Butterfly" in *A Boy's Will*) or that it referred to a particular time in his life (as "Kitty Hawk" from *In the Clearing*). Only the second of these reasons would be appropriate to "November." In part the date 1938, supported by the poem's final word "warring," refers to the beginnings of World War II. The poem concerns the collapse both of the private and of the public world, and its closing sequence of references suggests that the latter is in fact a periodic outgrowth of the former. But the reference to the war alone would have been sufficiently clear in 1942, and one is left with the fact that 1938 was the year of the death of Frost's wife. That event occurred suddenly in March, whether before the composition of the poem I do not know, but it seems reasonable to assume that at least in retrospect Frost considered the additional allusion appropriate.

These biographical speculations prove nothing about the meaning of the poem itself, but they suggest a context that may prove helpful in considering it. The poem's first part tells a little "story," a simple sequence whose very starkness suggests that it contains a basic and inevitable truth. It relates what a certain "We" have seen, and without much straining one can see it as an aperçu of two people's life together, an expression of regret for the wasted chances (or chance) of a lifetime. (The quick jumps in the narrative necessitate at least a somewhat expanded time sense, and it is easy to expand it further. Besides, the common metaphor of the autumn of life can hardly be forgotten.) The image of the "leaves" in their "glory" pretty clearly recalls "October," and the first line suggests the ephemeral quality of the reality that, even given its ideal resolution, "October" (for instance) represents, by capsulating it, almost dismissing it, in a single phrase. In addition, the expression "go to glory" hints at the imminence of death, perhaps by recalling the use of similar expressions in fundamental Christianity, though the suggestion may be due simply to the reader's inevita-

ble awareness of the general truth that Frost displays in a different context in "Our Doom to Bloom"—that ripeness, if one views it that way, is only a prelude to death. The most that the human consciousness can do is to intervene at the propitious time, arrest the process momentarily, and give the ripeness a kind of permanence through imagination. And even this uncertain possibility depends partly on chance.

Then the "leaves" are compared to migrating birds, with the suggestion of a hope for continued life somewhere else, as though death could be evaded. Such a fancy is vain, of course: they are "beaten down" (from their flight, I think), as they must be, and (perhaps as punishment for their presumptuousness) "pasted" into a single mass that negates even their individual existence. Nor is this merely because they are "leaves": nothing goes more than "part way down" whatever "lane" it takes. The question is not whether it will be struck "down," but only when, and "the story" of the "leaves" is "the story" of all experience. In a sense all human activity can be said to consist "of storing, / Of saving and of keeping," and from this point of view the poem is about the extreme vulnerability of everything human, since what has taken a "year" to ripen can be lost in a "day." But more especially it concerns love and art, or their conjunction, for what is lost is specifically the reality of shared beauty. From the perspective of "November," "October" is vain "boast," and this despite its success in "saving" its moment, in giving it permanence, for, among other things, there are so few such moments. Moreover, though it is a negative argument, and though they are always dubious, the very absence in "November" of anything like the grapes of "October" suggests a kind of sterility. The point is that both poems are true. Or, to state the matter another way, if "October" emphasizes life in death, "November" emphasizes death in life, the darker side of the same truth: "sleeping," "weeping," and "warring" can all be either literal or figurative, and all the possibilities involve a kind of death.

In its latter half the poem moves to the present tense and the generalized "we" that is all of us (the former "We" is past), and its explicit theme is the universality of "waste." Now, "waste" is basically a matter of unrealized possibility. Its pathos arises precisely from human awareness of the possibilities that have been lost, and of the fact that the loss is permanent. "'Tis over" roars with a terrifying finality: there is no reprieve, no second chance. (If the speaker is not terrified, that is only because his mind is as large as the truth being uttered.) The terribleness of the truth resides partly in the suddenness with which the impersonal destruction can occur, and one thinks of the sudden death of Frost's wife (as though "In one wild day of" the "rain" that is "weeping"). Regarding the poem in this way, one sees an intense pathos in the fact that the two people are jointly conscious of the truth, the "wasted" possibility, right up to the "end" of "the story." The poem ultimately rises to a kind of tragedy in that what is "wasted" is not merely played off against what has been stored up, but identified with it. (The "pleasure" that we think we have saved up, we only "waste" in "weeping." "November" is a "waste" of "October.") This point of view, which the poem insists be taken into account, requires us to regard all human effort as

futile. Moreover, “sleeping,” “weeping,” and “warring” are all voluntary actions that are yet a response to necessity—the necessity, the flaw, of human weakness. And the progression from the private acts of sloth and self-pity to the mindless collective action of war raises the theme of “waste” to an almost cosmic inevitability. In such a perspective human love and poetry are flimsy indeed. The only compensation, in the end the saving fact, is that, after love is gone, the poem transcends its own flimsiness by comprehending it.

If “October” displays one side of the truth about human erotic and esthetic aspiration and “November” the other side, “Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length,” the second of these poems from *A Witness Tree*, comprehends both faces in a single vision, and thus serves as a kind of conclusive statement, or as nearly so as Frost’s poems ever are. As indicated by the first word of the title, it is also an example of a Frost poem where the figurative meaning of the imagery is undoubtedly paramount. Again the speaker is a man regarding the past, this time rather quizzically:

O stormy, stormy world,
 The days you were not swirled
 Around with mist and cloud,
 Or wrapped as in a shroud,
 And the sun’s brilliant ball
 Was not in part or all
 Obscured from mortal view —
 Where days so very few
 I can but wonder whence
 I get the lasting sense
 Of so much warmth and light.
 If my mistrust is right
 It may be altogether
 From one day’s perfect weather,
 When starting clear at dawn
 The day swept clearly on
 To finish clear at eve.
 I verily believe
 My fair impression may
 Be all from that one day
 No shadow crossed but ours
 As through its blazing flowers
 We went from house to wood
 For change of solitude.

The humor of the facetiously verbose title is maintained throughout the poem in phrases like “brilliant ball,” “my mistrust,” “I verily believe,” and in the poem’s general exaggeration, but not far below the surface the tone is one of great seriousness, as though the truth were too acute to be borne without the mitigating grace of humor. (Indeed, one of Frost’s considerable rhetorical successes is a feeling for ironic understatement and overstatement just sufficient to enhance, rather than to diminish, the emotional intensity of the matter.) Also, the balance between humor and sad sobriety underscores the balanced truth that the poem seeks to convey.

The first seven lines, ending with the dash, are in the form of an impulsive outburst, an apostrophe to the "world," and the repetition in the first line suggests a rueful "wonder" at how "stormy" that "world" really is. (It is, of course, the speaker's own "world," internal and external, that is primarily in question, though the image of the rounded earth gives the theme an intended universality that few of us will dispute.) The usual alternative to the "stormy" chaos of self-perpetuating confusion is given out as a static and shroud-wrapped deadness that prevents any effective motion (and any vision) at all. The sun is the perfection of knowledge—the true, the good, the beautiful—all that man could want, all that his nature can use or comprehend (the emphasis on its roundness suggests the circle as a traditional symbol of perfection). This principle of the higher truth, the higher life, is there, if man can only apprehend it, but full access by the imperfect "mortal" sight is rare. And the phrase "mortal view" hints sadly that the human vision is itself partly responsible for creating the dead blankness that it supposedly only sees. All of this suggests again the great dependence of the artist's consciousness on the fortuitous (or seemingly fortuitous) combination of circumstances that permits an even momentarily "clear" and coherent "view" of things. It is then up to memory and the ordering power of the imagination to make that "view" "lasting"; that this is possible is as wonderful as the storminess of the "world" to begin with.

Accordingly, the speaker is shown as perplexed about the reason for his tremendous "sense" of "warmth and light." He is not certain that his explanation is right—he simply offers the only cause he can think of that might make the phenomenon intelligible—and the word "mistrust," though Frost uses it basically to mean "suspicion" or "surmise," does carry a hint of doubt about the validity of the whole conception. Hence the poem just leaves open, though it does not point to, the possibility of an ultimately divine source for the speaker's "impression" (etymologically the word suggests an image permanently imprinted on the spirit). Or perhaps it would be better to say that the poem intends to portray the nearest thing to a vision of the divine that man can attain, a vision not wholly explainable in rational terms. But then poetry always involves an intimation that cannot be proven, and in some sense creates its own truth. In any case, the "day" of "perfect weather" that the speaker recalls is importantly characterized by the word "swept": contrasting with "swirled" and "wrapped," neither chaotic nor static, the word evokes a feeling of purposefully ordered motion that seems to carry the observer's consciousness with it.

Until the fourth line from the end, though words like "stormy" clearly refer in part to emotional agitation and personal sorrow, the theme has appeared to center on only a single individual. Then the word "ours" retroactively infuses the whole with a sense of shared reality, giving the poem a further dimension. On the one hand we recall that the "world" of the poem's opening is the "world" of the past, and think again of the death of Frost's wife (the poem was first published in September 1938). On the other hand the "day's" perfection is seen to proceed from the "warmth and light" of human love as well as of intellectual elation (if I may momentarily separate the two; the very degree of perfection de-

pends on the fact that they are not finally separate). Prepared for by the imagery of "perfect weather," the poem's closing lines present a picture of perfect human action. Again we have the withdrawal from the institutionalized domestic situation into the isolation of a "wood." But his is not a poem of renewal, for there is nothing to suggest that the "house" contains anything undesirable (a measure of the "day's" very flawlessness). In its literal sense "change" is emotionally neutral, so that the pair are free from any negative motivation and hence free to choose their going for the absolutely minimal reason, "change of solitude." Likewise, "went" is the neutral verb of motion, connoting nothing either ameliorative or pejorative, giving no sense of the pressure of time, suggesting no compulsion either of speed or of slowness. But "change" can also signify a qualitative transformation, a metamorphosis, and given the pattern of imagery in other poems of Frost's—the leaving behind of institutional arrangements for communication with natural and universal value—and the important fact that the "wood" here is freely chosen, one can be certain that it represents a more perfect state. It is this free involvement *in* time, in action, that frees man *from* time, or at least insofar as that is possible. The movement of the pair exists in a one-to-one harmony with the perfect sweep of the "day," to which, in a sense, they surrender, in voluntary cooperation with the glorious possibility that it represents. (It may be, however, that this awareness of freedom from time can exist only in retrospect, that when the perfect moment is present it is always subject to the kind of threat manifest in "October.") The way to the "wood" (and this is another argument for its representing a higher state) is "through" the "day's" "blazing flowers," the earthly manifestation of the principle of life embodied in "the sun's" brilliance. They suggest both a purified beauty, purgatorial—a kind of Yeatsian holy fire—and the fires of carnal love. (The word "crossed" involves an ironic play on its two senses "moved across" and "marred": the single "shadow" of the two people is emphatically not a defect, but the mark of their unified presence by which they make the untarnished "day" their own.) These "flowers," an image that partakes of both the esthetic and the erotic in the highest degree, are the way of access to what Frost's poetry seems to offer as the highest of human states, the bilateral and contemplative community of shared "solitude."

The speaker's consciousness of the past, then, is dominated by his "sense" of a single perfect "day," suggesting that for the rightly ordered spirit positive experiences have more weight than negative ones, and indeed that this is precisely what makes human life worthwhile and even endurable. At the same time he makes sadly but unmistakably clear that the "days" of "perfect weather" were "few." It is finally this sense of balanced and universal truth that gives the poem its quality: the flawless perfection that is humanly possible, the rarity with which it is attained, and the fact that that is, after all, enough. A knowledge of possibility is sustaining between the moments of actuality, for we know that the sun is there even during the seemingly endless times when we cannot see it. This is indeed a fragile basis for human faith and hope, but it is all that we have.

The return of good "weather" can, nevertheless, be helped along, for we recall the poem's implication that what a person sees is determined at least partly by

the way in which he sees it. One reason why a harmonious relation between a man and his "world" is so difficult to maintain is the simple fact that this "world" is constantly altering. The harmoniously orchestrated (in a sense changeless) movement of time portrayed in "Happiness Makes Up in Height" permits the voluntary "change" that the two people undergo, but the world's changes are most often not in a direction that ministers to one's own inclinations. And enforced change, whatever its tendency, is painful for man's spirit, perhaps partly because it forces upon his awareness his involvement in the very unidirectional movement of time that he seeks to escape. That change is imbedded in the nature of things is conveniently (and unavoidably) represented in the changing seasons, and Frost often makes use of the fact. "Reluctance" seems an appropriate poem to consider here, since in dealing with the ever-present question of man's response to the world in which he finds himself, it recalls us from the past and strikes a note less cosmic and more immediate, and so more characteristic of Frost's poetry at its best.

Out through the fields and the woods
 And over the walls I have wended;
 I have climbed the hills of view
 And looked at the world, and descended;
 I have come by the highway home,
 And lo, it is ended.

The leaves are all dead on the ground,
 Save those that the oak is keeping
 To ravel them one by one
 And let them go scraping and creeping
 Out over the crusted snow,
 When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
 No longer blown hither and thither;
 The last lone aster is gone;
 The flowers of the witch hazel wither;
 The heart is still aching to seek,
 But the feet question "Whither?"

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

The poem is so exquisite on its literal level that one hesitates to accost it in any but its own absolute terms. It distills and expresses in utmost purity what is surely a universal response to nature's seasonal decline, and the slight turn and expansion in the word "love" at the end infuses the whole with just the right sense of a shared feeling. Nevertheless, there are other things that can be said about the poem, in itself and in the larger context of Frost's poetry.

The first stanza takes the form of a survey of the speaker's neighborhood, in which he searches beyond his own domain, crossing successive boundaries rep-

resented by "the walls," with the conclusion, "it is ended." One might note his inability to find, among "the hills of view," a spot that proves a source of the kind of satisfaction represented in "The Vantage Point." Nor are the beautiful "leaves" of "October," or even "the last remaining aster flower" of "A Late Walk," to be seen. The successful withdrawal from the domestic situation that I have identified with artistic activity depends upon the existence of a suitable place to withdraw to; the speaker of "Reluctance" searches and comes "home" unfulfilled. He returns "by the highway," as though having given up hope of finding anything worthwhile among "the fields and the woods." One notes that this is the last poem in *A Boy's Will* and recalls the words of the narrator of "Into My Own," the first poem in the volume:

I should not be withheld but that some day
 Into their vastness I should steal away,
 Fearless of ever finding open land,
 Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

Apparently this confidence has been at last disappointed. The "it" that "is ended" seems to represent everything, all possibility, of the kind concerned, and the phrase perhaps takes on a mythic largeness by recalling the last words of Christ. The concept is particularized in imagery of the sort that seems, in Frost's poetry, to be especially related to esthetic concerns. The "dead leaves" are anything but living ideas: described in language that lays emphasis on their wasted vitality, they contrast rather directly with both the "ripened" images of "October" and the "leaves that blew away" of "A Dream Pang." The "oak," traditionally a symbol of strength and permanence—and by implication the other trees—is endowed with a considerable degree of volition in the words "keeping," "ravel," and "let," as are its "leaves" in the word "creeping," so that the scene has life and a metaphorical consciousness, and it is further humanized by the association of the leaves' death with sleep. The image of "crusted snow" suggests a congealed impenetrability that cuts off contact with the earth, the source of life, and above which "the oak" will provide the only continuing source and evidence of animation. And in the "flowers" the beauty of the scene, as well as its substance, is withering at the source. (The word "others" means "other leaves," implying that "those" of "the oak" are not, and even after the "snow" falls will not be, "sleeping." Oak "leaves" do stay from falling much longer than "others," but they have no beauty, being only a dull brown.) There is no mention of the return of spring: the poem describes a cheerless present and looks forward to an even bleaker future. The world of the poem's first part does have, then, a minimal vitality, but one may assume that it will ultimately be exhausted, and in any case it is not enough.

All of this seems to me to suggest metaphorically the diminishing creativity of the speaker's state of mind. The poem's main impulse arises from his diminishing capacity for response to an order, internal and external, that is gradually excluding him, and the word "love" at the end puts the whole poem consciously into the erotic dimension, reemphasizing that the bleakness of the scene proceeds importantly from the gradual extinction of the generative principle. The goal of

the individual, and specifically of the artist, is a state of mind that is constant and constantly viable because it is imbued with truth. But this unchanging mental harmony cannot be maintained unless one's response to one's situation continually changes in such a way that it remains appropriate. The source of this self-sustaining operation must be one's apprehension of "things" as they are, unhampered by any vitiating self-deception, unclouded by any longing toward a world as one could wish it might be. The speaker's very reluctance to accept the truth, to see "things" "go" as they must, helps create the bleakness that he sees. A failure of accord with the winter outside will produce a winter of the mind. (One should not forget, of course, that the poem is transcending the reality by recognizing it and committing it to form, and so in a sense belying its own statement.) Moreover, the individual is himself subject to the inevitable "drift of things," being a part of the world as well as its observer. He cannot hold himself in one place any more than he can stop the progression of the seasons, and he must constantly adjust his image of himself to the fact that he is no longer what he was.

It is poignant that this should be true. Having achieved an eminently satisfying equilibrium in one's own spiritual ecology, one must of necessity relinquish it. It is indeed "a treason" "to the heart" for a person to put aside "a love" (as opposed to the generic "love," the continued existence of which depends on the act), but it must be so, for tomorrow neither he nor the things that he loves will be the same. The speaker is seen in that most human of moments, paying the tribute of regret in a gesture of resistance, even as he moves to "yield." Yet in that very motion, the stepping back and broadening of view in the last stanza, with its implicit shift of attitude, he has freed himself from the moment and gives promise of being able to respond appropriately to whatever the world offers next. More specifically, occupying as it does the final position in *A Boy's Will*, the poem is the speaker's farewell to the "season" of his youth, and Frost's leave-taking of the volume and the period of creativity that it represents.

What the new appropriate response may be seems to be suggested in "A Winter Eden," one of the few Frost poems that give positive value to a winter scene for its own sake:

A winter garden in an alder swamp,
 Where conies now come out to sun and romp,
 As near a paradise as it can be
 And not melt snow or start a dormant tree.

It lifts existence on a plane of snow
 One level higher than the earth below,
 One level nearer heaven overhead,
 And last year's berries shining scarlet red.

It lifts a gaunt luxuriating beast
 Where he can stretch and hold his highest feast
 On some wild apple-tree's young tender bark,
 What well may prove the year's high girdle mark.

So near to paradise all pairing ends:
 Here loveless birds now flock as winter friends,

Content with bud-inspecting. They presume
 To say which buds are leaf and which are bloom.
 A feather-hammer gives a double knock.
 This Eden day is done at two o'clock.
 An hour of winter day might seem too short
 To make it worth life's while to wake and sport.

The title immediately suggests some kind of inversion of the "Eden" myth, and the suggestion is supported by the first line, for the original "garden" was associated with anything but "winter." A highly special combination of elements makes this nearly "a paradise," but it is "a paradise" of unearthly beauty rather than of Arcadian pleasures. The phrase "winter garden"—well established, but inevitably a kind of oxymoron—stresses the combination of elements in a pleasing whole, as well as the scene's essential difference from the usual "garden"; and the fact that it occurs naturally, rather than being artificially arranged, further emphasizes its uniqueness, its improbability. The combination of "sun" and "snow" is the poem's dominant image, and this symbol of light without heat, as opposed, for example, to the "warmth and light" of "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," marks a reality that is strongly Platonic. The "snow," as supported by details later in the poem, signifies that the generative principle is not operating. As in "Reluctance," it cuts off contact with "the earth," but here the fact is seen as leading to a "higher" "existence" that is "nearer heaven," the realm of ideal truth.

The "beast" is "gaunt," deprived of hedonistic pleasures and even normal sustenance, but nevertheless "luxuriating"—partly, no doubt, because of the extreme paucity of his usual fare—but this merely indicates the ascetic way in which material pleasures, from the point of view of the poem, *ought* to be enjoyed. And the phrase "highest feast," especially in view of the heavenly associations already established for the word "higher," suggests a more perfect quality in spiritual terms, with perhaps at least some reference to the Christian sacrament. The manner of association of the place's inhabitants is likewise nonerotic. Gone is the pair normally associated with carnal love, replaced by the "flock" of Platonic friendship. These "birds" merely inspect the trees' "buds"—know them, in a way—but do not participate in the reproductive impulse that they represent. Rabbits are traditionally associated with fecundity; "now" they "come out to sun and romp," rather than staying in their burrows and procreating. Nor is this simply a case of sublimation, as "Flower-Gathering," for example, can be held to be: here the generative principle is muted, bypassed, "dormant." Eros has disappeared; only agape remains. The "berries"—"last year's" and so somehow not really belonging to the scene—are the ironically minute remnants of the Edenic apples, while the apple-tree offers only its "bark." Their "scarlet red" color has various erotic and seductive connotations, and placed, as they are, in an elevated position and so associated with "heaven," they seem to be a "shining" temptation to revert to "last year's" myth, to imagine that this scene offers a perfection of the same kind, and accessible in the same way, as the reality represented by, say, the apples in "After Apple-Picking"—or that by rising high enough one

can attain the pastoral "Eden." The poem seems to me to portray, then, the only kind of "Eden" that man *can* actually attain. It is tempting to see it as delineating the reality of old age, but such a reading would perhaps be excessive. What it does do is to demonstrate (as does, in a different way, "The Oven Bird") an appropriate and workable response to a reality that has been altered. When one's situation is not such that the erotic impulse is available as the basis of consciousness, one must do without it, and the way to do that is in the Platonic mode.

Yet in the last stanza the possibility that the poem affirms is somewhat undercut. Taking noon as its center, one can estimate that this "day" lasts about four hours. If it were not so very much shorter, the speaker suggests, it would so nearly approach the vanishing point as not to constitute a justifiable interruption of hibernation, and so would be equivalent to death. The foreshortening is somehow the price that is paid for the vision, implying that Platonic love is not available to the human spirit for very long at a time; or, to state the matter another way, the more heavenly the vision becomes, the more nearly it ceases to exist. Gaining one thing thus means giving up something else, and the exigencies of the real world are reasserted. Moreover, the poem's very failure to specify the presence of a human observer (which would indeed ruin the picture) suggests that the scene exists only in the imagination, the ideal, and is not materially accessible. (When actually confronted, the "winter" reality is more likely to provoke a response like that manifest in "Desert Places" or "The Onset.") In addition, there is the extreme fancifulness of a woodpecker's numerically proclaiming the time, and to increase the aura of unreality, his "double knock" conjures away the scene as though it were only an apparition. The reader is left with the sense of a possibility that is yet rare and difficult. The carnal can be put aside and the imagination can function without it, with little or no sense of loss, but it would not do to adopt a general optimism based on that expectation.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is now possible to try to characterize—haltingly and in preliminary fashion, to be sure—the complex sense of life and truth that is associated with the reality of art and the figure of the artist as they emerge from Frost's poetry. The difficulty proceeds, at bottom, from the ambiguous relation that art bears to the physical world, its position as part of that world yet higher.

There is an imaginative truth that art embodies, which is distinct from objectively verifiable truth, but which is nonetheless firmly tied to the real and the physical. Art maintains its unique integrity, its sense of difference and separateness from individual men and social institutions, from natural process, from mechanical progress, and from economic necessities. But at the same time the artist is involved with all of these things as a man living in the real world, which is the final source of his material; and the work of art itself must ultimately be offered to the world for judgment.

The basic stance that Frost's poetry assumes constitutes an empiricism that does not deny mystery or spiritual value but nevertheless affirms only what it can be sure of. There is no *a priori* authority to which one can refer responsibility for one's actions. Correspondingly, there is no set of absolute truths that man can apprehend or look to for sanction. Still, it is good for him to assume that such truths exists, or to act as though they existed, even though they may be specifically inaccessible. Humility before the mysteries is salutary and even therapeutic, for, among other things, it is a defense against a developing sense of one's own omniscience and, accordingly and more dangerously, omnipotence. The artist's sense of difference can encourage a dangerous longing for divinity which, if not controlled, leads to a destructiveness that denies the very basis of the artist's life, his justification for being. For his insights to remain valid, he must maintain his sense of a limited vision, of finiteness, and of the need for a changing response to the changing world in which he finds himself—an orientation that leads, among other things, to an attitude of tolerance. He nevertheless has a constant impulse to heaven that transforms and even transcends his involvement with the real and the physical, related to the fact that poetry for him is always and forever a matter of play. He holds to a rigorously unromantic view of reality and of the poet's art and insists on maintaining strict possession of his own awareness. But he is willing to yield himself in surrender under very special conditions that give rise to a heightening, rather than an extinction, of consciousness.

Art is an interference with nature, and it establishes its own reality, which is causally and morally discontinuous with the natural order, except in that it is unique to man and man himself is a part of nature. (I should add that its exact ontological status, as with all such metaphysical abstractions in Frost, is irrelevant to its importance for the human spirit.) The link is the individual man, the artist, and the work of art is primarily a manifestation of the creative mind's awareness of its own life. Accordingly, the work's primary characteristic is its mysterious

sense of *its* life, with which it is endowed by the artist as creator. In Frost this life is primarily organic and erotic, rather than Platonic, and the poem is analogous to a living organism.

The eroticism of artistic creativity is related to the eroticism of personal relations, and both probably spring from the same basic human impulse. The work of art is a work of love, and it is offered in love. It is something shared. It is a bond between people—perhaps the deepest of all bonds. But its integrity requires separateness and hence creative isolation, which the artist must not only accept but insist upon, and there is an inevitable conflict with other things that might be shared, other manifestations of love. The moment of artistic perfection is at best precarious, but there are rare and fragile moments when the human conflict is transcended and the creative activity itself can be directly shared, and these represent the highest of earthly experiences. It is primarily in this, its character as something shared—directly or, more often, implicitly and at one remove—that art is supremely valuable, despite its impermanence, despite the fact that it arises from the physical universe and must decay with it.

A different perfection, a Platonic perfection, is possible for the artist, but it is extremely rare and difficult, and it seems less satisfactory. To return to "A Winter Eden" for a moment, one may say that it is notably free of the tension and conflict that characterize most of the poems considered in my third chapter; and the price paid for this serenity is acceptance of a vision that is somehow insubstantial. If the Platonic state of consciousness is more restful than the erotic, it is nevertheless ultimately less satisfying. The esthetic in Frost, far from being an escape from the demands of eroticism, is intimately bound up with it, as, for example, the imagery of these lines from "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" suggests:

To the fresh and black of the squares of early mold
The leafless bloom of a plum is fresh and white;
Though there's more than a doubt if the weather is not
 too cold
For the bees to come and serve its beauty aright.

Beauty is generative, and it asks for warm weather. Accordingly, the conflict between love of beauty and love of person, which might be taken simply as a special case of the conflict between job and home, is seen as imbedded in the nature of the erotic impulse itself. The Platonic alternative (and one should not forget that "A Winter Eden" involves both the esthetic sense and the nature of relations among individuals, as though the two could not in any case be separated) seems offered mainly as a workable response to imposed and imposing conditions. The scant play it is given, along with the ironic undercutting involved, makes Frost's choice in the matter clear, and it is one more measure of the very limited extent to which, in Frost, man is the voluntary maker of his world.

Recent writers on Frost's life have tended to be distressed by the discrepancy between his public mask of placidity and the private difficulty of his emotional relationships, as though he had been deceiving us all his life about what he really was. This aspect of his life is in fact taken into full account in his work (though

certainly not in the manner of a “sensiblist”), where, indeed, it gives rise to one of the important themes that I have been concerned with here, the relation between love and art. If the artist conceived of Platonically corresponds to a god of pure spirit and sufficient unto himself, the artist conceived of erotically corresponds to a god incarnate and hence subject to all the exigencies of the flesh. It is no accident that after a lifetime of creative activity Frost chose these words as part of the epigraph to his final volume, *In the Clearing*:

But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.

The risks that Frost took during his life can easily seem incomprehensible. To George W. Nitchie they seem irresponsible and self-indulgent.⁴⁵ But Frost knew exactly what he was “risking,” what the artist must risk. If we can come to accept, once and for all and without reservation, the fact that he was nobody’s fool, we will have taken a large step toward understanding his poetry.

45. George W. Nitchie, “Frost as Underground Man,” *Southern Review*, 2(Autumn 1966):817-821.

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