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SOME ASPECTS OF STYLE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

BY

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Some Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Robert Frost," submitted by T. R. Srinivasa Sharma in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

C. Q. Drummond
Supervisor

Martha Ross

John Lauber

Jean K. Lauber

Clark S. Hall
External Examiner

Date 21 March 1973

ABSTRACT

Frost's style is plain, lucid, and belongs to a tradition of discursive style. Within this tradition, however, there are variations to be found. While Frost's didactic poems such as "The Lesson for Today" and "Build Soil" remind the reader of strong resemblances to classical models, his short poems exhibit specific links with the British and American poets. If the poems of love and courtship--"Going for Water," "Meeting and Passing"--are somewhat reminiscent of Ben Jonson and Herrick, "Mowing," "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," and "Bereft" come closer to the interests of poets such as Crabbe, Hardy, and Edward Thomas; the latter provide a context of rural themes, tone, and diction in which to place Frost's poems in order to note both resemblances and differences. The links with Emerson and Emily Dickinson are, especially, stronger and more apparent because the latter provide Frost an immediate American context in which to function. These several influences and resemblances relate Frost to a milieu of prevalent styles.

One of the intrinsic features of Frost's style is metonymy. The contiguous thing and the proximate word frequently help Frost construct his poems--"The Pasture" and "Spring Pools"--and project his regional world. But metonymy also restricts the poet's interests to a world of facts and literal details. However, Frost is, as he has claimed for himself, a synecdochist; and synecdoche helps bring a larger share of meaning into some of his poems--as in "I Will Sing You One-O"--when he writes in the Emersonian manner. More frequently, synecdoche functions

in Frost in less obvious ways. It functions through voice tones, which Frost often employs with excessive indulgence, the tones characterizing the speaker's qualities of whimsical humor or ideological hesitancy. It also works, cumulatively, as when a number of poems, read together, project the figure of the Frostian speaker.

Frost's use of the figures of similarity is in accord with the virtues of discursive style. The poet uses similes far more frequently than "interactive" metaphors. And similes often help determine the structure of his short poems and fables. The "interactive" metaphors, when used, acquire symbolic overtones; in poems such as "Into My Own" and "The Onset," for instance, snow and dark woods gain meanings of death. In brief, these stylistic figures as they operate in the poems are the sources of Frost's strength as a poet. They also reveal some weaknesses in the basic attitudes of the poet toward human experience. Finally, they increasingly point to a poet preoccupied with the fascination of self-discovery.

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CHAPTER I

Influences, Resemblances, and Differences

Poets learn from other poets. They borrow subject matter, tone, and, quite often, hints of style. While influences vary in degree and importance, the most important kind of influence is the kind whereby the poet has learned to handle significant experience. Such an influence is often seen in the verbal affinities of one poet with another, the way a poet assimilates into his verbal texture elements of style of another poet. Internal evidence of this nature is the most reliable guide in tracing influences, since, often, there is no external evidence available to show that one poet was influenced by another, or that he was even acquainted with another; and, further, poets may lie, try to cover up their sources.

And then there is the question of resemblance. Poets may resemble other poets not because of any direct influence involved, but because of certain shared verbal qualities arising from their similar concerns, say, the pastoral subject matter. For instance, Crabbe is aligned with Frost in this manner, and certain striking resemblances may be seen to exist between the methods of the two poets, but still the resemblances may not amount to an influence because no definite verbal affinities exist between the two. Similarly, Chaucer's use of monologue in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" might have suggested, more than Browning's, a model for Frost's monologues in, say, "The Witch of Coos" and "A Servant to Servants."

But there is little likelihood of any notable influence here. And the resemblances may be found to be superficial, despite Frost's express statement that he learned from Chaucer's conversational manner.[1] Of course, Frost's poems show both influences and resemblances; the literary influences contribute to the shaping of Frost's style; and the resemblances bring about an alignment of Frost with other poets. The influences and resemblances together make for a concept of stylistic tradition relevant to the study of Frost's style. Further, such an extrinsic approach as this will enable us to place Frost's style in relation to the milieu of other prevalent styles.

The relation of Frost's style to the milieu will become clear if we can categorize poems, broadly, into two types: they are, to offer a rough hypothesis,[2] the discursive and the non-discursive. The discursive poem relies on statement and, therefore, on the resources of syntax. The non-discursive poem, on the other hand, depends mainly for its effects on image and symbol. The discursive poem is based on the belief that rational discourse is possible, and can deal with the most intricate or profound parts of human experience. The best poems in this mode convey their meanings through the refinements of grammar and rhythm; and their meanings are controlled by rationality and powers of discrimination. On the other hand, the non-discursive poem relies on a

[1]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Conversations with Robert Frost and Others on the Craft of Poetry, p. 5.

[2]The hypothesis offered here somewhat resembles the one offered by A. Alvarez, in The Shaping Spirit, p. 110. The terms he uses for the two types are discursive and intuitive.

belief in the dramatic rendering of experience. Its aim is to gain in concentration and immediacy of sensory feeling. Since its goal is intensity, its lines of meaning are metaphorical. But the poem, after all, cannot do without syntax. So it retains a nominal, minimal syntax. Both kinds at their best have great virtues. The discursive statement can have great generalizing power; the non-discursive image--or "the presentational symbol," to use Mrs. Langer's phrase[3] -- can embody intense feeling.

Both kinds have inherent dangers too. The typical discursive poem is a didactic poem--such as Pope's "An Essay on Man," or Frost's "The Lesson for Today." The didactic poem, at its worst, is apt to suffer from dryness, and a paucity of sensory feeling which would render the verse lifeless. The dangers of the non-discursive mode are equally apparent. The mode can easily deteriorate into sheer sensationalism. The poet who pursues this mode to the exclusion of the other is apt to deprive his poems of any intellectual content. He will be anti-rational, and anti-syntactical. He will make images the focal center of his imaginative life. And if he lacks an intellectual grasp of the issues he has set out to handle, he will reduce the poem to a set of notations.

The typical non-discursive poem is the imagist poem. Setting down images in their vivid particularity of detail is the method. Pound's early imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro" achieves this in two lines:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

[3]Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, p. 89.

Amy Lowell's "The Pond" presents a vivid scene:

> Cold, wet leaves
> Floating on moss-colored water,
> And the croaking of frogs--
> Cracked bell-notes in the twilight.

The words are used so as to denote objects and evoke sensations. The reader is invited to see things and hear sounds clearly, and savour the sensations they offer. "No ideas but in things" was W.C. Williams' dictum. His famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" was supposed to illustrate that "so much depends/upon" one's clear perception of things and objects. If this be the goal of the poet, then syntax can be disposed off at his will, because the links between things and the perceiver are not the central issue. Williams' "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" (printed as part I of sequence titled "Spring and All") is an impressive poem; it offers vivid images, gains in concentration of its theme, which it renders dramatically, but does away with syntax. E.E. Cummings offers the extreme example of the non-discursive mode. He defied many conventions of grammar and orthography; he dislocated syntax, and he was definitely anti-rational in many of his stances. Hart Crane is another example. He was almost wholly given over to the non-discursive, lyrical mode; and he believed in the "logic of metaphor" to carry off a poem. But his poem "The Bridge," with its epic intention, remains in fragments. The poem can not maintain the rational narrative structure that an epic demands. These poets, in brief, practised in one mode as if the other mode did not exist; and so their poems could not exploit the resources of language available to the other mode. Frost might have had them in mind

when he said that poetry "was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency."[4]

But these two modes are not necessarily exclusive of each other. The discursive mode can accommodate non-discursive elements. The "Metaphysical" poets frequently achieved the union of the two modes in their poems. In Donne's "The Canonization," for instance, there is both the syntax of argument and the metaphoric growth of meaning. In our own day Eliot was trying to assimilate the two stylistic modes into his verse because of the urgent demands of his subject matter. His subject was the contemporary educated consciousness, which, for him, was complex and all-inclusive. His intention was, like Whitman's, to include as many things as his verse could hold. He realized, however, that Whitman's technique of simple cataloguing would not do. The technique would have to be commensurate with the complexity of the theme. In short, Eliot devised a technique of juxtaposing contrasts in order to "orchestrate"[5] the heterogeneous elements which are supposed to constitute contemporary consciousness.

Frost was, however, neither equipped to express nor had he a taste for such "orchestration" of complex themes. His own stand in relation to the poets mentioned above was clear. He was in favor of "coherence, logic

[4]Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, ed., Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 60.

[5]The musical analogy has been used by F.R. Leavis in New Bearings in English Poetry, p. 98, to suggest the kind of organization that Eliot was aiming to achieve for his poem.

and consistency,"[6] qualities germane to the discursive mode. As opposed to "fragmentary sentences, irregular verse forms, abrupt shifts from subject to subject, and an elliptical mode of reference," to use John F. Lynen's words, which characterize what has come to be known as modern poetry, "Frost's sentences are always clear, his verse forms traditional, his language close to everyday speech."[7] And further, as Lynen notes, there are in Frost no references to Dante, no esoteric learning or private symbolism. Frost's style is preeminently a discursive style. Even in his lyrics, language observes the overt forms of logic, as in "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same":

> Admittedly an eloquence so soft
> Could only have had an influence on birds
> When call or laughter carried it aloft.

And the poem closes with,

> Never again would birds' song be the same,[8]
> And to do that to birds was why she came.

The last line offers a literal explanation and, read out of context, would sound even naive.

There were still, however, premises common to Pound, Eliot and Frost. Hulme's directive "make it concrete," and Pound's "make it new" were in line with Frost's poetic intention and practice. Poems of North of Boston (1914), which incited Pound's enthusiastic review, fulfilled some of the promises of the New Movement that Pound was heading at the time.

[6] Selected Prose, p. 60.

[7] The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, p. 2.

[8] Complete Poems of Robert Frost, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). All Frost's poems referred to or quoted are from this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Furthermore, the primary concern with language was common to all the poets. Frost's own dictum pointed to this concern: "Literature is a performance in words"; and what marks the poet's performance is "the renewal of words."[9] This is similar to what Eliot conceived as the poet's task, to charge "the dialect of the tribe"[10] with poetic power. But these premises, obviously, did not lead to a similarity of styles.

If Pound and Eliot did not touch his poetry in any significant manner, one of the reasons was that Frost was already forty and had written enough poems, as J.M. Cox notes, "to fill two and a half volumes" when he met Pound in London in 1913. Eliot, of course, had not published anything at the time, and by the time Eliot became known, Frost could consider him only as a rival. What maturing there was, had taken place by the time Frost wrote his North of Boston poems. The poet had matured quickly between the poems of A Boy's Will and those of North of Boston, and had found his style. There was little Pound could do either to influence his style or enlist him in his new movement. As Cox further notes, Frost began writing in the 1890's when "the careers of Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot and Pound had ... not begun; Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway had not even been born."[11]

[9]Quoted by Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost, p. 45.

[10]T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," Collected Poems: 1909-1962, p. 218.

[11]James M. Cox, "Introduction," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 1.

Frost's style, then, bore no direct relation to the milieu of other prevalent styles of the Twenties and Thirties; and, during this time, it stood apart as distinct and uniquely different. Nevertheless, it belonged with the earlier generation of poets. It belonged, chiefly, with poets such as Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, and E.A. Robinson. Besides these poets as possible source of influence, several other influences have been claimed for Frost. It is suggested that Frost's profound interest in the Greek and Roman poets had something to do with the direction his poetry took.[12] And Emerson, as is widely acknowledged, was a major influence; Thoreau and Emily Dickinson minor. Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Marvell, Herrick, Dryden, Pope, Crabbe, and Wordsworth have, it is claimed, touched Frost's poetry at various points.[13]

There is, however, one negative influence which may be mentioned in passing: This was the Tennyson-Swinburne Pre-Raphaelite line, a pervasive influence for a young poet in the 'nineties. The point is that Frost had outgrown this influence by the time he came to write the poems of North of Boston. Several poems in A Boy's Will, however, exhibit the melancholy half-lights of the Victorians, and their flair for the "poetical" and the musical phrase. In "My Butterfly," the first poem to be published in 1894, Frost writes: "Thine emulous fond flowers," "airy dalliance," "the soft mist/Of my regret," and "reckless zephyr"--phrases of a type he would never use again in his poems.

[12]Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 146.

[13]Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost, pp. 5, 7, 8, 13, 14, 163, 181.

Another poem "In a Vale" has "misty fen," "maidens pale," "they wist," and "fain to list." Phrases such as "specter-like," "the antiphony of afterglow," "vague unearthly cry," and "seem/Dimly to have made out my secret place," all from the poem "Waiting," and "stifling sweet," "a Temple of the heat" from the poem "Rose Pogonias "--these carry with them the twilight hush of the Pre-Raphaelites.

When North of Boston came out in 1914, the poems in the volume reminded several critics of classical models. The dialogues and monologues involving New England landscape and character were compared to the Idylls of Theocritus. Pound called them "modern Georgics."[14] The poems seemed to support what Frost thought about poetry as being fundamentally rural: "Poetry is more often of the country than of the city. Poetry is very, very rural--rustic. It stands as a reminder of rural life--as a resource--as a recourse."[15] The rural life provided subject matter, idiom, and image. It was a "resource" in this sense. This line of thought was in accord with Theocritus, Horace and Virgil, who all wrote in favor of the country. Together they showed Frost what a poet could do with rural subject matter. They offered models, a sense of restraint and proportion, and a very general kind of convention. Frost wrote "New Hampshire," "The Lesson for Today," and "The White-Tailed Hornet" after the model of the Horatian Sermo;[16] and adapted

[14]Pound's review of North of Boston appeared under this title in Poetry, 5 (December, 1914), 127-130.

[15]Quoted by Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, p. 431.

[16]Both Thompson and Brower copiously document Frost's interest in the classical writers. See Brower, pp. 63, 123, 172, 200, 204-206. Also Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, pp. 231, 318, 432, 632.

Virgil's first eclogue in "Build Soil," even borrowing the names from it, Tityrus, the farm-loving poet, and Meliboeus, the displaced farmer. Also, Frost took over some of the Horatian tones and literary devices. The tone is polite and insinuating in "Provide, Provide," bantering in "New Hampshire," and one of debate in "The Lesson for Today," which borrows the Horatian device as well of setting up an opponent in order to prove the poet's point. The pastoral convention that Frost conforms to, however, is very general. It enables the poet to stabilize his feeling for the rural folk and setting, and ensure that this norm of feeling is present in the entire poem. This helps stylistically. The feeling helps control choices of diction and tone. The themes are usually man versus nature, or men involved in rural life, and love between couples or loneliness of man amidst nature. The rural material would necessitate certain verbal preferences, for instance, a preponderant use of words denoting objects of the rural scene. The one obvious result of this is the exclusion of words depicting urban realities. This would mean a style which does not mix "registers," that is, does not juxtapose words of different and opposed connotations. The "throh" of the heart in Frost scarcely suggests the rhythms of the internal combustion engine. Of course, Frost did use scientific words for satirical purposes, but then these poems written about speculative theories or political matters form no part of his "pastoralism." They could have been written by any city poet, and most of them read like parlor verse.

Lawrance Thompson suggests that Frost turned to the British classical poets, especially to Jonson and Herrick, for stylistic virtues of clarity and discipline[17]. Frost's short poems are lucid, often precise in statement, and tend to be epigrammatic. And their restrained tone may suggest the influence of Caroline lyrics. There may even be an occasional echo of Jonson or Marvell, as Brower finds in the poem "Going for Water."[18] But the difference between Jonson and Frost is too striking to suggest many possible affinities. For what distinguishes Jonson's verse, a certain intellectual vigor, and the directness and force with which the vigor is expressed in verse, is particularly lacking in Frost. Frost is gentle, evasive, even reticent--as his poems of love and courtship illustrate. Apparently, Frost has more in common with Herrick than with Jonson.[19] The poems "The Silken Tent," "Meeting and Passing," and "Telephone" are charming, and have a certain Caroline grace that points to Herrick. Herrick is playful, charming, but often trivial. He maintains, however, a classical restraint reminiscent of Jonson. "The Silken Tent" is charming, but not trivial. The poem begins in a playful manner, but toward the end, the wit contained in the bold metaphor--"She is as in a field a silken tent"--turns into an insight:

> But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
> By countless silken ties of love and thought
> To everything on earth the compass round ...

[17] Fire and Ice, pp. 59, 94, 158.

[18] Poetry of Frost, p. 181.

[19] Thompson notes Frost's early admiration for Herrick. Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 492.

The poem, with its fine control of tone and feeling, accomplishes an urbane, graceful compliment to the woman, the subject of the poem. "Meeting and Passing" describes with a matter-of-fact tone the situation between two lovers. It combines the very literal, meticulously stated, "Afterward I went past what you had passed/Before we met and you what I passed," and the mathematical "being less than two" and the "decimal," with the metaphysical idea of their not being "one" in mind "as yet." The metaphysical element, as in Herrick, is not obtrusive, for it merges into the prevailing tone of reticence exercised about love. "Telephone" with different line-lengths (Frost quoted Herrick's "To Daffodils" as precedent for such variations[20]) and the touch of fancy may owe more to Herrick than to any other poet. But these poems do not have the directness of Jonson, nor of Herrick, for that matter.

The effects on Frost's style described above are, still, of a general nature, and can be ascribed to the direction set by the classical models. For more specific kinds of influence, however, we may have to turn to the later British poets. Alvarez states, "Frost's poems sound almost familiar; Crabbe, Hardy, Edward Thomas, even Clare, worked in the same area."[21] The statement does not refer to any influence, but provides a context, and offers an alignment of poets for inspection. Discussing these poets in the context of Frost would perhaps reveal influence, if any, and both resemblances, and differences.

[20] Ibid.

[21] The Shaping Spirit, p. 169.

Though far from Frost in time, Crabbe may be assumed to have some relation to Frost's narrative poems. Certain broad features common to both can be stated, to start with. The poems of both are impersonal; their interests are actively engaged in presenting the lives of others around them in a pastoral setting. In both the rural community makes itself felt as a stabilizing presence. And both have strong anti-pastoral elements in their poems: Crabbe portrays "squires, parsons, parish clerks, paupers, criminals, farmers, dissenters, gipsies, all the grades of life to be found between the hall and the workhouse."[22] Frost, with less range of human types, writes about New England men and women "honestly and seriously," and without any condescension: As Pound said, "His stuff sticks in your head,"[23] and by "stuff" he meant subject matter. Crabbe rejected the convention of the pastoral, and of the dignified subject matter. In his first poem "The Village," Crabbe explains his general attitude to poetry:

> ...I paint the cot
> As truth will have it and as bards will not.

The antithesis established between "truth" and "bards" is implied in Frost's respect for literal fact, as in "Mowing":

> Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
> To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
> Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
> (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
> The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

[22]T. R. Barnes, English Verse: Voice and Movement from Wyatt to Yeats, p. 147.

[23]Poetry, 5 (December, 1914), 130.

The styles of both are lucid, matter-of-fact, and characterized by a certain bare honesty. If the attitude to poetry is similar, so are their narrative methods. Both are strongly anecdotal--Crabbe in The Parish Register (not to speak of the full-fledged verse tale which he later developed), and Frost in North of Boston--and they both display the art of the short story. Two characteristics especially stand out in their methods: first, there is no physical description of characters in their verse tales; second, the character of men and women is established through their actions. The portrait of widow Goe from The Parish Register is a case in point. In "Home Burial," the first seventeen lines illustrate Frost's method of the verse tale. The lines describe the actions of a distraught mother who has lost her child and is inconsolable. Both her speech and actions point to her nervous, high-strung nature.

But the resemblances cease here. Alvarez stresses the difference when he writes: "There is a certain toughness to Frost that is not the same as Crabbe's moral firmness."[24] This is true. Crabbe has Chaucer behind him; something of Chaucer's range and humanity touches Crabbe. Besides, he shares the irony of Jane Austen, his contemporary. Frost has none of these advantages. He has, of course, Emerson behind him, but his attitude to Emerson is ambiguous. In his poems, Frost holds his theme in isolation, and presents it in all its starkness and without any reference to the larger world. Crabbe presents his in relation to a sense of balance, reason and good sense, moral imperatives respected in

[24]Alvarez, p. 169.

Augustan culture. Crabbe's strength is Augustan, as Leavis has remarked;[25] and his wit is of the kind nurtured by the inner rhetoric of the heroic couplet. The "moral firmness," therefore, is due to Crabbe's strong ties with the Augustan background. In Frost's world, on the other hand, there are no explicit moral commitments. The need is simply to survive--as the oven bird does or the woodchuck, which even makes a philosophy of survival. The "toughness" of Frost comes out in the statement, "the strong are saying nothing until they see" ("The Strong are Saying Nothing"). And what is seen, the stark reality, is what Frost presents in his narratives. In "Home Burial" the conflict between husband and wife remains unresolved, and is presented as unresolvable. The near-mad wife in "A Servant to Servants" has nothing but a dark future to look forward to. No wonder Trilling concluded that the people in Frost are "so isolated ... so tried down and calcined by life ..."[26] It is at this point that the difference between Crabbe and Frost becomes striking. With Crabbe, then, the similarity is one of subject matter and general method, rather than of style.

The case of Hardy is different, and more pertinent than Crabbe. The premises, however, are the same with all the three. The regional or the rural rather than the urban is the territory where they recognized that manners and morals were to be studied. And it is from Crabbe, as

[25] Revaluation, p. 125.

[26] "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," in Robert Frost, ed. J. M. Cox, p. 157.

F.L. Lucas notes, that Hardy "derived his own first impulse towards realism."[27]

Something of the tough honesty one finds in Crabbe, in Frost, is in Hardy too. They all tell the truth as they see it, without pity, without gloss. What distinguishes Hardy's verse and Frost's, though, is their uncompromising fidelity to fact and detail. And in this Hardy is more akin to Frost than to Crabbe. If in the eclogues Frost has similarities with Crabbe (which may not amount to an influence), in those lyrics, wherein Frost's persona is not an obtrusive presence and wherein the perception is the central focus, Frost has affinities with Hardy. Frost seems to have Hardy in mind when he writes:

> There is seldom more than a man to a harrowed piece.
> Men work alone, their lots plowed far apart,
> One stringing a chain of seed in an open crease,
> And another stumbling after a halting cart.
> (from "The Strong Are Saying Nothing")

These lines are strongly reminiscent of Hardy's lines, both in situation and sentiment, in "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations,'":

> Only a man harrowing clods
> In a slow silent walk
> With an old horse that stumbles and nods
> Half asleep as they stalk.

Despite the verbal similarities, Hardy's lines are more effective, more sharply focused. A closer look at Hardy's poem "A January Night" and Frost's "Bereft" will perhaps help clarify both the similarities and differences:

[27]Introduction, George Crabbe: An Anthology, p. xxi.

The rain smites more and more,
The east wind snarls and sneezes;
Through the joints of the quivering door
    The water wheezes.

The tip of each ivy-shoot
Writhes on its neighbour's face;
There is some hid dread afoot
    That we cannot trace.

Is it the spirit astray
Of the man at the house below
Whose coffin they took in to-day?
    We do not know.

And here is Frost's "Bereft":

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

Despite the obvious differences in metrical form, the theme of "hid dread" is common to both, and so is the background of hostile nature. Both poets resort to physical things and happenings in nature in order to dramatize their fears. Facts and things are conceived in terms of physical action: Hardy uses strong verbs like "smites," "snarls," "sneezes," and "writhes"; Frost uses similar verbs in "hissed," "struck." Further, Frost conceives his poem in terms of a number of actions: "I heard ... Holding open a restive door/Looking down hill ..."

Frost's saying as early as 1894 that "Thomas Hardy has taught me the good use of a few words"[28] makes eminent sense here.

The differences are equally apparent. Whereas Frost writes "I," Hardy generalizes "We." Hardy even hazards a guess about the "hid dread." It may be the dead man's spirit "afoot"; but "We do not know." Frost refrains from making any such guesses. The guess on the part of Hardy sounds a trifle naive, but the poem's effectiveness is unmistakable. Frost's poem is equally effective, but for a different reason. While Hardy's poem has the structure and rhythm of song,[29] Frost's poem, like Robinson's, has those of formal discourse. For, the discourse gives room for inferences to be drawn: "Something sinister in the tone/ Told me my secret must be known." And the close of the poem achieves effects similar to the effective peroration of the discourse, by using syntactic parallels: "Word I was .../Word I was .../Word I had ... " It is here that Frost is unlike Hardy.

Now compare Hardy's "Under the Waterfall" with Frost's "Directive"; the resemblances are curious, and the differences are striking. Both the poems describe a journey, a quest. Hardy's poem refers to a miraculous "drinking glass," "The chalice of ours," which is "lost" by the couple; Frost's poem refers to an equally miraculous "drinking goblet," which is "stolen" by the speaker. If Hardy gives his sense of measurement in "the purl of a little valley fall/About three spans wide and two spans tall/," Frost matches this with his, "The only field/

[28] Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson, p. 20.

[29] Yvor Winters, E. A. Robinson, p. 21.

Now left's no bigger than a harness gall." Neither of them, as they talk about the "drinking glass," is betrayed into any heroic postures. But Frost cannot escape from slipping into a posture of self-complacency. As Jarrell remarks: "Frost has little of Hardy's self-effacement, his matter-of-fact humility; Frost's tenderness, sadness, and humor are adulterated with vanity and hard complacency."[30] This is because talking in verse comes so easily to Frost: "Both of them are lost./And if you're lost enough to find yourself/By now, pull in your ladder road behind you/And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me." Beside this the dialogue that Hardy carries on in his poem is awkward: "And why gives this the only prime/Idea to you of a real love-rhyme?/And why does plunging your arm in a bowl/Full of spring water, bring throbs to your soul?" Because Frost can talk so well in verse, he tends to indulge in whimsical garrulity. And if this indulgence occurs frequently, as critics have noted, in Frost, indulgence in past memories and their potency occurs as frequently in Hardy. The experience in the poem "Under the Waterfall" is enveloped, characteristically, in memory which brings back the distant past--"a throe/From the past awakens."

A similar attitude to country things is also noticeable in both the poets. The speaker in Hardy's poem "An Unkindly May" comments on the outer weather's being very disturbing; but the shepherd, who is so taken in counting his flock returning to the fold, has no time for the weather. His attitude is similar to the speaker's in Frost's "The Need

[30]Randall Jarrell, The Third Book of Criticism, p. 300.

of Being Versed in Country Things": "One had to be versed in country things/Not to believe the phoebes wept."

As for Edward Thomas, it was Frost who influenced him to write poetry. Frost argued with him that poems could be made out of common vocabulary and cadence of everyday speech. North of Boston poems were to Thomas examples in technical innovation. Reviewing them, he said, "Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets. The meter avoids not only the old-fashioned pomp and sweetness, but the later fashion also of discord and fuss. In fact, the medium is common speech and common decasyllables ..."[31] The notion that realistic poems could be made from common speech fascinated other Georgians like Abercrombie and Gibson, who also knew Frost well. They often had a sharp eye for the natural detail, and, in a matter of fact, but casual, tone, they tried to express the rural misery or mirth in dramatic monologues.

Actually, Frost strengthened his notion of "sound of sense" in the sensitive company of Thomas. The sound of sense was, as Frost explained, how a sentence sounded when spoken. And his prime concern, as he stressed time and again, was to get into his verse the natural sounds and accents of the human voice as it utters sentences. Thomas helped refine the theory, and in his words, the emphasis falls on the educated voice, not just on the rural or colloquial:

[31]"A New Poet," The Daily News and Leader, 22 July (1914), 7. Reprinted by William Cooke, Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography 1878-1917, p. 146.

> All he [Frost] insists on is what he believes he finds in all poets--absolute fidelity to the postures which the voice assumes in the most expressive intimate speech. So long as these tones and postures are there he has not the least objection to any vocabulary whatever or any inversion or variation from the customary grammatical forms of talk. In fact I think he would agree that if the tones and postures survive in a complicated or learned vocabulary and structure the result is likely to be better than if they survive in the easiest form, that is, in the very words and structures of common speech.[32]

Thomas' own poems, all of them, are about the English countryside, its beasts, birds and flowers. While much of his material was the same as that of the Georgians, what distinguishes him is the scrupulous honesty and self-searching that is at work in his poems. His is a minor, but a very individual voice. And it is more ruminative, introspective than Frost's. His blank verse resembles at times Frost's blank verse, as in "Up in the Wind":

> 'But would you like to hear it swing all night
> And all day? All I ever had to thank
> The wind for was for blowing the sign down.
> Time after time it blew down and I could sleep.
> At last they fixed it, and it took a thief
> To move it, and we've never had another;
> It's lying at the bottom of the pond.
> But no one's moved the wood from off the hill
> There at the back, although it makes a noise
> When the wind blows, as if a train were running
> The other side, a train that never stops
> Or ends....

Thomas himself had outgrown the poetical habit of the Victorians and cut the language to the bone:

[32]See his letter to Gordon Bottomley, quoted by W. W. Robson, "The Achievement of Robert Frost," Southern Review, 2 (Autumn, 1966), 741.

> The steam hissed. Someone cleared the throat.
> No one left and no one came
> On the bare platform. What I saw
> Was Addlestrop--only the name. ("Addlestrop")

Compare this with the characteristic Frost stanza:

> As long as it takes to pass
> A ship keeps raising its hull;
> The wetter ground like glass
> Reflects a standing gull. ("Neither Out Far ...")

Despite the obvious differences in rhyme, midline pauses, in the above two stanzas, the scene described in them comes out sharp, precise. The speaker in "The Road Not Taken" hesitates which road to take, and reminds one of the lines in Thomas' "The Sign-Post":

> I read the sign. Which way shall I go?
> A voice says: You would not have doubted so
> At twenty.

The theme is similar; but the voice is less vacillating and more assured.

The British poets, then, have influenced Frost in varying degrees. And this influence, often composite and not easily traceable to any one single poet, had surely its contributing effect on lines such as these--whose "classical" virtues Brower has stressed:[33]

> 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. ("Going for Water")

But Frost's early fame rested more on the colloquial and the familiar than on the literary or the "classical." It rested on the "technical innovation" seen in lines such as these from "The Code:"

[33] Poetry of Frost, p. 181.

> I'd seen about enough of his bulling tricks
> (We call that bulling). I'd been watching him.
> So when he paired off with me in the hayfield
> To load the load, thinks I, Look out for trouble.
> I built the load and topped it off; old Sanders
> Combed it down with a rake and says, "O.K."

While the above two passages bear witness to Frost's stylistic range--from the literary to the colloquial--they also point to two distinct sources. If the first passage has British sources in the background, the second passage has a distinctly American idiom and rhythm, designed to give the feel of colloquial yankee speech. Frost had looked, as any innovative poet would do, for antecedents in American verse to support his use of colloquial speech. And as an approximation to his notion of the colloquial were the brusque lines from Emerson's "Hamatreya":

> Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Meriam, Flint,
> Possessed the land which rendered to their toil
> Hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool and wood;

and a few lines later, these resembling a countryman's talk,

> The land is well,--lies fairly to the south.
> 'Tis good, when you have crossed the sea and back,
> To find the sitfast acres where you left them.

This is, of course, as far as Emerson could sound colloquial in verse. And if his practice in the colloquial was not a great help, his theories were; they seemed to set the terms for Frost in shaping his poems. The "anti-vocabularian"[34] stance expressed in Emerson's poem "Monadnoc," for instance, was partly responsible for Frost's colloquial rhythms in North of Boston. As for Emerson's practice in the writing of

[34]"On Emerson," Selected Prose, p. 113.

verse, he had clear models to offer by way of gnomic poems. And in this respect Emily Dickinson was another distinct influence on Frost's occasional epigrammatic style as seen in several of his short poems. Emerson and Miss Dickinson, in short, were Frost's immediate poetic heritage.

Emerson's influence on American literature has been, it seems, ubiquitous. There is, perhaps, hardly any American writer who does not, if not directly, in some remote fashion, feel Emerson's influence. But with Frost, as both Frost and current critical opinion agree, the influence of Emerson has been direct, major. It is an influence that Frost both accepts and rejects; it provides him the framework in which to operate, and the challenge which he often resists. The following discussion will deal with this aspect of influence in so far as it contributed to the shaping of Frost's style. Frost was eminently pragmatic in his approach to Emerson. He took from Emerson whatever was immediately relevant to his purposes. And quite often, there was support to be found in Emerson's express statements for some of his stylistic practices. Thus Frost's style can directly be linked to Emerson's emphasis on a language of facts and things, and so his "whimsy" to Emerson's assertion of "Whim" as a form of personal freedom. Frost rather frequently called himself a "synecdochist"; and Emerson's favorite method of analogy was synecdoche. Further, Frost got his notion of voice tones, as he himself admits, straight from Emerson's poem "Monadnoc." And, finally, several of Frost's short poems are reminiscent of Emerson's gnomic poems; especially, poems such as "Brahma," "Uriel"--along with Dickinson's numerous poems--were models of terse,

epigrammatic verse for Frost. These points may be taken up one by one.

Evidence for this many-sided relation of Frost to Emerson is not hard to come by. To take the first point (Emerson's stress on a language of things), the precept that Emerson lays down in "Nature" would sound momentous if read in the context of Frost's style. After complaining how "old words are perverted to stand for things which are not," and how "In due time the fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections," Emerson writes: "But wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things."[35] Frost had turned away from the "old words," and from the Victorian poetical after A Boy's Will. He had tried to "fasten words again to visible things," had turned to actual things and facts to make poems about them. In North of Boston and Mountain Interval, he wrote poems, as their titles suggest, on objects related to practical life of the country: "Birches," "Mending Wall," "The Axe-Helve," "The Grindstone," "Blueberries," "After Apple-Picking," "The Mountain," and so on. Abercrombie, one of the earliest reviewers of Frost, was quick to perceive this aspect of Frost's verse: "His poetry is composed as far as possible in a language of things."[36] Frost himself was aware of this aspect of his language, for when he praised Thomas' verse he did so in terms of his own stylistic preoccupation: "His concern to the last was what it had always

[35] Selected Writings of Emerson, p. 17.

[36] Unsigned review of North of Boston in The Nation (London), 15, No. 11 (June 13, 1914), 423-24; reprinted without a title under Lascelles Abercrombie in Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton, p. 25.

been, to touch earthly things and come as near them in words as words would come."[37] This was Frost's own favorite method, to let words come as near objects as words can; and this method had brought both the poets together.

Presumably, there were not one but three Emersons, as William James noted: the pragmatic, the whimsical, and the mystical.[38] The pragmatic Emerson respected facts. In his essay "Nature" he concluded, "To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables."[39] Of course, Emerson himself could not attain to a strong sense of facts, because his "transparent eyeball" often saw only the universal in the particular. But Frost could match Emerson's precept with his practice, for he wrote in "Mowing:" "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."

Emerson's respect for facts, however, did not prevent him from being whimsical at times. For, in "Self-Reliance," he announced: "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim."[40] And in order to assert personal freedom from logic and consistency, he declared:

[37] Selected Letters, p. 217.

[38] After examining the nine volumes of Emerson's writings, marked and annotated by William James - at present housed in Widener Library at Harvard - Frederic I. Carpenter notes that James's remarks upon Emerson's essays fall into three classes - giving, perhaps, three Emersons. American Literature and the Dream, pp. 108-10.

[39] Selected Writings, p. 41.

[40] Ibid., p. 149.

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."[41] Whether or not Frost took this "whim" from Emerson, it is hard to tell. But he surely joins the tradition of Emerson when he says in "To a Thinker": "Trust my instinct--I'm a bard." It is this trusting of instinct, impulse, in the face of reason which has given us the "whimsical" Frost. There are, however, occasions when Frost seems to distrust instinct, as in "The White-Tailed Hornet." But this only leads to intellectual inconsistency, which Winters has noted.[42] Thompson even records that Frost arranged the order of the poems in A Boy's Will so as to portray "a wavering progression of subjective moods: searchings, questionings, doubtings, affirmings"[43] and so on. And this pattern of arranging his poems recurred in several books.

Emerson's glorification of things and facts had its correlative. It pointed to the notion that things are also symbols: "Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part."[44] This synecdochic correlation of part-whole is further stressed in the same essay: " ... there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature."[45] Also, this

[41] Ibid., p. 152.

[42] The Function of Criticism, p. 168.

[43] Robert Frost. Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlet, p. 10.

[44] "The Poet," Selected Writings, p. 325.

[45] Ibid., p. 327.

notion of synecdoche as being the functional principle of nature links him to the Puritans, for, as Thompson remarks, this was "a notion ... found operative in Puritan doctrine: that any 'fact' may and should be viewed as a type or emblem or symbol of some element in the divine plan."[46] He returns to the same idea in his essay "Poetry and Imagination": "God himself does not speak prose, but communicates with us by hints, omens, inferences and dark resemblances in objects lying all around us."[47] And this is perhaps the mystical Emerson that James referred to.

It is at this point that Wordsworth comes into the picture. For Emerson, as Brower puts it, "was a direct inheritor of the Wordsworthian tradition."[48] And Brower has discussed at length the relation of Wordsworth to Frost, and has commented on Wordsworth's "mythological seeing"[49]--the way the peaks in the "Prelude" seem to threaten the boy--as being a possible source for Frost's occasional stylistic elevation. Thus Brower seems to relate this kind of seeing to, say, Frost's image of the powerful buck in the poem "The Most of It," the buck carrying, as part of nature, nature's mute answer to man's questioning. The sea in "Once by the Pacific" is another illustration, and so are the last lines of "Two Look at Two." Furthermore, the correspondence of natural facts to spiritual facts stressed by Wordsworth and Emerson in their writings

[46]The Early Years, p. 550.

[47]As quoted by Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 694.

[48]Poetry of Frost, p. 56.

[49]Ibid., p. 51.

seems to inform some of Frost's poems, "I Will Sing You One-O" and "Canis Major." But even in these poems the correspondence is implied rather than stated, and the implying is done with caution and reservation. In "Design," on the other hand, the speaker appears to be questioning Emerson's assumptions of a beneficent design in the universe. The framework is Emersonian, but the attitude of the poet is one of skepticism: If there is any design at all in the universe, it cannot be one of benevolence. In poems of loneliness and alienation--"Desert Places" and "Acquainted with the Night"--Frost seems to deny what Emerson affirms on the strength of his transcendental beliefs. In the main, therefore, Frost accepts, as Brower says, the "pragmatic" Emerson,[50] but would question the mystic--"The strong are saying nothing until they see." And this stance often makes for his ambiguous attitude to Emerson. The mystic Emerson remained always a challenge that Frost would more frequently resist; and when he resisted he wrote fine poems such as "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," "The Most of It," "Design," and "The Rabbit Hunter."

Though the synecdochic stress is seen everywhere in Emerson, Emerson did not explicitly call himself a synecdochist, as Frost did. And the objects in Frost's poems, "The Axe-Helve," "The Woodpile," or the wall in "Mending Wall" invariably led to general conclusions about life. The method was essentially similar to the one Thoreau had applied in Walden:

[50] Ibid., p. 42.

a particular object or fact led to a general insight into life. And the leap from the particular object to the general notion, accomplished in Wordsworth and Emerson by a poetic fiat, is replaced, for the most part, by gradual discursive steps, taken with caution and whimsy, as in "The Woodpile." The bird's role in the poem and the speaker's relation to it, can only be called whimsical; and the caution is of the kind that comes out in the statement: "And it [nature] must be a little more in favor of man,/Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least" ("Our Hold on the Planet")--the Frostian brand of optimism. This caution--"Say a fraction of one per cent"--and whimsy, which relaxes the control of reason, both are conveyed often by the speaker's sudden changes of tone in the poems.

The changes of tone in the poems were actually based upon Frost's notion of voice tones, which, as mentioned earlier, he formulated and refined in the company of Edward Thomas. The point to stress, however, is that he got the notion, as he admitted in his essay "On Emerson," from Emerson's poem "Monadnoc." The poem, according to him, set forth an "antivocabularian stance":[51] "Fourscore or a hundred words" are all the vocabulary that the country folk could afford. This paucity in verbal resources notwithstanding, these "rude poets of the tavern hearth" could express many nuances of meaning, "Past the statesman's art and passion," through their voice tones for which they find no words. Frost confesses in the same essay that he "was always

[51] Selected Prose, p. 113.

in favor of the solid curse as one of the most beautiful of figures ... It depends for variety on the tones of saying it and the situations."[52] But as theory this was hardly commendable, and, obviously, it underwent several revisions. For in practice, neither Emerson nor Frost was anti-vocabularian: their range exceeded that of basic English. And as Frost wrote in blank verse several monologues and dialogues for North of Boston, he could achieve the control of voice tones not by limiting the vocabulary but by skillful placing and moving of the caesura along the metrical line, as in this passage from "A Servant to Servants":

> I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water,
> Our Willoughby! How did you hear of it?
> I expect, though, everyone's heard of it.
> In a book about ferns? Listen to that!
> You let things more like feathers regulate
> Your going and coming. And you like it here?
> I can see how you might. But I don't know!

This is obviously a refinement on the earlier "solid curse" theory. The sudden changes of tone in the above lines recreate for us the nervous woman who is seen, later in the poem, fighting a losing battle against hereditary insanity. Even this imitation of colloquial speech, admirable as it is, gave way to later sophistication in Frost's verse. After North of Boston Frost's tendency was to use colloquial speech with less frequency and to turn more toward literary locutions, and to employ the subtle nuances of voice. This was probably because he wrote lyrics more frequently than narratives, and so had less to do with the

[52] Ibid., p. 114.

creation of characters. The result, perhaps, can be seen in the supreme poise with which the last stanza of "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" deploys the finer niceties of tone:

> They cannot look out far.
> They cannot look in deep.
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep?

The first two lines declare the utter limitedness of the sea-watchers. The third line changes the tone to one of sarcasm; the fourth line, with "any watch," generalizes the condition of the sea-watchers. The third and fourth lines, together, point to the central dilemma of the poem, that the people, though limited, are limitless in their persistence with which they watch the sea. This is, perhaps, the farthest point of refinement the theory achieved from its early beginnings in the idea set down by Emerson in "Monadnoc."

Of course, there was Browning's use of conversational rhythms in his monologues, and Frost could have taken his clue from it. But then, he could as well have taken the clue from Chaucer and Shakespeare, in whom he said he first heard the speech accents.[53] But the point is he took the clue from Emerson, and the reason, perhaps, is that the context was closer home, and the problems faced by both American poets were similar. And in contrast, Browning's use of language was urban; he wrote about the Renaissance characters, and so his conception of the

[53]See The Early Years, p. 155, and Conversations with Frost, p. 5.

historical figures depended on his powers of impersonation.[54] Frost had to portray, not historical, but contemporary men and women of New England in his verse. Browning may have suggested the form of the monologue in a general way to Frost. But, no doubt, it was to Emerson, as discussed earlier, that Frost turned, because both his precepts and his poems provided Frost an immediate American context in which to work.

As for Emerson's poems, they have a primal quality; for, as Winters says, "it was with Emerson that American poetry may be said to have begun."[55] And Frost's turning to Emerson's poems was only natural. The gnomic, riddle-like qualities of poems "Brahma" and "Uriel" cut deep for Frost. "Brahma," as Frost confesses in his essay "On Emerson," intrigued him for a lifetime; and "Uriel" was "the greatest Western poem" ("The Masque of Reason") ever written. Frost captures something of the terse and the paradoxical, as in "Brahma,"

> If the red slayer think he slays,
> Or if the slain think he is slain ...
>
> Far or forgot to me is near;
> Shadow and sunlight are the same ...
>
> When me they fly, I am the wings;
> I am the doubter and the doubt ...

in the turn of the phrase in his poem "Escapist - Never":

[54]See T. S. Eliot, "Three Voices of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets, pp. 95-96.

[55]"A Cool Master," Review of E. A. Robinson's Poems, Poetry, No. 5 (1922), 277.

> He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.
> He seeks a seeker who in his turn seeks
> Another still, lost far into the distance.
> Any who seek him seek in him the seeker.
> His life is pursuit of a pursuit forever.[56]

The defiant and the subversive in "Uriel"--"Evil will bless and ice will burn"--was, as Brower remarks, responsible for many of the unconventional, paradoxical statements in Frost's two Masques. Even Frost's "Fire and Ice" is seen, by both Mrs. Sergeant and Brower, to owe its terse style to "Uriel."[57]

If, then, Emerson's poems and precepts have gone a long way in forging a complex bond with Frost, there are certain specific, perhaps simple, ways in which Thoreau influenced Frost's style. Frost has acknowledged that Walden (along with Robinson Crusoe) showed him "how the limited can make snug in the limitless."[58] This attitude is particularly seen in poems such as "The Oven Bird," "A Drumlin Woodchuck," and "An Empty Threat." But more important as source of stylistic influence is the naturalist's eye for unusual details seen in Walden. As Brower notes, "What distinguishes Thoreau from Emerson and Wordsworth is not his transcendental interpretation of nature but his full expression of his commerce with things." And this constant "commerce" as he further notes, is based on a certain "reverence for 'things'"[59]--a

[56]This is from In the Clearing (1962), p. 27, Frost's last volume of verse, which is not included in Complete Poems. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text, abbreviated as IC.

[57]Poetry of Frost, pp. 118, 217. Brower also cites Mrs. Sergeant's opinion.

[58]The Early Years, p. 549.

[59]Poetry of Frost, p. 71.

trait which links Thoreau to Emily Dickinson. And it is essentially this "commerce with things" which engages the attentive eye of Frost in "Hyla Brook." In fact, Frost's perception of things in their singular quaintness, as in "Directive," points directly to two chapters of Walden: "House Warming" and "Former Inhabitants: and Winter Visitors." The locutions in "Directive" such as "lilacs ... cellar dents ... cellar holes ... firkins ... watering place" have all been traced to the native words of Walden.[60] Even the quest for the perennial source of life is common to both. The difference, of course, is that while Thoreau could afford to pursue the quest of the spirit's watering place to "Brister's spring" and "Walden pond," and, ultimately, even to the Ganges, any such transcultural leap for Frost would be going against his grain.

Another New Englander who seems to have had considerable influence on Frost is Emily Dickinson. Her pithy and epigrammatic poems were, besides Emerson's, the only other source of gnomic style available in American verse. Frost's saying, "We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections,"[61] has its parallel in Emily Dickinson's "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." Several of her poems read like riddles. Further, this "tell it slant" often leads them both to a kind of cuteness, which can only be called whimsy--we remember that Emily Dickinson and Frost are both in the direct line of Emerson. Even in her best poems, there are places where she goes "cute." The poem

[60] S. P. C. Duvall, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of Walden," American Literature, 31 (1959-60), 482-488.

[61] "Education and Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 37.

"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," closes with this:

> But never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone-

The closing lines of Frost's "Come In" has this kind of cuteness, even a certain coyness:

> I would not come in
> I meant not even if asked,
> And I hadn't been.

Alongside this whimsy is their remarkable talent for using words to denote vivid natural details. Emily Dickinson's lines in "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" or in "A Bird Came Down the Walk" give sharp and vivid details of the snake and the bird, a characteristic one finds in several of Frost's short poems, say, in "Spring Pools" or "The Door in the Dark." Moreover, there are words and lines in Frost which often remind one of Emily Dickinson. The early poem "In Neglect" (from A Boy's Will) has these lines:

> That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook
> With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,
> And try if we cannot feel forsaken.

The word "seraphic," especially, has the touch of Emily Dickinson, and so the bright vivacity that goes with it--a quality which points forward to Wallace Stevens:

> Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
> And saints to windows run,
> To see the little tippler
> Leaning against the sun!

is the last stanza of "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed." Frost's lines are playful, cute; Emily Dickinson's have even a touch of hilarity; and a certain flamboyance of phrase in them, absent in Frost, links them

with Stevens' poem, say, "Evening without Angels."

Consider Frost's "To Earthward": The poem seems to support and illustrate Keats' "Oh, for a life of sensations!" And the mystique of sensation celebrated in each stanza with sharp images culminates, aptly, and through a sense of satiety, in a longing for death, which again is Keats:

> When stiff and sore and scarred
> I take away my hand
> From leaning on it hard
> In grass and sand,
>
> The hurt is not enough:
> I long for weight and strength
> To feel the earth as rough
> To all my length.

But the verbal affinities--"stiff and sore," "grass," "hurt"--clearly point to Emily Dickinson, who is also an adept in describing benumbing sensations connected with death, as in "After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes" or "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain." Furthermore, the mixing of the colloquial and the literary, of the native English with the learned Latin, which are the striking characteristics of Emily Dickinson's style, is often seen in Frost's lines, as in the final stanza of "Good Hours":

> Over the snow my creaking feet
> Disturbed the slumbering village street
> Like profanation, by your leave,
> At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

In the third line, "by your leave," after the learned word "profanation," lightens the tone from the serious to the casual. In Emily Dickinson such effects are much more frequent, far easier to find (see, for instance, the second stanza of "This is My Letter to the World").

Sometimes it is common to find Frost assimilating even the logic and the turn of her phrase: Compare the stanza from "I Never Saw a Moor" with Frost's "Not All There":[62]

> I never spoke to God
> Nor visited in heavens;
> Yet certain am I of the spot
> As if the chart were given.
>
> I turned to speak to God
> About the world's despair;
> But to make bad matters worse
> I found God wasn't there.

If Frost's several short poems have qualities similar to those of Emily Dickinson, his narratives in blank verse somewhat resemble those of Robinson. Critics have cited the example of "Isaac and Archibald" as being the closest to resemble Frost's narratives. But while the general run of verse is like Frost's, the diction is different.

> It was high time
> Those oats were cut, said Isaac; and he feared
> That Archibald--well, he could never feel
> Quite sure of Archibald. Accordingly
> The good old man invited me--that is,
> Permitted me--to go along with him;
> And I, with a small boy's adhesiveness
> To competent old age, got up and went.

The first four lines are similar to Frost's narrative verse in their accents of colloquial ease. But with the fifth line onwards the verse takes a new turn: the boy corrects himself--"Permitted me"--with a touch of self-consciousness; and the last two lines with the word "adhesiveness," a word from Whitman--which Frost perhaps would never

[62]Also, many lines in Frost's "Sand Dunes" are strongly reminiscent of Miss Dickinson's last stanza in "By the Sea."

use in his narratives--are unlike Frost. The last two lines would however constitute Robinson's usual formal style.

Though Robinson shared with Frost a taste for the familiar and the colloquial, he did not have a sure hand at sustaining it in his narrative verse. In fact his longer poems like "Launcelot" show frequent lapses in taste as he affects to write in a colloquial style. Robinson was Frost's contemporary, and he, together with Emily Dickinson and Frost, as Waggoner remarks,[63] defined the direct Emersonian line. If Frost was ambiguous and somewhat skeptical about Emerson's transcendentalism, Robinson had accepted it in principle. But when he wrote short poems such as "Veteran Sirens" and "Eros Turannos," he could put aside his transcendentalism. It touched, however, his longer poems, wherein his thought and style are loose and unimpressive. But Emerson's influence on Robinson did not result in any "stylistic eccentricity"[64] as it did with Emily Dickinson and Frost.

When we get to the short poems of Robinson, the differences between the two poets become all the more striking. Compare Robinson's "Eros Turannos" with Frost's "The Subverted Flower." Both poems deal with love and its unsatisfactory nature from the point of view of women. But behind such phrases as "blurred sagacity," "her pride assuages her almost," and "Tradition, touching all he sees,/Beguiles and reassures him" in Robinson's poem, one senses the presence of

[63]Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets, p. 292.

[64]Winters, E. A. Robinson, p. 18.

Henry James,[65] an interest in probing the inner motivations and springs of action matched by a search for the inevitable phrase. The short poem offers Robinson as the poet of absolute statement:

> The falling leaf inaugurates
> The reign of her confusion.

The dignity of impersonal tone with which Robinson renders the woman's tragic despair in the poem is very unlike Frost. Contrast the poem with the following lines from Frost's "The Subverted Flower":

> A girl could only see
> That a flower had marred a man,
> But what she could not see
> Was that the flower might be
> Other than base and fetid:
> That the flower had done but part,
> And what the flower began
> Her own too meager heart
> Had terribly completed.

The lines relate feeling to flower: Everything revolves round the flower; it is in relation to the flower the sentiments of the girl get defined. In Robinson's poem there is no single object in relation to which the woman's predicament is made vivid. The concrete situation is in the background of the poem, and the poet considers the situation at a level remote from direct feeling or involvement, a level at which the inner motivations could be probed in order to understand the situation. Frost moves from one specific detail to another; Robinson from one precisely stated feeling to the next. As the Frost poem moves toward its close, the poet succeeds in defining vividly a particular situation.

[65] Ibid., p. 20. Winters considers Henry James as a strong influence on Robinson.

Robinson generalizes the particular, and the degree of abstraction that the poem takes is amazing when we think of Frost. By contrast, what impresses the reader is the unusually high degree of factual content in Frost's poem. In Robinson the personal balance is already achieved by the poet before the poem begins. In Frost the balance is achieved in the poem by a process of discovery of opposed attitudes or viewpoints; but the balance itself is one of unresolvable dilemma of the lovers.

Despite the dissimilarity between the two poets, Frost still belongs firmly to the milieu constituted by Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Robinson. Of course, in the above discussion, I have not mentioned all the poets who have, at some time or other, touched Frost's verse, perhaps ever so slightly. For instance, in "The Lesson for Today," an occasional couplet may sound similar to those of Dryden and Pope.[66] In such poems as "What Fifty Said" and "Riders" Frost may write like Yeats. The lines from "What Fifty Said," for instance,

> When I was young my teachers were the old.
> I gave up fire for form till I was cold.
> I suffered like a metal being cast.
> I went to school to age to learn the past.
> Now I am old my teachers are the young.
> What can't be molded must be cracked and sprung ...,

have, both in theme and idiom, striking Yeatsian echoes. But these are so occasional, momentary, they cannot be regarded as permanent influences (despite Frost's admiration for Yeats).[67] Nor do these resemblances

[66]Brower notices similarities between Frost and Dryden and Pope. See Poetry of Frost, p. 205.

[67]The Early Years, pp. 361-62.

amount to anything significant either, for any poet with a career as long and sustained as Frost's is bound to capture echoes of other poets in his poems. The echoes and resemblances captured in Frost's verse are usually those accessible to the range of the poet's basic discursive style. Of the influences we have discussed, Emerson and Emily Dickinson among American poets form a durable influence on Frost. Of the British poets, Crabbe might have suggested a method, and a viable attitude for Frost's narrative poems; but it is Hardy who helped shape Frost's style in his short poems. The classical poets of Greece and Rome, and the English classical poets such as Jonson and Herrick may, however, be said to have only a general influence on Frost.

CHAPTER II

"Poems About -- Things"

> Your trouble, Robert, is that you write poems about--<u>things</u>. (Wallace Stevens to Robert Frost)

(1)

In the previous chapter Frost's style was discussed in relation to the styles of other poets, both earlier and contemporary, British and American. The purpose was to derive from specific examples qualities that would relate Frost to other poets and yet sufficiently distinguish him from others. This undertaking further helped evolve a notion of stylistic tradition to which Frost's style belonged.

The present chapter and the chapters to follow will, however, concentrate mainly on the intrinsic features of Frost's style in his poems. The need to offer an idea of style, therefore, may arise at this point. In the following discussion, I shall use "style" to mean, simply, choices of words and rhythm a poet makes in his poems. The words may be literal or figurative; the rhythm may be conversational or incantatory. The choices of these elements of style, however, are controlled by the needs of the subject matter. A pastoral poem or parlor verse would bring in its own restrictive controls on the use of words. "The Pasture," for instance, uses a greater proportion of words denoting natural objects, while "A Case for Jefferson" uses a greater

proportion of abstract, learned words. This is one part of the story. The other part consists in the attitude of the poet toward the subject matter, and in the control this attitude exerts on the choices. If the attitude is ironical, as it is in "A Case for Jefferson," then the irony is conveyed through words chosen so as to strike a note of incongruity. The abstract words juxtaposed in the poem--"Freudian Viennese," "Marxian Muscovite," and "Puritan Yankee"--connote ideas and concepts, pointing to the cleverness of the poet in juggling them. In brief, it is the attitude of the poet which determines the way he views the subject, the things he includes and the things he excludes. It is, then, the principle which decides the style of the poem. Wesley Trimpi sums up this notion of style succinctly: "Any study of style is, in the end, a study of an intention, of the expression of certain attitudes toward experience."[1]

It is perhaps no coincidence that both Hardy and Frost, whose literary kinship was noted in the previous chapter, seem to hold a similar view of the close interrelation of style and attitude. Consider Hardy on style: "Style, as far as the word is meant to express something more than literary finish, can only be treatment, and treatment depends upon the mental attitude of the novelist thus entering into the very substance of a narrative, as into that of any other kind of literature."[2]

[1] Ben Jonson's Poems, p. x.

[2] As quoted by Samuel Hynes, The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry, p. 65.

For Hardy, then, style is "treatment," and depends upon the mental attitude. The resemblance of this view to Frost's is evident: " ... style in prose or verse," Frost remarks, "is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying ... [The writer's] style is the way he carries himself toward his ideas and deeds."[3] These remarks make clear the relation between what the poet says and how he says it: That is, style does both, shows how a writer takes himself, seriously or amusingly, and how his taking himself affects what he is saying. If he takes himself seriously, then he will take his ideas seriously, and so his poetic discourse will exhibit an attitude of seriousness. But this is, obviously, said from the poet's point of view. The reader can, however, infer the poet's attitude by attending to the style of the poem closely.

In deciding the style of a poem, according to Roman Jakobson, the poet will have usually two basic verbal choices available to him. If Jakobson's remarks may be restricted to poetry, then, poetic discourse for the most part proceeds "along two different semantic lines: One topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity."[4] The terms that Jakobson suggests are respectively the metaphoric and the metonymic. The metaphoric relation between two objects depends upon the link established through likeness between them.

[3]The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, p. 166.

[4]"The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," Fundamentals of Language, Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, p. 75.

The metonymic relation between objects, on the other hand, depends upon contiguity, their proximity in space and time. Jakobson further relates these two "semantic lines" of poetic discourse to the idea of style: "In manipulating these two kinds of connection (similarity and contiguity) in both their aspects (positional and semantic)--selecting, combining, and ranking them--an individual exhibits his personal style, his verbal predilections and preferences."[5]

On this view, then, if a poem adopts a consistent way of calling up things and objects in contiguous relation, the poem will predominantly be metonymic in style. This way of describing metonymy is significant because what it points to in Frost's verse is central to the present enquiry. In this chapter, therefore, my chief preoccupation will be with the metonymic method, and the other related aspects which the metonymic way of seeing, viewing, and speaking would seem to lend to Frost's poetic style. In fact, as I hope to show, the metonymic method is basic to Frost's style in a great number of poems. I shall, however, refer to the metaphoric--the other semantic line of discourse--in this chapter incidentally, whenever it is found to occur or operate in close relation with the metonymic. A fuller discussion of the metaphoric in its own right I reserve for Chapter IV.

In the previous chapter I noted, while comparing the styles of Robinson and Frost that, despite their being in the direct line of Emerson, Robinson works usually with a much greater degree of

[5]Ibid., p. 76.

abstraction than Frost. And Frost, in contradistinction, displays a greater concreteness of detail and degree of local specificity. An understanding of the use of metonymy in Frost sharpens the focus on this aspect of Frost's style, making possible an assessment of both its strengths and its weaknesses.

The following passage from Frost's "In the Home Stretch" will illustrate the point at issue:

> She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked
> Over the sink out through a dusty window
> At weeds the water from the sink made tall.
> She wore her cape; her hat was in her hand.
> Behind her was confusion in the room,
> Of chairs turned upside down to sit like people
> In other chairs, and something, come to look,
> For every room a house has--parlor, bedroom,
> And dining room--thrown pell-mell in the kitchen.

Note in particular here the first three lines: The word "sink," used once in each of the first three lines, becomes a focal point to which the description returns. Even the link between weeds and sink is not as remote as it may seem, because the water from the sink made the weeds grow tall. If "she" can be taken as an object of perception, then the objects linked together and perceived in relation are: she, sink, window, weeds, and water. The grouping of these several items in three lines of verse illustrates the principle of contiguity. The first line has two finite verbs "stood" and "looked," and a strong iambic beat. The second line, however, with irregular meter, catches in its wavering rhythm something of the motion of looking, the motion being conveyed by the prepositions: "Over ... out through ... at ... from ..." The passage as a whole reads like a piece of realistic fiction, only

condensed into verse; it illustrates Frost's characteristic way of linking things and objects together.

The lines from "The Mountain" may be offered as a second example:

> And yet between the town and it [mountain] I found,
> When I walked forth at dawn to see new things,
> Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields.

The words as put together show the speaker's grasp on the proximate reality. They represent a concrete awareness of the location of objects--fields, river, mountain, and town--fixed and predicated in relation to the "I." The "I" in the lines decides, measures the external scene, and a few lines later, emerges with a sense of possession:

> ... I saw through leafy screens
> Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,
> Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up--
> With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet
> Or turn and sit on and look out and down,
> With little ferns in crevices at his elbow. (Emphasis added)

The sense of possession, of mastery over the external scene, is first tested casually in the subordinate clause, "[that] one could rest a knee on getting up," and personalized in terms of "one" who could sense the "depths behind him sheer a hundred feet." The shift of the pronoun from "I" to "one" keeps up the objectivity of the description. The passage exemplifies, once again, Frost's method of perceiving objects and events in contiguous relation.

The method, however, can suddenly deteriorate into an awkward mannerism, as in the lines from "In the Home Stretch" (a part of which was quoted earlier):

'Rank weeds that love the water from the dishpan
More than some women like the dishpan, Joe.'

This method of linking objects and events closely keeps up the flow of poetic discourse, and, in the above passage, helps maintain the flow of nondescript dialogue between the couple who have just given up their city dwelling and come to live in the country. The trick of repeating "dishpan," which is similar to the earlier repetition of "sink" in the first three lines of the poem, is a familiar one. Also noticeable here is the anthropomorphic association in "rank weeds that love"; such associations appear frequently in Frost's verse.

The above examples are drawn from narrative poems. And it is not difficult to see how narrative poems after all do tend to have a strong metonymic base and, therefore, tend to be realistic descriptions. Jakobson himself suggests that "the metonymic way is preponderant" in heroic epics, and "predetermines the so-called realistic trend" in fiction.[6] In Frost, however, the same method can be shown to be operative even in his meditative short poems. The first stanza of "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight"--"a metaphysical poem" as Lynen calls it--will illustrate the method:

When I spread out my hand here today,
I catch no more than ray
To feel of between thumb and fingers;
No lasting effect of it lingers.

[6]Jakobson, p. 76.

The "hand" in the first line almost anticipates "thumb and fingers" of the third line. The verbs "catch" and "feel" further continue the metonymic association. The stanza once again illustrates the method of the proximate word. The poem, as a whole, establishes the firm metonymic base before it launches out into the metaphoric extensions of meaning.

When metonymy and metaphor come together in a poem, it is more than likely that metonymy would appear the stronger of the two, rendering uncertain the metaphoric influence. The well-known poem "Design" can be offered as a case in point. The first two lines posit a contiguous relation between objects such as spider, moth, and flower. The central issue in the poem is, Is this kind of grouping of objects that the speaker comes across accidental, enjoying only a metonymic relation, or designed by an evil force? If the grouping of these objects is accidental, then they are arbitrarily put together by the poet to test whether or not he could draw any conclusion. The metaphoric conclusion the poet draws remains uncertain:

> I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
> On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
> Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--
> Assorted characters of death and blight
> Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
> Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
> A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
> And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
>
> What had that flower to do with being white,
> The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
> What brought the kindred spider to that height,
> Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
> What but design of darkness to appall?--
> If design govern in a thing so small.

The objects named in the poem, spider, moth, and flower, all in white, tend to stay very much as literal objects; and the transliteration, to borrow the term from R. P. Warren,[7] of these objects into symbols of evil is accomplished only tentatively, at one remove from the objects. The lines that transliterate them, or to use Jakobson's opposed extremes, the lines that push these objects from the metonymic pole toward the metaphoric, are "Assorted characters of death and blight/Mixed ready to begin the morning right." But one can still discern the lineaments of objects in the "assorted characters" they are made out to be, because they are still seen distinctly as spider, moth, and flower. The integrity of objects as objects is not violated. Moreover, the reservation expressed in the last line "If design govern in a thing so small," further supports this view. The conditional "if" seeks to subvert the transliteration achieved in the expression "What but design of darkness to appall?"

The two differing relationships established within the poem may be further examined. The metonymic relationship depends upon the togetherness of the objects; and the metaphoric relationship between them depends upon two characteristics they share in common--their whiteness, and their participation in acts of "death and blight." The metonymic and the metaphoric relations both are brought together and juxtaposed in the middle of the poem:

[7]"The Themes of Robert Frost," The Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review, 54, No. 10 (December, 1947), 9.

> Assorted characters of death and blight
> Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
> Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
> A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
> And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

The suggestion of evil is there, but evil does not transform the objects, as noted earlier. Frost does not accomplish any vatic fiats of a Wordsworth-Emersonian kind, and therefore, the words are not being progressively charged to create and establish the presence of metaphysical evil. The juxtaposition of the relations is seen precisely in the balance that Frost maintains in the poem between the literal and the transliteral. The eventual subversion implied in the conditional "If design govern in a thing so small," expressed as an afterthought, seems to upset this balance.

The last line undercuts the inevitability to which words "brought" and "steered" point. It seeks to subvert, syntactically and rhythmically, the force of the argument sustained until the last line: syntactically, because the last line is added as an afterthought; rhythmically, because it is a falling off at the end when one remembers the preceding lines. Furthermore, the poet is playing with our normal expectations of closure in the standard sonnet form; that is, the last line or couplet of a sonnet usually sums up or clinches what has been argued earlier in the sonnet. Here the metrical irregularity of the last line, sharply in contrast with the rhythmical authority established in such earlier lines as, "Assorted characters of death and blight/ Mixed ready to begin the morning right," ironically undercuts our expectations and makes us feel the last line as a doubt, a falling off in the assurance of the speaker's interpretive scheme.

This raising of doubt at the end probably reflects the poet's suddenly being in two minds, an unresolved dilemma, perhaps, prompted by the poet's fine scrupulosity for facts. The next question seems to be inevitable, How seriously should the reader take this doubt? Or is it that the "if" is conceived only to confuse the reader? For if design does not govern in a thing so small, then the poem is pointless. But the poem rests on the assumption that design does govern after all--at least until the penultimate line. Is it then that Frost is trying to have it both ways? If he is, then the "if" in the poem, stylistically, has something to do with Frost's theory of voice tones. It points to the habit of caution and reservation that Frost exercises frequently in his statements. The outcome, of course, is that the strong sense of fact established by metonymy renders uncertain the metaphoric influence in the poem. Metonymy seeks to debilitate the metaphor of design imposed on literal facts.

There are times, however, when Frost does not impose any explicit metaphoric design on literal facts to carry off a poem. He can, in his best poetic moments, just describe a set of objects, say, pools, flowers, and trees and present them as being involved in a state of quiet dramatic action. The poem I have in mind is "Spring Pools." It reads like a poem of celebration of things in nature, a reenacting in terms of rhythm, syntax, and image, of the continuity of nature's process. In fact, if anything in Frost deserves what Emerson said about facts--that "a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables"[8]--

[8]"Nature," Selected Writings, p. 41.

then it would be this poem. And it must be stated, however, that there are very few poems in Frost as good as this one. Furthermore, no other poem in Frost perhaps will show to greater advantage the poet's predilection for working closely with objects and linking them together, to get the weight and mass of the world into his poems:

> These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
> The total sky almost without defect,
> And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
> Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
> And yet not by any brook or river,
> But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.
>
> The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
> To darken nature and be summer woods--
> Let them think twice before they use their powers
> To blot out and drink up and sweep away
> These flowery waters and these watery flowers
> From snow that melted only yesterday.

The poem has two stanzas and each stanza consists of a single sentence. The first stanza describes pools as seen in a New England landscape in early spring. They "reflect/the total sky," and are, like flowers, gone after a while. But they disappear through roots and, as sap, work their way up and into the dark foliage. Syntactically, the first stanza--a periodic sentence--has striking qualities. The "pools" as subject is suspended until the fourth line before it is given its predicate verb in "Will like the flowers ... be gone." In the meantime the subject picks up, in the subordinate clause, the attributes it shares with flowers, the syntax prolonging the suspense until the fourth line. Then we have in the fifth and sixth lines--"And yet not out by any brook or river,/But up by roots to bring dark foliage on"--a rapid movement of thought, which culminates in a sudden perception

of nature's process. The syntactic parallels in the lines "And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,/Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone," and the rhymes in "reflect/defect," and "shiver/river"--which help the verse run lightly from line to line--enable the verse rhythm to enact a parallel motion of things quietly taking place in nature. The second stanza is an elaboration of this sense of motion perceived in the organic things of nature. The syntactic balance in "These flowery waters and these watery flowers," by interchanging the words involved, articulates the vital merging of elements in nature's process.[9]

A pertinent, though obvious, remark to make at this point is that the principle by which relations among things in the poem are discovered and established is one of contiguity. And, as shown, the way syntax is handled in the poem--the syntactic parallels have a way of promoting semantic equivalence--contributes to the total sense of a close interrelatedness and an interinvolvement of things in nature that the poem presents. Furthermore, the kind of animation resulting from the anthropomorphic attitude to things, noticed earlier in "In the Home Stretch," is perceptible in this poem as growing into a threat in the line "Let them think twice before they use their powers." This sudden personal intrusion of the speaker is a trifle jarring on the dispassionate tone heard earlier in the verse. The strong verbal action suggested in

[9]Ernest Fenollosa perceives, as Donald Davie points out, "things in motion and motion in things" as characterizing nature. Further he relates this to the nature of the transitive sentence. Davie, Articulate Energy, p. 35.

"blot out and drink up and sweep away" brings to "them," things, further attributes of volition and destructiveness.

Another aspect of the poem impresses itself on us, since metonymy controls the strategy of calling up objects and arranging them. "Spring Pools" is, for instance, almost wholly object-oriented; that is, the poem talks about pools and trees. The first stanza has "pools" for its subject and the second stanza has "trees," and the poem focuses the reader's attention unswervingly on these objects of nature. In "Design," the first person pronoun "I" begins the poem: "I found ..." Soon after its mention, however, the "I" is relegated to the background, and what thrusts itself to the foreground and takes over the rest of the poem is the object and the contemplation of objects through a number of subordinate clauses. Therefore, semantically, the nominal "I" has a limited function; it is given an impersonal status. In brief, these are instances where the object rather than the subject takes over the reader's interest and controls his response.

Another characteristic related to Frost's preference for working closely with literal objects is the emphatic use of literal action or motion in his poems. This suggested physical activity is achieved usually by a predominant use of action verbs, similar to the strong verbal action noted in "Spring Pools." The little poem "The Pasture" illustrates eminently this aspect of Frost's style:

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

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

This is a poem about which Frost himself had this to say: "There is a poem about love that's new in treatment and effect. You won't find anything in the whole range of English poetry just like that."[10] If Frost is claiming for the poem only a certain unique way of expressing love, perhaps his claim would be granted ungrudgingly. And if love is the theme of the poem, it is certainly given a new treatment. There is no explicit suggestion, however, of a lover being addressed by the speaker; it might well be a little girl. The uniqueness of expression claimed for the poem by Frost can perhaps be accounted for in two ways. First, in line with our enquiry, the poem illustrates Frost's method of organizing details according to the principle of metonymy. The poet gets hold of a detail and follows it through contiguous association: the details are pasture, spring, leaves, water, calf, and cow. A certain logic of things seems to guide the poet here. The mention of "calf" points to "the mother" who "licks it with her tongue." Details cohere into a compact, perceivable event, and are such they characterize with delicacy, even tenderness, the simple act of the speaker's inviting the listener to the idyllic scene.

[10] Early Years, p. 561.

Brower remarks how "Frost balances perfectly the claims of both song and speech" in the poem.[11] But there is also a different kind of balance working grammatically in the poem. In the first chapter, in both Hardy and Frost a certain similarity of method was noted in the use of action verbs. In this lyric, in the course of two quatrains, Frost makes use of an unusual number of compound verbs and sets them off against each other: "Going out to clean ... stop to rake ... wait to watch ... going out to fetch," and simple action verbs such as "totters," "licks," and the imperative "come" in the refrain "You come too." The compound verbs occur in pairs and constitute what Davie calls "syntax as rhyme":[12] That is, "going out to clean" syntactically rhymes with "going out to fetch" in the second quatrain. And "stop to rake" rhymes syntactically with "wait to watch." Besides, there is the implied antithetical balance in "going out to clean" and "stop to rake"--where "going" and "stop" not being wholly symmetrical in grammar brings in asymmetry. This asymmetry, however, has its parallel in the next pair, arranged in chiasmal order in the poem--"wait to watch" and "going out to fetch." Part of the effectiveness of the poem rests with this grammatical balance, the other aspects being the refrain in lines 4 and 8 and the rhymes. The compound verbs are in themselves little narratives, and implicit in their use is the attempt to view life in terms of motion, of physical action. The speaker in the poem for

[11] Poetry of Frost, p. 11.

[12] Davie, p. 91.

instance, has a number of little actions to perform. Or to put it differently, thought and life are both conceived as movement: the poem's overall quality of animated action, of motion, can be attributed to its extraordinarily high ratio of verbs to nouns. Even in treating what might seem a static and abstract subject, as in "In a Poem," the poet uses many action verbs:

> The sentencing goes blithely on its way,
> And takes the playfully objected rhyme
> As surely as it keeps the stroke and time
> In having its undeviable say.

It is interesting, at this point, to see how some aspects of Frost's style discussed above accord so well with Ernest Fenollosa's observations on poetic syntax, and the use of the transitive sentence. Besides, one can find in Fenollosa a theoretical justification for Frost's practice.[13] Language, to make a general observation, has multiple functions: it describes, narrates, emotes, persuades, and performs. Fenollosa emphasizes one particular use of language, the use of active verbs, and the way verbs perform in a transitive sentence. According to him, in nature's process energy is always transferred from the agent to object: Agent → Energy → Object. In the form of the transitive sentence, the agent acts upon the object, and the action, as Fenollosa stresses, corresponds to the universal form of action in nature.

[13]Donald Davie discusses in his book Articulate Energy Fenollosa's ideas on poetic syntax and their relevance to some kinds of poetry. My own interest here, which is limited, is the immediate relevance of some of these ideas to Frost's style in his poems. Davie, pp. 33-42.

He therefore concludes that the use of transitive verbs "brings language close to things, and in its strong reliance upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry."[14] And what he dislikes most is the copula, because it "evades the transference of energy," as Davie puts it, "and is static."[15] This is perhaps mimesis--the imitation of action in nature--with a vengeance, but what bearing this attitude has on poetry needs to be examined.

In the examples cited above, Frost's own reliance on verbs is apparent, and so his preference for the transitive sentence. "The Pasture" has these transitive verbs: " ... clean the pasture ... rake the leaves ... watch the water ... fetch the little calf ... licks it [with her tongue]." "In the Poem" has these: " ... takes the playfully objected rhyme/ ... keeps the stroke and time." "Spring Pools" provides these verbs: " ... reflect the total sky ... bring dark foliage ... darken nature ... use their powers ... To blot out and drink up and sweep away/These flowery waters ... " It would seem that much of Frost's practice rests on these verbs and the way they engage objects in articulate motion.

More common in Frost, of course, is the occurrence of the intransitive action verb, which engages the subject in motion--as in "The Lockless Door." The effect is the same, though; both the

[14]"The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," Instigations of Ezra Pound, p. 367.

[15]Davie, p. 44.

transitive and the intransitive verbs increase the sense of physical activity involved in the poem. As Davie comments, "a verb denotes the action of a mind or a body or a force, in time."[16]

The idea that dramatic poetry is sustained by active verbs, as opposed to passive verbs and the copula,[17] finds its support in what Frost has to say on the nature of the sentence: "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing ... A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic."[18] Hence for Frost the "dramatic necessity" redeems the sentence, and in his practice his conception of the dramatic sentence gets its linguistic support through the frequent use of action verbs. In this respect a large part of Frost's verse bears Fenollosa out completely. The reader gets the feeling that even abstract notions such as age or time are doing things: "Age saw two quiet children" ("Carpe Diem"), or "To Time it never seems that he is brave/To set himself against the peaks of snow/To lay them level with the running wave," ("I Could Give All to Time")--a method of personifying close to certain practices prevalent in eighteenth century poetry.

Besides metonymy and action verbs, there is another stylistic feature to be noted in the above examples: words that anthropomorphize

[16] Ibid., p. 48.

[17] Fenollosa illustrates this idea with the celebrated passage on sleep from Shakespeare's Macbeth, and writes: "A study of Shakespeare's verbs should underlie all exercises in style," as quoted in Articulate Energy, p. 49.

[18] Selected Prose, p. 13.

objects, birds, and beasts. As one reads through the Complete Poems of Frost, one is surprised at the frequency with which the poet animates his objects, and humanizes his birds and beasts, providing them with attributes of will and action. This aspect of Frost's style is striking in the poems "In the Home Stretch" and "Spring Pools." In fact, such examples are legion, and they go to show that there exists a clear link between metonymy and the concomitant use of anthropomorphic locutions:

> A breeze discovered my open book
> And began to flutter the leaves to look
> For a poem there used to be on Spring.
> I tried to tell her 'There's no such thing!' ("A Cloud Shadow")

In "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," the tree is the subject of the poem: "The tree is not to bar ... But just to ask us ... She likes ... She knows." The tree likes, knows, is set up as someone to encounter us with questions. The tree in "Tree at My Window" becomes an equal partner with the speaker in sharing immediate concerns: The tree's "head so much concerned with outer/Mine with inner, weather." In "The Last Mowing," the speaker remarks that "The trees are all I'm afraid of," and, addressing the flowers as "tumultous flowers," proposes to share the brief moment with them before trees, nature in its wildness, crowd out both flowers and humans from the scene. This fear of man's extinction, a common enough theme in Frost, invests nature with a sinister misanthropic purpose. The storm in "Storm Fear" "Works against us in the dark/And pelts with snow." It even "whispers with a sort of stifled bark,/The beast,/"Come out! Come out!" It threatens the security of the speaker and his small family.

The mountain in "The Birthplace" takes on a dire, sinister aspect:

> The mountain seemed to like the stir
> And made of us a little while--
> With always something in her smile.
> Today she wouldn't know our name.
> . . . .
> The mountain pushed us off her knees.

The following lines from "Directive,"

> The ledges show lines ruled southeast northwest
> The chisel work of an enormous glacier
> That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.
> You must not mind a certain coolness from him
> Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain,

present an awe-inspiring image, the result of "mythological seeing," a quality or aspect of style which Brower identifies in Wordsworth.[19] The powerful image of the buck in "The Most of It" shares this kind of seeing. And in "Out, Out--," perhaps the lone instance in Frost, the animated object turns out to be murderous:

> . . . At the word, the saw
> As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
> Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap ...

The question that the reader of Frost may have to face at this point is whether Frost is simply fanciful in the above examples, or trying to personify in the older tradition of the fables? The animation of inanimate objects, seen in the above examples, is only a part of the overall anthropomorphic world that Frost presents. This includes those poems similar to the fables of Aesop or La Fontaine, wherein beasts and birds are given human attributes. As Lawrance Thompson

[19] Poetry of Frost, p. 51.

remarks, "In several of his poems, he [Frost] has kept the spirit of La Fontaine by giving us little dramatic glimpses of animals whose actions remind us of human beings, dramatic scenes in which men and animals intermingle."[20] Frost's world, in this respect, seems to be close to the world of the Fables--a world animated by mountains, rivers, birds, and beasts who think, move, act, and will. And if the rural world of Frost comes alive and vivid in his poems, it does so mainly because of the habit of animation which his metonymic method has incorporated. The result is--to sum up--the objects, as they fill out Frost's world, seem to have an independence of their own; they take on human attributes, threaten human life or security. One gets the overwhelming impression that the cumulative inter-relation of objects as they make their presence felt in the poems constitutes the close-textured world of Frost. Consequently, the poems are object-oriented; the poet has projected himself into the non-human world, the impersonal world of things.

None of the above stylistic features, occurring in isolation, however, would appear very startling or novel. But, quite frequently, the features occur together in poems, and are seen in their essential interrelationships, as in the following passage from "The Census-Taker":

[20]Fire and Ice, p. 158.

> The time was autumn, but how anyone
> Could tell the time of year when every tree
> That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
> And nothing but the stump of it was left
> Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch ...
>
> Perhaps the wind the more without the help
> Of breathing trees said something of the time
> Of year or day the way it swung a door
> Forever off the latch, as if rude men
> Passed in and slammed it shut each one behind him
> For the next one to open for himself.

Brower has noted the "rough grammar" and the "effect of breathlessness" of the rhythm of this passage.[21] What is of special interest here, however, is the extreme point to which Frost seems to push the metonymic method. Metonymically, the "trees" brings "wind" to mind, and the "wind" points to "a door" being "swung," which in turn points, in the context of the poem, to "rude men." With the hurried pace the rhythm keeps in the passage, the support of additive syntax, and the run-over lines, the successive details come tumbling in, like an unending cascade: " ... the way it swung a door/Forever off the latch, as if rude men/Passed in and slammed it shut each one behind him/For the next one to open for himself." In the animated scene which follows, the wind and door, like guardian spirits of the desolate place which the people have left behind as they abandoned their dwelling, divide the transitive actions between themselves. The total effect of metonymy, action verbs, and the consequent animation is the evoking of the panic-stricken consciousness of the speaker in the poem.

[21] Poetry of Frost, pp. 19-21.

I have discussed these several aspects of Frost's style, especially at the level of diction and the response of the poet to his world, as if one thing followed another, as if metonymy led to the use of action verbs, which in turn led to the anthropomorphizing of the inanimate and the animate. But, actually, there is no way of showing the chain of causation in these matters. In fact, these several aspects need not necessarily follow the application of the metonymic method. That they do in some passages or poems of Frost is a matter of observation. This great evocative power of the external scene is a formidable talent in any poet, though as I shall try to make clear, a limited one.

Surely there is no need to labor the point that Frost handles his metonymy rather frequently to fill out his world with interrelated objects, with perceivable situations--a method by which he usually develops his poetic discourse. However, in lyric verse a strong reliance on metonymy is rather infrequent; that is, the contiguous detail and the neighbouring word is not the general rule, and not certainly followed with such thoroughness as it is usually done in Frost. If this method occurs in lyrics, then the poet can be said to mix narrative elements rather preponderantly, as Jakobson implied, in his lyrics. Evidently, this is the case with Frost. A 'love' lyric like "The Pasture" leans heavily on verbs of action, which form, as noted earlier, little narratives by themselves.

The metonymic method, then, is basic to Frost's style. The poet tends to get close to things and objects and be bound by their circumstantiality. This method seems to work well especially with the

examples we have examined: the one chief characteristic that unites all of them is that they all have a rural setting, and many of them rural themes. And they all present more or less identical situations. However, there are exceptions to be made, poems wherein the metonymic method does not seem to operate in any appreciable measure. For instance, this method seems to fail or break down in his well-known city poem, "Acquainted with the Night."[22] The close metonymic way of getting the "thinginess of things" (to borrow Ransom's phrase) into verse suddenly seems to give way to a more random way of grouping impressions--the things have lost much of their "thinginess"--in this sonnet. What holds the sonnet together is the consternation of the speaker - the predicament of the poet--in the face of the myriad impressions the city has to offer. The city comes into the poem in the form of random images:

> I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the furthest city light.
>
> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
>
> I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
> When far away an interrupted cry
> Came over houses from another street ...
>
> And further still at an unearthly height,
> One luminary clock against the sky
>
> Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

[22]In fact, Frost has another, what sounds like a "city" poem "The Brook in the City." But it is more about the brook and the farmland on which the city is encroaching, and so it retains all the signs of the rural setting and displays the metonymic linking of specific things and objects in the usual way.

The poem is oriented neither to objects nor to other people. Instead it seems to be oriented to the poet himself, and the poet is trying to bring some order into the confusing images of a city. But the images, "the watchman," the "interrupted cry," and the "luminary clock," despite the poet's reiteration of his acquaintanceship with the night, remain sporadic. The excellence of the poem, however, is not due to the circumstantiality of the objects or images, as it is in "Spring Pools"; it is due to the tact with which the feeling of tension of unresolved fear is handled.

The metonymic method does not occur very noticeably in the political poems either. And this is perhaps so for the same reason. There is no concrete or identifiable situation as such. The poems are, as Reginald Cook calls them, "opinionations,"[23] expressed with whatever feelings of self-assurance the opinions could inspire in the speaker. These poems have always been an embarrassment to a reader of Frost. Some of them are, however, delightful to read, but nothing more substantial could be claimed for them.

And there is also no point in stretching this idea of method to include the dramatic dialogues, the "talk poems" as Frost called them, nor for that matter a poem like "New Hampshire," which sets out to expound Frost's regional manifesto. In these poems the poet's obvious focus of interest is not upon the circumference of things but the human center - the people as they appear, behave, and suffer in rural New England. Metonymy in these poems obviously thins out and is not worth particular study.

[23] Dimensions of Frost, p. 176.

(2)

Frost's reputation for colloquial style hardly needs any rehearsal. And the reputation is obviously based on his dialogue poems. But what is so often lost sight of is the poet's predilection for a literary style. The question is whether Frost's frequent use of metonymy favors any particular form of syntax, a form that fits either literary or colloquial style. Does the poet prefer certain syntactic structures?

Richard Bridgman in his book The Colloquial Style in America offers four characteristics of the colloquial style in prose: one, stress upon the individual verbal unit; two, fragmentation of syntax; three, use of repetition to bind and unify; four, the use of the colloquial narrator.[24] Although these are offered as characteristics of prose style, they, nevertheless, have varying degrees of relevance to poetry. They certainly offer us a framework in which to consider some aspects of Frost's style.

The fourth characteristic, the use of the colloquial narrator, will be discussed in the next chapter. The third characteristic, the use of repetition to bind and unify, is a device common to all poetry, and more so with mnemonic verse, with any oral verse tradition and, as such, it is not something peculiar to colloquial style in verse. In some of the passages looked at, we had occasion to note such repetitions in syntactic patterns or in refrains and so on. Of immediate relevance to our enquiry is the characteristic of colloquial

[24]Richard Bridgman, The Colloquial Style in America, p. 21.

style, which Bridgman calls fragmentation of syntax. Does Frost fragment his syntax?[25] If he does not fragment his syntax, can he still be said to write in a colloquial style?

The importance of syntax cannot be over-emphasized if one is talking about poetic style. Winifred Nowottny explains this effectively: "Of all the elements necessary to make an utterance meaningful, the most powerful is syntax, controlling as it does the order in which impressions are received and conveying the mental relations 'behind' sequences of words."[26] The critic stresses rightly that "since it [syntax] controls the word order"[27] in the sentence, it reflects the mind that perceives things or conceives ideas and puts them together in sentences; it reflects the relations the mind perceives between things and ideas. It reveals, in brief, the poet's grasp of these relations. And since metonymy points to the perceiving mind exploring relations and establishing them between things, its relevance to syntax is paramount. And metonymy, as I have tried to suggest, is the dominant principle that controls and evolves Frost's poetic discourse in several of his poems. Furthermore, Mrs. Nowottny emphasizes, in particular, "the power syntax has of giving prominence

[25]By syntax or traditional syntax I mean the sentence structure that is normally used by the educated speakers of English: the usual spoken order of words, which is subject + verb; with transitive verbs, subject + verb + object; or, with to be, the copula, subject + verb + predicate noun; with, of course, when used in verse, traditional poetic licenses such as inversion, elision and so on.

[26]The Language Poets Use, p. 9.

[27]Ibid., p. 21.

to logical relationships."[28] If the forms of syntax are the forms of logic, as Winters remarks[29]--a view identical with Mrs. Nowottny's--then, it is the internal kind of logic in a sentence that makes for its coherence. It is a form of logic that is in consonance with metonymy, which exploits the logic of contiguity. And if metonymy is the principle by which relations are established between things, then metonymy would make for a closer weave of syntax.

Now, the strong metonymic base that Frost gives to his poems seems to favor keeping traditional syntax. And quite often, it is syntax which functions positively in a Frost poem, not just neutrally and devoid of real significance as, say, in an Imagist poem: It articulates, mimes, enacts the burden of the lyric, as Davie points out in several British poets.[30] The syntactic parallels used in "Spring Pools," for instance, have miming qualities. Also, Frost's method tends to favor the constant use of what is technically known as hypotaxis: the use of subordinate clauses, by which the poet qualifies his statements, makes reservations and, in short, adopts a discriminatory stance toward experience. This kind of syntax reflects essentially a certain modulation in human response to environment. Perhaps the poem that can best illustrate Frost's deft handling of syntax that metonymy seems to have favored is "The Silken Tent":

[28] Ibid., p. 22.

[29] Forms of Discovery, p. 28.

[30] Davie, p. 73.

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

Critics have commented on the striking qualities of this sonnet. Brower notes, among other things, its "mastery of syntax and rhythm."[31] Thompson notes the dramatic structure of the metaphor used in the poem.[32] What perhaps may be affirmed here is the way the principle of contiguity operates in the poem, and the way syntax lends its articulating power to the narrative structure.

To put first things first, the sonnet is an extended analogy in a single sentence. The first line "She is as in a field a silken tent" states the initial analogy. The extreme disparity of objects (if "she" can be called an object for purposes of this analysis) compared is obvious, and the rest of the poem is taken up with exploring the implications involved in the comparison. Grammatically, the first line constitutes the main clause and, from the second line onward, there follows a series of subordinate clauses in which both the

[31] Poetry of Frost, p. 185.

[32] Fire and Ice, p. 125.

literal details connected with the tent and the qualities relating to the woman are worked out. Further, the subordinate clause beginning in the second line concentrates mainly on the literal details of the tent in this order: " ... a silken tent ... its ropes relent ... in guys it gently sways ... its supporting central cedar pole ... its pinnacle ... [it] seems to owe naught to any single cord ...[it] is loosely bound." The grammar points constantly to the object, the tent. Words like breeze, ropes, guys, cedar pole, cords lend a lexical cohesion to the sonnet--and what arranges these details is, by our definition, the principle of metonymy. Similarly, "field" in the first line presupposes in its sequential relations "at midday ... a sunny summer breeze" in the second line, and "has dried the dew" in the third line.

Furthermore, the words on either side of the analogical fulcrum offer interesting features: guys, ropes, cords, and so on, are all 'concrete'words, that is, they relate to the tent in the poem; on the other hand, we have 'abstract' words that ascribe qualities to the lady in question. "Gently sways," though said of the tent, alerts the reader to the possibility of reference to woman, and in the seventh line "the sureness of the soul" points clearly to the woman, though it keeps the semantic equivalence in balance. "Ties of love and thought" in the ninth line is a curious phrase and stands right on the fulcrum, holding the center of the poem as it were. Because "ties" is a word that occupies the semantic middle ground between "cord" and "love and thought," it is both 'concrete' and 'abstract'; that is, it partakes of the nature of the visible "cord" as well as the invisible "love and

thought." These abstract and concrete locutions on either side of the analogy seem to deal out to two halves of the poem, so to speak, the literal and the figurative or the metonymic and metaphoric poles of meaning. These contrasting poles are so well balanced that what we get is an elaborate structure of syntax "nicely held, yet loosely bound."

A look at the caesural structure of the poem will perhaps clarify some of the striking qualities of syntax. As we read the first line, we give the natural pause after the line-end, and even half expect that the syntactical pause will coincide with the natural pause of the line-end. But finding no punctuation at the end of the line, we realize that the first line is run over, and so we curb our tendency to lengthen the pause. The first syntactic unit ends after "midday," and therefore we make a pause perhaps a trifle shorter than the first pause at the first line-end. Syntax continues to flow through the second and the third line before it can coincide with the third line ending. After the initial surprise we begin to notice the interesting punctuation, controlling the flow of rhythm. There are longer pauses at the end of the third, fourth, and fifth lines, and the sixth line is run-over and gives the transition of meaning from the tent to the woman, thereby reinforcing the semantic equivalence in the eighth line, where once again there is the syntactical pause coinciding with the natural pause. Only one midline pause in the whole poem is indicated by punctuation, and this occurs at the crux of the poem, the caesural placement underscoring the antithetical balance in "But strictly held by none, is loosely bound."

But, once again, there is no syntactical pause at the line ending, a situation which parallels that of the first line.

Moreover, we realize that it is not a perfect antithesis; the line is asymmetrical, it blends with the rest of the poem. So we have the balanced second half of the line "is loosely bound by" breaking out of the antithetical pattern and running on to the following line with "countless silken ties of love and thought ... " This helps in affirming the accomplished sense of identity between the two disparate objects, woman and tent.

Furthermore, the poem exhibits metaphysical qualities; the analogy in the poem is a conceit, a piece of wit. What threatens to be a droll poem in the first line turns out to be a poem of metaphysical wit--if by metaphysical we mean the polarity suggested in questions of soul and body, which is implicit in the phrases "the sureness of the soul" and "in guys it gently sways." The wit proposes the notion of the ideal woman and pays her a graceful compliment: She is free, and has the sureness of the soul; yet it is the bondage of love and thought which characterizes her.

Two things are especially relevant to our enquiry in this analysis. First, metonymically, the subordinate clause overtly preoccupies itself with the contiguous details of the tent, foregrounding them for the reader's attention. Metonymy does not, of course, explain the excellence of the poem, but it does explain how Frost organizes his material. Further, we notice that the analogy or metaphor works in close cooperation with metonymy. And this is quite the opposite of

what happens in "Design." In the latter, as we have seen, metonymy upsets the balance, minimizes the effect of metaphor with the last line; that is, the sense of fact seeks to overthrow the sense of fiction, which the first thirteen lines help develop. In "The Silken Tent" metonymy supports metaphor; that is, the more the details of the tent are explored, the greater is the meaning that accrues to the ideal woman the sonnet seeks to present.

Second, in terms of syntax, the single sentence of the sonnet displays elements of surprise and suspense. In fact, Donald Davie points out (and draws upon Fenollosa in doing so) that the sentence can have a plot.[33] In the sonnet, after the surprising analogy stated in the first line, the suspense remains because we would like to see how the poet will maintain the analogy without growing facetious or flippant. The sense of plot, for instance, impresses itself upon us in the sixth line when the connective "that" introducing the relative clause changes the semantic direction, making the smooth transition from the "pinnacle" to "the sureness of the soul"--that is, from the ambience of tent to that of woman. In terms of our enquiry, metonymy seems to support hypotaxis--in this case, an elaborate syntactic structure with several connectives. The poem, as Frost himself remarks, is seen "moving easy in harness." And this movement in harness is mimed by syntax.

[33]Davie, p. 52.

Perhaps this is an extreme instance to cite from Frost. Besides, it is the only poem of its kind in Frost with a single sentence and with unusual syntactic qualities. It does, however, exemplify the syntactic preference that Frost exercises in his poems. This tendency to exploit the resources of syntax surely works contrary to the fragmentation of syntax - a feature too frequently seen in many of Frost's contemporary poets.

(3)

Metonymy, then, has its strengths. But it has its weaknesses too. One of its strengths is that it guards against any vagueness and facile generalization by confining its choice of words to the denotation of literal facts and objects. Yet its weakness is that it foregoes some of the generalizing power which the discreet use of abstract words can confer on poetic style. This was noted in the first chapter while considering Frost in relation to Robinson. Most of the examples drawn in the present chapter, however, seem to point to the strengths of the method. The reason is simple: the examples chosen are the good poems. They are good because they are both specific with respect to detail and general enough to command a greater connotational range of meaning. In "Design" there are both the metonymic and the metaphoric, the denotative and the connotative ranges of meaning. In both "Spring Pools" and "The Pasture" there are other expressive features--metaphors of motion and action. But it is hard to find these redeeming features in a large number of poems, wherein the only ostensible intention of the poet seems to be to report with great fidelity, even country charm, the externalities of the rural scene.

Take for example the poem "The Runaway": Is it a fable or just a rural vignette? If it is a fable, what is the moral? A little Morgan colt gets scared at the first sight of falling snow. The people in the poem, referred to as "we," offer some kind of a choric comment throughout. The colt is described with vivid details: it "bolts," a "miniature thunder," a consequent "clatter of stone" is heard as it flees. But what is the point of the poem? Is the people's statement offered at the end the final message? The comment, "Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,/When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,/Ought to be told to come and take him in," is banal and trite. A similar poem "The Cow in Apple Time" fares no better. Thompson remarks on the poem: "Taken on the single plane of denotation, this farm scene (truly dramatic for those who have tried to bring such a cow either to her senses or to her stall) gives us a little picture which is enough to make a complete poem."[34] Thompson says this in praise, and the qualities one is supposed to note are the verisimilitude of the picture presented, and, probably, the dramatic rendering of the cow: "She bellows on a knoll against the sky./Her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry." There are poems, any number of them, such as "A Time to Talk," "An Encounter," "A Girl's Garden," "Pea Brush," and so on, which present vivid realistic pictures of rural life. Their existence as poems is perhaps to be justified by whatever country charm and nostalgia they might evoke in their readers; they are perhaps meant to be read as rural vignettes. This aspect of Frost, however, does invite the criticism that W. W. Robson makes:"Frost

[34]Fire and Ice, p. 159.

assumes his task to be complete when he has given a faithful record of particulars."[35]

In these poems where Frost seems to do just this, where he is content to give us only perceivable things and situations, his poetic language suffers; his expression is not drawing on the full resources of language. Since these poems concentrate heavily on the denotative content, they are deprived of the connotative range of experience. Put simply, it means that several of his poems are too specific, and not general enough to give to the poem a greater emotional range. Frost is rather too much versed in country things to be really free to think clear of them with sufficient perspective. And this incapacity to think clear of them restricts his world.

Perhaps a qualification is in place here. In some of his lyrics, despite his usual procedure of weighting the poem with literal facts, Frost can, by a deft use of an "abstract" word strategically positioned toward the end of the poem, effect a reorientation. Except for this "abstract" word, the poem would have remained strictly a record of particulars. This stylistic feature of some of Frost's poems deserves a detailed examination. And this is perhaps one of the ways by which Frost escapes the limitations of his basic method. The poem to consider is "For Once, Then, Something":

[35]Robson, p. 753.

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The poem, first of all, records the particulars of the scene: the well, well-curb, the speaker's reflection in the water, fern, and "cloud-puffs." Then a drop of water falls from the fern into the well, then the ripple, which blurrs and blots out the reflection; and finally, there is "whiteness" at the bottom of the well, probably "a pebble of quartz." All the literal details of the well are recorded faithfully; and perhaps there cannot be a greater application of the metonymic method than what the poem offers. In this poem, with its outstanding qualities of local specificity, the one striking word which stands out for its abstraction is "truth," and specially so, in opposition to "pebble of quartz," contiguously placed in the poem. The poem as a whole, seen retroactively from the word "truth," begins to function on the epistemological plane of reference. What occasions this reference, one realizes after one gets to the word "truth," is the act of seeing through the surface of the well-water in order to find something deeper--perhaps truth--below one's ego-center.

The speaker is taunted by "others" on his inflated ego because he is never able to see beyond his own "godlike" image. Then he narrates his experience that happened only "once." This time he succeeds in getting beyond his image to something far deeper than the surface of well-water. But the irony becomes more effective, because of the way the abstract word is used in the last line of the poem: "Truth" used in opposition to "a pebble of quartz." At last there was some consolation that the speaker got beyond himself and to this extent he was able to escape his ego. But whether he saw truth or just a pebble of quartz is a moot question. The poem can further be interpreted as posing the question whether there can be anything beyond one's own self which man can know for certain; because that "something" may be "truth" or "a pebble of quartz." It can be a disconcerting poem if one reads it as a dark allegory of man's quest for objective truth. The poem, however, succeeds in presenting the speaker's predicament in a vivid manner. The last line, seen in the total context of the poem, is a tour de force; each word enjoys a special emphasis. Frost seems to have tried his several voice tones here. A confusion of feeling results: of curiosity, hesitation, discovery, and assurance. But, finally, what comes through these several tones is irony.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," perhaps Frost's most popular poem, owes not a little to this deft use of abstract words in the final stanza: "dark and deep," "promises," and the abstract sense that the word "sleep" acquires after its repetition in the last two lines. These locutions release the content of the poem from its

strong literal frame of reference--besides, of course, the rhythm and the interlocking rhyme scheme. If "the area of experience touched upon by the poem is suggestive or 'haunting'," to use R. P. Warren's words,[36] then the suggestiveness is greatly due to the less concrete, less literal words used in the last lines of the poem.

Frost often follows this technique in narrative poems too--perhaps to escape from the restrictive narrative framework. In "The Hill Wife," for instance, which occurs in Mountain Interval at a time--which is right after the North of Boston poems--the poet is seen experimenting with narrative form. "The Hill Wife" has both narrative and lyrical elements; and there are five lyrics, each dealing with a significant phase in the progress of the Hill wife's despair, which in the fifth lyric ends in the dissolution of all ties between the wife and her man. The fifth lyric, frequently anthologized, is most effectively written, and the effectiveness mainly depends upon the occurrence of the abstract word "finalities" in the last lines:

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

To sum up, then, the abstract words occurring in the closing lines of the above cited poems mark the point at which the deeper meaning of the simple arrangement of objects or narration of events begins to

[36]Warren, p. 4.

unfold. In effect, they generate a radical reorganization of meaning in the poems in which they appear. This larger significance in the poems brought about by the use of certain locutions is, perhaps, what Frost had in mind when he said: "I started calling myself a synecdochist ... Always, always, a larger significance."[37]

[37] Years of Triumph, p. 693.

CHAPTER III

"A little thing touches a larger thing"

I use the term "synecdoche" to mean a particular use of words to describe the part of a thing or concept in such a way that the words connote the whole. In synecdoche the specific connotes the general, or a general kind of meaning develops from the specific; and vice versa, the general evokes the specific.[1] In the lines,

> ... the serial order
> Of being watched from forty cellar holes
> As if eye pairs out of forty firkins, ("Directive")

"eye pairs" refers to men. In "The melancholy of having to count souls" ("The Census-Taker"), "souls" recalls bodies. In the same manner, microcosm would invoke macrocosm. Each touches or in close proximity with the other. Like metonymy, in short, synecdoche depends upon contiguous relation.

Considering synecdoche in Frost enjoys a special propriety on two grounds. First, as Jakobson points out, the "metonymist" usually resorts to synecdoche: "The realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details." Besides

[1] My use of the term follows Quintilian's description of it as "letting us understand the plural from the singular, the whole from a part, a genus from the species, something following from something preceding; and vice versa." The Institutes of Oratory, Tr. H. E. Butler, VIII, vi, sec. 19.

"synecdochic details," Jakobson also talks about "synecdochic close-ups" and "synecdochic condensation."[2] These brief remarks will focus on the intimate link between metonymy and synecdoche. They are also apt here, because Frost's narrative and didactic poems recreate for us a realistic picture of things and men. And synecdoche, since it brings a larger share of meaning into the poems, provides an escape from the restrictive world of metonymy. Second, Frost claimed himself to be a synecdochist in as early as 1931: "I started calling myself a synecdochist when others called themselves imagists or vorticists. Always, always, a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing."[3]

On another occasion Frost stated what amounts to a poetic creed: "I believe in what the Greeks called synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole: skirting the hem of the goddess. All that an artist needs is samples."[4] And, as the poet states in "New Hampshire," synecdochic samples are what the region he frequently writes about has to offer: "Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,/One each of everything as in a show case/Which naturally she doesn't care to sell." In "Kitty Hawk" the poet articulates his poetic intention:

[2]Jakobson, p. 78.

[3]Years of Triumph, p. 693.

[4]Ibid.

But the comfort is
In the covenant
We may get control
If not of the whole
Of at least some part
Where not too immense,
So by craft or art
We can give the part
Wholeness in a sense.

This poetic aim of Frost accords well with his voluntary choice of pastoral life: voluntary, for he could still write fine poems that have scarcely anything to do with the rural, such as "Acquainted with the Night," "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," "The Master Speed," and "All Revelation," to name a few. The pastoral life that most of his poems present, however, constitutes the part to which his craft has presumably given "wholeness in a sense." He is even more positive about this, as when he says: " ... any poem is most valuable for its ulterior meaning. I have developed an ulteriority complex."[5]

If synecdoche works in ways by which ulterior meanings are gained by poems, then the pastoral subject matter as treated by Frost has synecdochic potentialities. In fact, critics have claimed that the pastoral world of Frost--the world as it takes shape in the poems--represents in some way the world at large.[6] And conversely, there is

[5] Ibid., p. 314.

[6] The critics I have particularly in mind are Thompson and Lynen: See Fire and Ice, pp. 123-24: Robert Frost, Minnesota Pamphlet, pp. 11-12; and Pastoral Art of Frost, pp. 1-47.

present at the center of the poems "the Frost character,"[7] the colloquial narrator, whose sound-posturing, inflection of voice, and habits of narration carry with them the identity of a whole region. Accordingly, then, pastoral, voice-tones, and the narrator are the devices that Frost uses to double his meanings. Examining these claims will eventually enable us to see in what specific ways synecdoche functions in Frost's poetry.

John F. Lynen, in his book The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, seems to describe pastoral in ways which directly point to the idea of synecdoche. He states that pastoral is essentially "a point of view": "Though rural life is the subject of pastoral, it is not seen in and for itself: the poet always tends to view it with reference to the more sophisticated plane of experience upon which both he and his audience live."[8] Therefore pastoral poems enjoy a double reference based upon an implied contrast between the rural and urban worlds. And "the pastoral poet's real power," Lynen continues, "springs from his ability to keep the two worlds in equilibrium" (p. 12).

It is this "equilibrium," the "basic duality" (p. 20) in the idea of pastoral that Lynen insists on throughout his study. Even as the poems portray rural life, they refer implicitly "to the great world

[7]James M. Cox, "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," Profile of Robert Frost, ed. Lewis P. Simpson, p. 24.

[8]Lynen, p. 9. Since I quote Lynen frequently in this chapter, subsequent references to his book will appear in the text.

beyond." The poems, therefore, exhibit "a very broad range of reference without ever seeming to depart from particular matters of fact" (p. 19). In brief, what Lynen claims for Frost's poems is precisely what Frost implied when he called himself "a synecdochist."

But Lynen also remarks that, with the death of the Arcadian myth, there followed the decline of pastoral tradition, and the conventions which go with it. The myth of Arcadia was no longer a viable one, and so gave way to depicting the actual conditions of country life. Lynen concludes that, "... judged by the standards of literal truth, Arcadia could not but seem the shallowest of artifices" (p. 16); no wonder the myth earned the contempt of Samuel Johnson.

William Empson points out that, after the decline of the myth, the pastoral mode came to accommodate realistic elements as in Wordsworth's "Michael," in Crabbe's "The Village," and mock-pastoral elements in Gay's city pastoral "The Beggar's Opera."[9] These poets actually worked outside the tradition of Theocritus, Virgil, and Milton, and so outside the conventions that the tradition had given rise to.

The situation is very much the same with Frost. The subject matter of a large number of his poems is the rural life of the people of New England. North of Boston, Mountain Interval, New Hampshire, West-Running Brook -- these titles of Frost's volumes remind us of the strong regional ties of the poet. The form that the poems often take

[9]English Pastoral Poetry, pp. 3-6, 19-21.

is that of dialogue, debate, or talk of love between couples; and it is here, if anywhere, that the poems retain a strong resemblance to the traditional pastoral. The latter, as Lynen reminds us, involved all these: "The debate, the conversation between lovers, and the singing contest are among the commonest forms of pastoral, and all of them involve dialogue and some degree of dramatic action" (p. 126). Accordingly, Frost often referred to his poems, justifiably, as New England eclogues.

Nevertheless, these poems differ from traditional pastoral in a radical way. There is in them none of the excessive stylization of characters and situations that the old pastoral exhibits, none that can perpetuate the Arcadian myth: surely no Daphnis and Chloe gambol amidst flocks of sheep. The roughest approximation to this in Frost, perhaps, is the poem "Two Look at Two," in which a couple comes across "up the mountainside" a doe and "an antlered buck of lusty nostril" just as they suddenly achieve their sense of fulfilment, because " ... the earth in one unlooked for favor/Had made them certain earth returned their love."

But more positively, the poems about people give us farmers, mostly sturdy, laconic New Englanders, like the neighbor in "Mending Wall" with his proverb "Good fences make good neighbours," or like stoical Len in "A Servant to Servants" preaching to his near-mad wife, "the best way out is always through." Several poems in North of Boston reveal their darker side too, especially with respect to women; these women are half-crazed under the strain of neglect, of loneliness, and

often of family history, as "The Hill Wife," "The House Keeper," "The Fear," and "A Servant to Servants" amply illustrate. In short, Frost works outside the pastoral tradition and the conventions that go with it. Lynen admits as much when he says that "Frost's pastoralism ... could not have developed within the old framework" (p. 17). Clearly, then, the question before us is: Is Lynen right in claiming for Frost's poems "a very broad range of reference" (p. 19), and other benefits of double vision which he finds as integral to the pastoral tradition?

In order to examine this aspect of pastoral, consider, for example, "Out, Out--," a poem that Lynen himself leans on rather heavily to prove his thesis. The poem is about a farm-boy whose hand is cut off by a buzz-saw. The boy has worked with the saw a whole day, and toward evening when his sister comes to the work-spot to call him for supper, the buzz-saw " ... leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap." The boy loses his hand and eventually dies.

The first six lines are descriptive. The first three lines use strong action verbs in order to personify the buzz-saw and show it as possessing an active will: "The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard/And made dust and dropped .... " After this close-up of the saw, the view widens to reveal literal details of the landscape: "Five mountain ranges one behind the other/Under the sunset far into Vermont." The personifying of the saw is consistently kept up, for the seventh line reminds us almost like a refrain: "And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled." We have the foreboding in the regular line, with

a midline pause: "And nothing happened: day was all but done." The stage is now set for the accident and the consequent death of the boy. The personifying continues much more insistently, if somewhat quizzically in the lines: " ... the saw,/As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,/Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap--/ He must have given the hand. However it was,/Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!" The style of reporting is almost impersonal through the rest of the poem, except for the urgent, eager voice coming through what Brower calls "the expressive breaks,"[10] the frequent caesural pauses, in a fairly regular blank verse rhythm.

The personifying accomplishes a strong visual image of the saw "leaping" as if it were some maleficent power, but the poet is not sure about it, so he is quick to add "as if to prove" and "seemed to leap." The suggestion is muted immediately by an "as if" construction, pointing to a characteristic tendency of Frost to qualify, undercut any unrealistic detail.[11]

Clearly, what happens to the boy is a mishap, a fatal accident. What, then, is the point of the poem? Is it simply the reporting of the incident made effective with minimum comment, an exercise in the art of verse narrative, and probably the accomplishment of a faint suggestion that the buzz-saw may embody evil design in the world? It is,

[10]Poetry of Frost, p. 170.

[11]This "as if" qualifying can be shown to be an integral part of Frost's poetic outlook by referring to "Design" and his major poem "Directive."

perhaps; but this is not all. In fact, there is an attempt in the poem to generalize a specific incident to represent a certain human trait, a procedure somewhat similar to synecdoche. For the point of the poem gets its sharp focus in the last lines when the poet turns to comment on the witnesses to the scene after the death of the boy:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

The tale closes effectively, with decisive, clinching finality--"No more to build on there," and then, the general comment follows.

If " ... any poem is most valuable for its ulterior meaning," as Frost asserts, then the final comment is perhaps ulterior meaning enough, given the premise of the accident in the poem. But there is more to come in this instance, and Frost perhaps meant it to be so. Lynen tells us that the "imagery has a significance which extends outward to range upon range of meaning" (p. 31). This "range of meaning" is presumably to be sought in the title of the poem: "The title, of course, is taken from Macbeth's soliloquy upon learning of his wife's suicide .... The boy seems to accept death with the same resignation as that expressed in Macbeth's lines and in some ways the poem reflects the meaninglessness Macbeth describes" (pp. 33-34). When he makes this comparison, Lynen seems to forget that it took Shakespeare five acts of the play before Macbeth could experience utter despair. And, in order to establish his theory of pastoral as a "perspective of sharp contrasts" (p. 126), Lynen continues: "For the boy, unlike Macbeth, 'sees all' and he therefore does not struggle to live ... (p. 34). The boy's death symbolizes not

only a superior wisdom [superior to Macbeth's] but a superior kind of existence" (p. 35). Now what evokes this effusive comment is the line " ... Then the boy saw all" in the poem. And what Lynen misses is that the poem itself delimits the boy's seeing "all," which is not the "meaninglessness" of life, but what is in the line "He saw all spoiled": the boy turns to his sister, appealing,

> 'Don't let him cut my hand off--
> The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'
> So. But the hand was gone already.

There is no manifest intention here to relate the boy's seeing to Macbeth's vision. If the intention was there in the poet's mind, it is not realized in the poem. And if the poem recalls for the critic a certain contrast with the urban world, then this perception of contrasts is a critical burden borne gladly, if somewhat gratuitously, by the critic - a burden the poem should have borne to justify the critic's response.

The dangers of playing with theory are again apparent, to cite one more example, in Lynen's reading of the simple lyric "The Pasture": "The reader is to admire the pasture as a world better than his own ... Frost establishes a comparison between the pasture and the outside world" (p. 23). But there are no words either in this poem or in "Out, Out--" implying even remotely a comparison between the rural and the urban. The diction is fully controlled by the need of the poet to represent the pastoral life he sees around. That the world of pasture, spring, calf is not viewed in relation to "other places and other modes of experience" (p. 23) is apparent enough. In short, one is obliged to

conclude that the theory that pastoral promotes the basic duality of the poet's vision, and therefore, lends synecdochic qualities to the poem, fails. The reason for its failure is that Frost, as Lynen himself admits, works outside the traditional pastoral.[12] The pastoral poems of Frost, then, taken simply and without the benefits conferred on them by theory, are poems that deal with rural subject matter. And the use of pastoral material is no guarantee as vehicle for ulterior meanings. The vehicle may have to be looked for elsewhere.

Frost's theory and practice of voice tones, when examined, may, however, suggest the presence of such a vehicle. The theory was developed by the poet, presumably, to double his meanings and convey his "ulteriorities." By examining this aspect of Frost's style, it can be shown that there are different, but less obvious, ways in which synecdoche functions in Frost's poems. The notion of voice tones also points to another stylistic feature--a feature integral to colloquial style--which needs a brief rehearsing at this point.[13] The theory was intimately bound up with Frost's life-long preoccupation with ways of saying: "All the fun's in how you say a thing," as the farmer in "The Mountain" puts it. Referring to voice tones, which at one place

[12]Lynen's readings of other poems are often flawed because, as Brower points out in his review, Lynen works at "a high level of generalization." New England Quarterly, 34 (June, 1961), 246.

[13]The theory has already been written on copiously and explained by Frost himself in several ways and at different times during his career. Thompson documents Frost's preoccupation with this theory fully in the first two volumes of his biography.

Frost calls "brute throat noises," the poet remarked: "They have been my observation and my subject matter."[14]

Frost improvised several phrases to describe a single notion. "Accent of sense," "sound of sense," "sentence sounds," "voice tones," "vocal image," and "vocal or audial imagination" are some of the expressions he coined to describe different aspects of the same theory. Further he discussed the theory very thoroughly with Edward Thomas during the years 1915-16, soon after the publication of North of Boston in 1915.[15] And in the poem "How Hard It is to Keep from Being King when It's in You and In the Situation," published in 1962 in the last of his volumes In the Clearing, he lets the prince or ex-prince explain to the ex-king his father, the theory in the form of a poetic manifesto:

> I'm talking not free verse but blank verse now.
> Regular verse springs from the strain of rhythm
> Upon a meter, strict or loose iambic.
> From that strain comes the expression STRAINS OF MUSIC.
> The tune is not that metre, not that rhythm,
> But a resultant that arises from them.

Basically, three things are involved here: meter, rhythm, and tune. The first one is a fixed pattern; the other two are variables. There are two kinds of meter that Frost recognizes: the strict and loose iambic. The rhythm is that of the speaking voice, the voice expressing its feelings through different dramatic tones - dramatic because the voice is touched by "humor, pathos, hysteria, anger,"[16] and other emotions.

[14] As reported by Brower, Poetry of Frost, p. 3.

[15] Early Years, pp. 441-464.

[16] Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," American Literature, 9 (November, 1937), 298.

The rhythm carrying the sound posture of the voice--the voice as it assumes the postures under strain or stress of different feelings--is what constitutes the sound of sense. The voice necessarily has to utter sentences, and the sentences will sound dramatic if they carry with them "accents of sense," accents for which there is no verbal syntax. I discussed, in the previous chapter, Frost's conception of a sentence as being dramatic--"A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence."[17] The sound of sense is this dramatic necessity.

Further, Frost treated the form of a sentence as if it were a sound or a pattern of sounds, independent of words: "A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung." Therefore, how a sentence sounded came first before what it said, before the sound became words--"the sentence sound often says more than the words. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words."[18] The sentence first comes as a vocal image with the characteristic inflection or nuance attached to it. It carries with it its own context. In brief, what Frost was trying to do was to make verse sound like a high fidelity instrument, which can register all the different inflections that the human voice acquires in different situations.

[17] Selected Prose, p. 13.

[18] Early Years, pp. 434-35.

Frost remarked several times that he heard the sound of sense first in Virgil's eclogues, in Shakespeare, and in Chaucer. And "It's just the same," Frost said, "now I hear the country people talking, England and here, with these same ways of acting up." The "acting up" is what the poet called "expressiveness"--the way "groans and murmurs and things like that emerge into words."[19] He supposed that this aspect of voice tones would make for the universal appeal. The theory apparently has synecdochic potentialities: simple words spoken in a dramatic context with the sounds of sense (or voice tones) can convey a larger significance. But then, no theory can be used as carte blanche; each poem needs to be examined in terms of the implied synecdochic claims that Frost has made.

The third term the "tune," in the quoted passage, is the outcome of the strain of rhythm against meter. It is, as Frost has explained, "expressiveness" coming over words and giving us "the over-all, felt meaning" of the poem.[20] In other terms, what this means is the total connotational range of the poem to which the voice tones and rhythm contribute.

As for the poet's practice of "rhythm," and its impact on syntax and meter, Frost can be shown to have acquired a command of a variety of different styles. He could handle the dramatic tones from very broad

[19] Conversations, p. 5.

[20] Ibid.

Yankee accents (as in "The Code") to the subtle nuance of educated speech (as in "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same" or "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening")--and all these accomplished in traditional meters. His sound of sense could adapt itself, expand or contract, according to the form in which the poet chose to work. The forms range from dramatic dialogue, monologue, simple narratives to epigram and the most formally determined sonnet.

There is, however, a tendency among critics to play up one kind of style against the other. If we can broadly classify styles as colloquial and literary, then the tendency of the majority of critics is to eulogize Frost's colloquial style, and its flexibility in accommodating the flow of American speech. As a reaction to this perhaps, Brower, of late,[21] has tended to play up the literary style and ignore the colloquial - the diction in particular. But the truth is, that Frost is capable of handling both styles, and in both of them he could devise an enormous amount of variation in tone, syntax, and diction. The following examples are chosen to illustrate the variety of styles, and the different and changing interrelations between voice tones, syntax, and rhythm that Frost's verse can exhibit.

Regular verse, as Frost says, is no doggerel; it is the strain of rhythm on meter. But there are times when meter itself accents the sound of sense. The iambic rhythm does not vary from the speech accents in the following lines:

[21]"Americanness and Un-Americanness of Frost," Proceedings of the Conference of College Teachers of English of Texas, 32 (1967), 7.

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. ("Birches")

Meter and rhythm work in harmony, and the metrical beat assists the rhythm of the speaking voice. But this does not happen very often. Frequently, meter does not accent the sound of sense; instead, it gives in, lets the sound of sense "ruffle" it, as Frost puts it. In brief, meter is used both as restraint to keep the speaking voice from getting out of hand, and as an aid to bring out the best in speech. But there is nothing new in this; in every age the poetic revival seems to have consisted in a return to the vitality of spoken language--spoken, of course, by educated people. The novelty lies, however, in Frost's excessive emphasis on getting as many colloquial tones as he can into his regular verse. The important point to note here is that Frost's interest in colloquial, even country speech, did not weaken his hold on traditional meters:

'What is there wrong?'
'Something you just now said.'
'What did I say?'
'About our taking pains.'

'To cock the hay?--because it's going to shower?'
I said that more than half an hour ago.
I said it to myself as much as you.' ("The Code")

The passage has been praised by critics, and cited as example by the poet himself to illustrate his idea of blank verse as being very idiomatic and conversational.[22] The style of speaking is terse,

[22]Conversations, pp. 8-9.

laconic; the rhythm breaks from meter in order to return to it toward the end. The following is a direct imitation of routine conversation, not particularly educated, informal, rambling, and apt to be very boring in verse:

> Yes, but all that takes time, and I'm as much
> In haste to get it over with as you.
> But read it, read it. That's right, draw the curtain.
> Half the time I don't know what's troubling me--
> What do you say, Will? Don't you be a fool ...
>
> ("The Self-Seeker")

It is choppy, careless conversational style; neither diction nor rhythm has anything interesting to offer. In fact, many dialogue poems of Frost are marred by an excessive imitation of everyday speech: "Snow," "A Hundred Collars," and "The Self-Seeker" are some of them.

The colloquial style in dramatic dialogues and monologues depends chiefly on both diction and rhythm of speech. But, flexible as it is, in meditative lyrics, the style turns literary in diction, yet keeps the colloquial rhythm. It is this aspect of flexibility of Frost's style that Brower seems to emphasize when he says that there are no "peculiarly American words or idioms in Frost. But there is, I'm sure, a distinctly American <u>sound</u> in Frost, something more subtle than idiom, that Frost called the 'voice entangled in the words,' the sounds, as he said, 'never brought to book before.' This sound is not a matter of dialect, but of rhythm ... It can be heard most clearly in Frost's blank verse dialogues and monologues."[23] However, Brower seems to ignore Frost's

[23]"Americanness ...," 7.

diction in some of the less successful dialogues, and concentrates upon how the verse sounds.

The transition from the colloquial to literary is effected often in a single poem so smoothly that it almost passes unnoticed. "Putting in the Seed," for instance, demonstrates such a transition; the modulation is accomplished quietly, by gradual stages. The sonnet begins with the ease of colloquial idiom, "You come to fetch me from my work to-night/ When supper's on the table, and we'll see ...," but ends on a note which is literary, dignified, prophetic:

> When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
> The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
> Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

"Fire and Ice" is a different kind of poem. It is as terse and aphoristic in style as a poem of Emily Dickinson, and keeps both the colloquial idiom and rhythm:

> Some say the world will end in fire,
> Some say in ice.
> From what I've tasted of desire
> I hold with those who favor fire.
> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.

The casual phrasing in "Some say ... Some say ...," the habit of understating implied in "I think I know ... And would suffice," and the idiomatic ease in "I hold with those who favor fire," all these go to make up the epigrammatic style of the poem. Moreover, the strong presence of the Frostian speaker at the center of the poem is felt in the way his

voice is heard balancing opposites--fire or ice --and weighing equally dire and momentous alternatives.

The voice ways differ perceptibly in the lyrics. In many of them "a wild tune," as Frost phrases it,[24] is heard as dramatic tones are broken across the rigidity of a straight meter. Such a wild tune emerges out of voice ways - many different ways of qualifying that the voice assumes in its deft balancing act - in the sonnet "On a Bird Singing in its Sleep." The sonnet does not conform to either of the two traditional forms current in English; it is made of rhyming couplets, and has the octave-sestet division. The "wild tune"--that is, "the voice entangled in the words"--is heard in those reservations and qualifications of tone that proliferate in the phrases: " ... half wakened ... sang halfway ... Partly because it sang but once ... no especial bush's height ... less in peril than appears." And in the sestet, which is a single sentence with subtly modulated syntax, we are given a different kind of reservation, a built-in logic in the syntactic structure: "It could not have ... While we are men ... if singing out of sleep ... "

This "wild tune" sometimes presents exceptional difficulties in interpreting a poem. For instance, a wild tune is heard in the sonnet "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same." Commenting on this wildness in the poem--"talk about wildness must be talk about how the voice of a poem sounds"--W. H. Pritchard remarks in despair: "What are the correct

[24] Selected Prose, p. 18.

words to chart a medium through which the speaking voice moves by connectives like 'Admittedly,' 'Could only,' 'Be that as may be,' 'More over,' and 'probably'? Unassertively? Quietly certain? Who is the brave man willing to stake his reputation on identifying the tone of voice at a particular moment of this eloquence so soft?"[25] It is evident from the examples seen that the style, clear and direct in the dialogue poems, undergoes excessive modulation in order to give us this lyric wildness. If a style scale can be devised, then it will be bounded at one extreme by colloquial diction and rhythm--of the kind in "The Code," "The Bonfire," and "Brown's Descent." At the other extreme is the literary, sophisticated, and qualifying voice tones. In between are poems that combine the best of both styles, the colloquial rhythm of the country speech and the tight phrasing, the qualifying tone of the literary. Frost often talked of writing a poem as performance, and referred to "prowess"[26] as being required to get all those wild tunes into the verse. Sometimes this tendency had the danger of deteriorating into what Frost called "my kind of fooling" (IC,100).

One other example can be cited--an example in which, once again, too many imponderables seem to be involved in the use of voice tones - the last line of the poem discussed in the previous chapter: "Truth?

[25]"Wildness of Logic in Modern Lyric," Forms of Lyric, ed. R. A. Brower, p. 130.

[26]"Perfect Day--A Day of Prowess," Selected Prose, pp. 88-91.

A pebble of Quartz? For once, then, something." Brower, commenting upon the "wavering possibilities ... in the four words that complete the poem," mentions these several voice tones: " ... urbane, philosophic, rural, joking, visionary, and realistic ... "[27] Neither the critic nor the poet can be reliably certain about the sound posturing needed for the last line to bring out the correct meaning--if one correct meaning is at all possible.

The fault, if we may call it, in these lyrics lies in the overloading of voice tones--too many reservations, releases and withdrawals of assent--because what the sum-total of these tones leads to is, in Frostian terms, a wild tune: certainly an increase in the connotational range of the poem which accords well with synecdochic procedures. But there is no way of feeling certain that we have grasped all the tones, and got at the resultant or residual meaning. This does not, however, mean that the poems fail to impress the reader. This only means an acknowledgement of certain tendencies in Frost that often keep the poems from becoming memorably great.

I argued that the use of voice tones is in line with the way synecdoche functions. This is also true in a technical sense; that is, the way voices sound in dramatic dialogues and monologues evokes the presence of people, and the people in their turn evoke or represent a regional way of life. This is perhaps one reason why Frost dispenses with physical descriptions of men and women in his poems. Their voices are made to sound distinct in verse by the "intonation somehow entangled

[27] Poetry of Frost, p. 138.

in words."[28]

In order to determine some of the common stylistic qualities--which point to attitudes toward people of a certain region--we need to examine certain representative examples from the dramatic dialogues and narrative poems. We have in these poems farmers talking to other farmers as in "A Time to Talk," "Mending Wall," or "The Axe-Helve," lovers as in "Generations of Men," "Going for Water," "Happiness Makes up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," or married couples debating as in "Death of a Hired Man," or "West-Running Brook."

One general observation on the best of dramatic dialogues which appears convincing, has been made by W. H. Pritchard.[29] He argues that Frost sets up a colloquial norm early in the poem, and then in sudden moments of vision to which his men and women have access, the norm is violated in favor of lyric expansions. This "stylistic elevation" occurs in poems such as "Home Burial," "Death of the Hired Man," "The Black Cottage," and "West-Running Brook." Sometimes a hum-drum kind of verse, often pedestrian, reflecting everyday life, as in "The Black Cottage," is suddenly redeemed by an onrush of poetic feeling

[28]As reported by Brower, p. 5. Frost remarked about the poem "Snow": "I have three characters speaking in one poem, and I was not satisfied with what they said until I got them to speak so true to their characters that no mistake could be made as to who was speaking. I would never put the names of the speakers in front of what they said." Fire and Ice, p. 116.

[29]"North of Boston: Frost's Poetry of Dialogue," In Defense of Reading, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirer, p. 42.

which brings about a corresponding change in the style of the poem. The last twenty lines of the poem give us the subjunctive world of vision, " ... I wish/I could be monarch of a desert land ..." and so on. And this sudden heightening of feeling is followed by a falling off in the last three lines, indicating the resumption of everyday life through sharp, abrupt, declarative sentences:

> There are bees in this wall. He struck the clapboards,
> Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.
> We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.

Brower remarks about a similar lyric moment in "Death of a Hired Man": "At the climax of The Hired Man the style becomes decidedly lyric, moving outside the limits of either dramatic or narrative realism."[30] These remarks, in short, apply to lyric moments outside the limits of dramatic or narrative framework. Within the dramatic and narrative frame, however, certain notable features are apparent.

Two observations may be made about these features. First, dialogue in the dramatic poems tends to be stylized. This stylization is mainly due to repetition of words and patterns of syntax that characterize colloquial speech; and this occurs especially at moments of crisis, of sharp disagreements or clashes of will in the story. This is one thing that needs to be examined. Second, the overall craft of the dialogue and narration is very much akin to the art of the short story.

[30] Poetry of Frost, p. 165.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is a representative poem in the genre of dramatic dialogues, and it has had the attention it deserves from most critics. Its flexible verse rhythm, the distinct voices heard in the poem which help characterize the married couple, and its moments of lyric vision are some of the things commented upon by critics. What may be examined, however, is the pattern of dialogue that unfolds the opposite viewpoints the man and his wife represent in the poem. Repetition is one of the common devices used for stylizing speech, and the amount of stylization secured in the poem depends wholly on the kind of dramatic immediacy the poet aims to give. Such a dramatic moment first occurs in the following passage which focuses on the sharpest point of disagreement between Mary and Warren on old Silas, who has come home to them, finally, to die. In about eleven lines, we have this emerging pattern:

> Where did you say
> He didn't say ...
> What did he say? Did he say anything?
> Anything? ... He said he would come.
> But did he?
> Of course he did. What would you have him say?

This kind of word patterning on "do" and "say" draws our attention to a specific dramatic moment of opposed viewpoints, the expressive capabilities of the characters narrowed down to a direct confrontation. The pattern of dialogue helps sharpen the definition of positions the characters will take in relation to old Silas. The pressures of the two wills force the dialogue to be concise, laconic. In the face of man's pressing rejoinder the woman turns evasive, and bides her time.

The second point of climax occurs in the poem to signal Warren's change of attitude toward Silas. The end of Warren's conversion is marked by the repetition of the word "home." This time their difference of opinion centers not so much on Silas directly but on "home," which is more an ideological difference. The two different points of view cluster round the word "home" and get redefined in the interrogative searching for a satisfactory definition:

> ... 'he has come home to die:
> ...
> 'Home,' he mocked gently.
> 'Yes, what else but home?
> It all depends on what you mean by home.

The interrogative forms in the above lines are retained in the lines to follow, but they get assimilated in the definition of 'home' that they both try to arrive at:

> The place where ...
> When you have to go there.

The second observation about the poem is the art of the short story that the poem exhibits. The poem is a story with a plot and has a surprise at the end, at least for its characters--the death of Silas. The beginning of the story is conceived in terms of a series of little actions that Mary performs; the use of active verbs is insistently made in the narrative structure: "Mary sat musing ... Waiting ... heard ... ran on tiptoe ... to meet him ... put him on his guard ... pushed him outward ... shut it... took the market things ... set them on the porch ... drew him down to sit beside her." All the serial actions are performed in the first ten lines, after which the poem assumes the form of dialogue.

But in the ten lines, as the reader goes through the brief scene of vivid animation, the verse is predominantly functional giving us the precise details of location, and the characteristic of Mary--her high-strung nature--in terms of actions she performs. The rest of the poem, except for a brief passage on the "moon," is given over to expounding the differing viewpoints of Warren and Mary on Silas.

After presenting their differences through dialogue, the poet, with the art of the short-story writer, turns to the scene, as Warren is slowly coming round to Mary's viewpoint. W. W. Robson, who grants the art of the short story to Frost, nevertheless finds the "moon" passage rather extraneous to the poem: "The passages about the moon seem something added to the story to make it poetry."[31] But it can be shown that the "moon" passage is not added to the story. The beginning of the poem refers prominently to the time of night with words such as "the lamp-flame at the table ... the darkened passage." Then Mary confronts Warren outside on the porch and draws "him down/to sit beside her on the wooden steps," in the night. Therefore, the transition from this initial suggestion of night to the moon and cloud toward the end is gradual, convincing. The second point is that it indicates gentle feminine persuasion and the final winning over of Warren to her point of view about Silas. The feminine will gently working on Warren's firm resolve not to have Silas back on the job would further suggest the

[31]Robson, p. 752-53.

appropriateness of the moon passage and the subjunctive world of hope and wish in "As if she played unheard some tenderness/That wrought on him beside her in the night."

This passage, instead of detracting from the poem as Robson suggests, strengthens it if we remember the art of the short story. The story writer is free to move from character to plot to atmosphere, which according to Jakobson is a characteristic of metonymy; and the moon passage does the job of evoking atmosphere. The art of the short story is perceptible in poems such as "The House Keeper," "The Fear," "Home Burial," "The Witch of Coos," and "Snow." And the verse style is flexible enough to accommodate different kinds of demands, naturalistic conversation as well as poetic moments.

"West-Running Brook," another dramatic dialogue, presents, however, a different problem - different because it has no story and the drama it contains is minimal. The Frostian couple, man and wife, again appear in the poem to discuss a brook, the way it flows west which is contrary to the other brooks that flow in the region. They differ, initially, in their interpretation of the brook. The poem reads like an attempt at reproducing what Edwin Muir calls a "platonic dialogue"[32] in rural setting. The dramatic mode inherent in the dialogue is, however, not fully realized because of Frost's ideological

[32]"Preface," Selected Poems of Robert Frost, reprinted in Recognition of Robert Frost, p. 311.

preoccupation in the poem. Midway through the poem, ideology intrudes on the intrinsic naturalness of the couple's talking about the brook, and lessens its human content. There is some conflict of ideas in the initial debate of the couple, but the conflict is soon forgotten.

A certain pronominal pattern occurring early in the poem focuses the point at issue, the definition of "I" and "you" mutually and in relation to the brook: " ... the brook/Can trust itself to go by contraries/The way I can with you--and you with me--/Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are."

The definition of what "we," man and wife, are, is the subject of the poem, and the fulfilment they achieve in arriving at self-definition is suggested in the next lines:

> We must be something.
> We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.
> As you and I are married to each other,
> We'll both be married to the brook.

Marriage to the brook is, presumably, their way of feeling one with nature. The verse seems to proceed, through pronominal accentuation, to substantiate their own marriage and their marriage with the brook. Several antithetical patterns of sentence hitched to the notion of "contraries" appear, engaging the contrariness of the couple held securely in marriage:

> And the white water rode the black forever,
> Not gaining but not losing ...
>
> It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you
> It was to me.

The syntactic parallel in "flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool" is taken up later toward the end of the poem as a way of resolving the mutual contrariness in the following lines; the parallelism reinforces, semantically, the perennial cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and continuity in nature:

> Our life runs down in sending up the clock,
> The brook runs down in sending up our life
> The sun runs down in sending up the brook
> And there is something sending up the sun.

The dramatic effect further consists in sharply distinguishing the two voices: the light feminine fancy of the woman played off against the firm masculine grasp of objective fact. The wife personalizes the brook by seeing the brook, particularly its flowing by contraries, in terms of a successful marriage. The man, on the other hand, distances it, and views it as suggesting a parable or allegory; he sees in its contrary flow an image that illustrates for him his vision of devolution followed by evolution.

The point where the poem's dramatic mode seems to give in rather abruptly to the onrush of ideology--here one sees the essential commitment of the poet to his ideas rather than to the dramatic propriety of the poem--comes soon after the wife gives the signal as if it were for the husband to proceed: "Yes, you have too. Go on. You thought of something." But only a line before, the husband has confessed his inability to go on: "It is your brook! I have no more to say." And yet, what follows is his say, a long passage of meditative verse - contrary to the dramatic mode the verse has established till now - lyrical and philosophical.

At this point the poem breaks with the dramatic mode, and proceeds with the celebrated meditation; celebrated because what most readers usually remember is this passage, and not the poem. The transition between the dramatic and meditative is rather abrupt and presents no modulation whatever. The voice tones as characterizing the feminine and masculine views cease to function. The meditation proceeds, impersonally, in a more or less toneless voice, and takes hold of the subject of contraries suggested earlier in terms of their attempt to grapple with self-definition. It expands this notion and lifts it to the philosophical level, incorporating the ideas of Bergson and James.[33]

> It flows beside us in this water brook,
> But it flows over us. It flows between us
> To separate us for a panic moment,
> It flows between us, over us, and with us.

The human reference is still held and hence the definition of people involved in the "marriage" with the brook. But there is no particular sound posturing, and the passage can be read as an independent poem. Even the human reference thins out as the verse, in its attempt to take in a complex of Bergson's and James' ideas, works out slowly, ponderously, insistently the notion of contraries in terms of rhythm and syntax:

> Some say existence like a Pirouot
> And Pirouette, forever in one place,
> Stands still and dances, but it runs away;
> It seriously, sadly, runs away
> To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.

[33]Thompson has discussed fully the influence of their ideas on the poem. See Years of Triumph, pp. 298-304, 624-26.

What we have toward the end of the meditation is only a reminder of, perhaps a feeble return to, the people involved in the poem:

> It is from this in nature we are from.
> It is most us.

However, this return to human reference with which the long passage ends, does not lead to any restoration of the dramatic mode. Instead, the poem seems to close in the manner of a ritual. The last lines of the poem are terse, solemn, one sentence assertions made by each of the speakers. They produce the effect, rhythmically, of saying 'Amen' to a prolonged ceremony. Like the liturgical chant, the syntactic parallels succeed one another to close the poem:

> 'Today will be the day
> You said so.'
> 'No, today will be the day
> You said the brook was called West-running Brook.'
>
> 'Today will be the day of what we both said.'

This solemn, ritual closure will remind the reader of the mixing of styles, not always convincing, that Frost has employed in the poem.

At this point one clearly understands what Frost meant when he said he was a synecdochist. In the poem the brook touches a larger issue. And where it touches, it changes the mode of discourse. It changes style. The "moon" passage in "The Hired Man" is somewhat of this nature; the style change that the passage brings about is in line with the use of synecdoche, and the style change is justifiable because of the short story technique involved in the poem. The brook in the above poem suggests explicitly by its contrary flow universal laws

in nature's ways. But the synecdochic extensions of meaning as they occur within the dramatic mode remain unconvincing.

If one may generalize on the working of synecdoche in Frost, the poet usually derives synecdochic relations by working out from the particular, the specific. In "Design" there was an attempt to see tiny things like spider, moth and flower in their synecdochic[34] relation with "design of darkness to appall," but no confirmation of this could be reached there because of the skeptical undercutting implied in the last line. The woodchuck in "A Drumlin Woodchuck" formulates for us a whole life style from the little actions it performs in order to survive: it digs in--"I have been so instinctively thorough/About my crevice and burrow"--puts up a resistance to change, and feels shrewd, complacent in having taken such a stance. In "The Egg and the Machine" there is a similar attempt to derive synecdochic meaning from the particular. But the attempt fails, the particular does not get to be general, symbolic. If the poem was meant to celebrate the precedence of the organic over the mechanical, it was a miscalculation. For the turtle's egg in the poem can scarcely manage to symbolize the organic missile it is supposed to be. It remains in the hand of the speaker very much a miserable-looking turtle's egg.

[34]All synecdoches are metaphors, but not all metaphors are synecdoches. Synecdoche further particularizes the principle of similarity by emphasizing contiguous relation. Hence the particularizing word "synecdochic" here.

Despite Frost's command of several voice tones, there is a kind of voice, heard often in prophetic poetry, which seems to have eluded the poet. It is a public voice which carries intonations of authority, and is specially suited for public occasions--a voice often heard, for instance, in Yeats. "Build Soil" is one of the major ambitious poems of Frost; it was written especially for the public occasion. And if the poem fails, the failure is due to the lack of authority in the voice heard in the poem. The poem has been often criticized for its opinions, but the fault seems to lie elsewhere. Frost could not command in the poem the kind of authority of voice that goes with a certain poetic intensity, as in Yeats or Eliot. Further, in "Build Soil" Frost has an additional advantage: for once he seems to be working within pastoral tradition and in direct imitation of Virgil's first eclogue. But even this tradition does not seem to prevent him from sounding crotchety, peevish. The colloquial rhythm simply does not suit the occasion; further, the opinions expressed by the farm-loving poet Tityrus on the relations of individual and state, freedom of the individual, and free enterprise, are not backed by anything profoundly felt and related to any vital experience. If anything, the underlying attitude is very much the woodchuck's under pastoral garb, a narrowing down of one's interests to one's own home, one's own self.

But there is one exception; Frost did manage to sound "public" in the sixteen-line narrative "The Gift Outright." In this poem the poet has definitely moved from the "tonal self" to an impersonal tone. The

preoccupation with how you say a thing--which often draws attention to the sayer or the narrator and his manipulation of tones--transforms itself into a genuine interest in the history of the United States. And it is a definite release from the servility of the tonal self, and this is what gives the poem its command of the public voice. The contradictory changes rung on the verb "possess"--a syntactical triumph in the poem--point to the deeper historical ambiguity involved in the act of possession, which is the theme of the poem.

Let me sum up this discussion before moving on to the third major point of the chapter: The use of pastoral in Frost was examined to see whether it was synecdochic, and it was concluded that there was no basis for assuming that pastoral was correlative with synecdoche, and that each individual poem would have to be examined for any larger significance. The second point discussed was the theory and practice of voice tones, and their effects on syntax and rhythm. The poet uses them in the dialogue poems to characterize persons, evoke their presence; and in lyrics, the voice tones are found to qualify meanings and increase their connotations. The voice tones are in part synecdochic in nature, because they communicate to the reader commensurately a greater order of feeling. This would bring us to the third point, the narrator in Frost's poems--only because the statement that "All the fun's in how you say a thing" will finally focus on the sayer.

In the previous chapter I referred to Bridgman's ideas on colloquial style, one of which was the positing of the colloquial narrator as means to ensure colloquial style. Bridgman, writing about Huck as narrator in Huckleberry Finn, remarks: "The adolescent narrator provides a frame of reference by which the dictional level and rhythmical norm can be monitored."[35] The situation perhaps is very similar in Frost's narrative poems; that is, the way to sustain colloquial style is, obviously, to posit a rural narrator who provides "a frame of reference" and a consistent consciousness with which to control diction and rhythm of the speaking voice.

In recent Frost criticism this view has been offered frequently. The view that what unifies Frost's poems is the narrator in them has been suggested by Lynen, and vigorously put forward by J. M. Cox. Lynen puts it this way: "The link between style and meaning is the character of the person who speaks Frost's lines" (p. 89). J. M. Cox argues that Frost's poems should be treated as extensions of Frost's "character": For "Frost has from the start pursued the more indirect but equally effective mode of dramatizing and characterizing himself." In North of Boston, as Cox remarks, "Frost himself emerges prominently as a member of the volume's dramatic personae ... in nine of the sixteen poems."[36]

[35]Bridgman, p. 141.

[36]"Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," Profile, p. 24.

And, finally, Cox argues that "all aspects" of his poetry are "the related 'characteristics' which describe the character at the center [of poetry] and create the powerful illusion of his existence."[37] This, if true, would ensure the poems a control of diction and rhythm of the speaking voice. Further, anticipating the direction that Frost criticism would take in future, Cox writes: "A serious study of Frost's poetry will, I believe, discover how much its structure emerges in terms of a central character--the poetic figure of Robert Frost."[38]

Several objections can be raised against Cox's theory at this point. First, Cox does not seem to discriminate between the different figures of Frost available in the poems. Moreover, all the speakers in Frost's poems do not enjoy the same degree of physical presence. The "I" in poems such as "Design," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Quest of the Purple-Fringed," "Gathering Leaves," and "The Last Mowing," sounds impersonal and unobtrusive. On the other hand, the "I" figures prominently in "New Hampshire," "Mending Wall," "The Census Taker," "The Grindstone," "Stopping by Woods ...," "Directive," and "Two Tramps in Mudtime." The "I" in each of these poems is integral to its total structure. But even here, the "I" in "New Hampshire" needs to be distinguished from the "I" in "The Census Taker" and "The Grindstone." The farmer poet, or the Frost figure, makes

[37]"Introduction," Robert Frost, p. 14.

[38]Ibid., p. 13.

his first "full-dress entrance" (to use Cox's phrase)[39] in "Mending Wall." And he can be identified in several other poems. He is most prominently there in "New Hampshire," talking in the Horatian mode about his region, his craft as poet, and formulating his stances on several fronts--cultural, poetic, Freudian. He pops into the middle of the ballad narrative "Brown's Descent":

> Sometimes as an authority
> On motor-cars, I'm asked if I
> Should say our stock was petered out,
> And this is my sincere reply.

He appears very definitely in "To a Thinker": "At least don't use your mind too hard,/But trust my instinct--I'm a bard." He is there in "Directive," "Kitty Hawk," "The Lesson for Today," and in several of the satires and political poems. He is the whimsical, garrulous Frost whose extension is the public figure of the platform, as Cox rightly points out.

Now if these several poems project the figure of Frost, then this can be taken as synecdoche in reverse, that is, the whole giving rise to the emergence of the part, the poems promoting the figure of the poet. To this extent Cox's emphasis may be conceded; we do get the impression of the poet emerging through several, but not all, poems.

The second objection is much more telling: Cox's emphasis amounts to a recognition suggesting that the poems are there to promote the poet. This aspect of Frostian persona is, perhaps, somewhat similar to

[39] Profile, p. 24.

Whitman's persona: both Whitman and Frost do promote this strong identity coming through the poems; Whitman the celebrant, and Frost, foxy, whimsical, and shrewd as the "Drumlin Woodchuck." The one expands indiscriminately, the other contracts, shirks responsibility, and shuns wider ranges of experience, but shrewdly tries to be a synecdochist so that he could have the best of both worlds.

But Cox's way of arguing only shifts the focus on to a different head. Instead of asking what worth are the poems, we would ask how worth while is the study or recognition of this character whose existence the poems are said essentially to define and promote. Perhaps this kind of strategy helps us get around Jarrell and Trilling, who have come to favor and argue for the "dark," impersonal Frost poems,[40] and accept the whole oeuvre of Frost--on the plea that the whole oeuvre has interesting aspects of Frost to offer. If we concede this, then are we supposed to admire this whimsical, foxy character winking at us from behind the poems? The whimsicality in Frost is available to us in several forms and in varying degrees. Even in excellent lyrics, a sudden whimsy intrudes as in "Spring Pools": "Let them think twice ..."; in "Come In" the last two lines read, "I meant not even if asked,/And I hadn't been." Sometimes the whimsy follows as the poetic impulse stirs. In "To a Thinker" the speaker upholds the rightness of instinct as against the laborious processes of thought. In "Accidentally on

[40]Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age, pp. 28-69; and Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," Frost, pp. 151-58.

Purpose" he even turns out to be a wholehearted Emersonian as when he says:

> And yet for all this help of head and brain
> How happily instinctive we remain,
> Our best guide upward further to the light,
> Passionate preference such as love at sight. (IC, p. 34)

But in "The White-Tailed Hornet" the poet describes, as Winters points out, "the activities of a hornet and the errors it commits under the guidance of instinct, and he reprehends mankind for having engaged in 'downward comparisons'."[41] Thompson has documented both from the poems and from the biographical details the wavering moods of belief and disbelief, and the various poses and strategies the poet adopted to offset his fears--fear of belief and disbelief, and fear of death and God--which he had inherited from his mother.[42] But Cox has an ingenious explanation for Frost's whimsy: "Frost's much deplored whimsy is a kind of characteristic poetic fancy by means of which the character, rejecting the transcendental machinery of his New England predecessors, projects his consciousness into nature." It is, as Cox reiterates, "the character's style of belief."[43]

The question, then, is, How shall we understand this style of belief, and what credence can we give to it? Even in as wellknown a

[41] Function of Criticism, p. 168.

[42] Early Years, pp. 20-33, 36-37, 70-72, 89-91, 118-20, 122-24, 230-32, 239-43, 272-74, and so on.

[43] "Introduction," p. 14.

poem as "Directive," one is confronted with this problem: Is the poet himself serious about what he is saying? How serious is he when he says in the last line "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." This injunction certainly does not get its full sustenance of authority from several whimsies that the reader detects in the speaker-guide's voice:

> ... if you'll let a guide direct you
> Who only has at heart your getting lost ...
>
> As for the woods' excitement over you
> That sends light rustle rushes to their leaves,
> Charge that to upstart inexperience ...
>
> Pull in your ladder road behind you
> And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me ...
>
> I have kept hidden ...
> A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
> Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
> So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
> (I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)

Cox is right when he says that the Frost "character" has rejected the transcendental machinery. But what has he replaced it with, and what other traditional sanctions can he invoke to sustain "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion," apart from resorting to his whimsies to offset his skeptical strain? Critics who have praised "Directive" do not seem to have faced the discrepancy between the narrator and the subject he has set out to affirm. Of course, the poem has powerful lines, vivid memorable passages, but it just misses being great.

Therefore, in my view, by Cox's plea for considering the whole work of the poet in terms of this character and his style of belief, it is Frost who suffers most. The character that we get is none too admirable. And the style of belief, if adopted in real life, will only lead to confusion.

The above remarks are pertinent only to those poems where the figure of Frost (as promoted by Cox) makes its strong presence felt as something integral to the poem's total meaning. Here a third objection to Cox's theory may be offered: Does the figure of Frost include, say, the speakers who experience moments of terror as in "Bereft," "The Onset," "The Lockless Door," and "Desert Places"? How about the narrators in "The Grindstone" and "The Census Taker"? Obviously, they are not farmer poets; can they be included in the Frost figure? Cox does not seem to face this problem. The speakers in the above mentioned poems do not seem to have anything in common with the speaker in, say, the lines: "It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling/To get adapted to my kind of fooling." In brief, this kind of enquiry on the part of the critic is of dubious value. As Brower writes: "If he [the critic] is trying to discover the personality behind the poems, he will feel that Frost is undeniably there--massively so, yet terribly elusive."[44] This stands to reason, because even in poems in which Frost appears, the degree and nature of his presence varies greatly. Frost himself tried to scotch the attempt to relate the man to the poet in a letter to Sidney Cox in 1932: "The objective idea is all I ever cared about ... To be too subjective with what an artist has managed to make objective is to come on him presumptuously and render ungraceful what he in pain of his life and faith he had made graceful."[45] The poet after all speaks, as Waggoner

[44] New England Quarterly, 34 (june, 1961), 244.

[45] Selected Letters, pp. 385-86.

remarks, "through a variety of masks--the mask of the literate back-country farmer, the mask of the detached observer of his own emotions, the mask of the tough realist ... and then, in the latter third or so of the career, the mask of the shrewd, wisely cynical, but at the same time cherishing, sage."[46]

We may, however, wisely disagree with the "cynical sage" of the later years. And if we are to judge the poems, then the poems which seek to project the figure of the poet are, no doubt, synecdochic, but inferior poems. Stylistically, because of the presence of the narrator in them, they keep to the colloquial style and situation. And the poems in which Frost is least intrusive are the most persuasive, convincing. In these poems the style is not necessarily colloquial in diction. Although many of them retain colloquial rhythm, they exhibit preeminently a literary diction.

[46] American Poets, p. 315.

CHAPTER IV

Gathering Metaphors

> ... It represents ... not the long deferred forward movement you are living in wait for, but only the grim stand it was necessary for me to make until I should gather myself together. (emphasis added)
>
> Frost to Susan Hayes Ward, 19 Dec., 1911.

(1)

Metaphor is a protean term. Critics, rhetoricians, philosophers have all tackled the question of metaphor for the simple reason that it has profound effects on language, the way words behave in relation to each other. Metaphor, as in Aristotle, is often used as a composite term to subsume both metonymy and synecdoche.[1] Neither Frost nor Thompson, his biographer and critic, to cite a recent example, seems to differentiate between metaphor and synecdoche.[2] Any critic using these terms, therefore, is faced with the problem of delimiting the scope of each term and explaining it in a manner which would advance the argument with precision.

In the previous chapter I used synecdoche to mean words which describe the part of a thing or concept in such a way that it connotes the whole. Further, synecdoche, like metonymy, functions on grounds of

[1] Classical Literary Criticism: Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, p. 61.

[2] Fire and Ice, p. 123; Selected Prose, pp. 35-41.

contiguity; and since the part is contiguous with the whole, the relations between the two, as Wellek and Warren remark,[3] are internal. In metaphor, on the other hand, the principle of contiguity is not the determining factor. The objects compared might be as remote, and different from each other, as, say, in the expression, " ... those two eyes/Which starlike sparkle in their skies," or in "the mind's an ocean." It is, as Jakobson designates it, a figure of similarity (as opposed to the figure of contiguity). It can even be a figure of dissimilarity, or "disparity,"[4] as in the phrase "Christ the tiger."

Metaphor and simile, both figures of similarity or comparison, are usually differentiated. But the difference can be shown to be minimal with one kind of metaphor. "Christ the tiger" is a metaphor; "the evening is spread out .../Like a patient etherised upon a table" is a simile. But both can be equally shocking. And both have certain common linguistic features: they both explicitly give us the tenor or the literal term and the vehicle or the figurative term.[5] Actually, it is common for all similes to state the two terms, while it is not common for all metaphors to do so. Some metaphors state the two terms, some do not. The metaphor in "She is as in a field a silken tent" states the two terms--"she" and "silken tent"--and behaves like an extended or epic simile during the rest of the sonnet. After linking the two terms of

[3] Theory of Literature, p. 199.

[4] I. A. Richards, Philosophy of Rhetoric, p. 108.

[5] Since Richards' terms "tenor" and "vehicle" have been widely accepted by scholars, I shall use them frequently in the discussion.

comparison in the first line, the poet carefully works out the details. In these instances the difference between metaphor and simile is nominal: the metaphor simply omits the connective "like." The textbook distinction between simile and metaphor hinges on this connective; it is a distinction without a difference.

But some metaphors do not state both the terms, the tenor and the vehicle. Instead, they state the tenor in terms of the vehicle, and this feature makes for a crucial difference. These metaphors are different because of the more complex linguistic operation involved in the comparison. They are different from the metaphors and similes which provide both the terms. They are, what I. A. Richards calls, "interaction metaphors."[6] Winifred Nowottny offers a useful description of this kind of metaphor: It "is a set of linguistic directions for supplying the sense of an unwritten literal term."[7] If the unwritten literal term be called "Y," to use the same letters as Mrs. Nowottny does, then the terminology of "Y" is used to describe "X": that is, "Y" is not stated as an explicit term, but evoked to characterize "X." In the line "I found a dimpled spider, fat and white," the adjectives "dimpled," and "fat and white" are the terminology proper for describing, say, a baby. But the baby is not the subject of interest in the poem. The poet is writing about a spider, but he uses the epithets proper to a baby to describe the spider. The process

[6]Richards, p. 107.

[7]The Language Poets Use, p. 59.

involved is metaphoric interaction. The effect is one of unpleasant sensation evoked about the spider. But this sensation is not verbally specified anywhere in the poem. The adjectives chosen are the "linguistic directions" that Mrs. Nowottny talks about. "By using Y-terminology to describe X," she writes, "he [the poet] opens to himself the linguistic resources available in connection with Y."[8]

Such metaphors are used usually when the poet seeks to evoke sensations or present symbolic events. The process involved in the latter is the same: the poet uses the "Y-terminology" to describe X, and turns literal words into symbols. The line "miles to go before I sleep," suggesting the journey motif, repeated twice in the last stanza of "Stopping by Woods ...," would bring in associations of death without naming it. The last stanza, as a whole, represents a symbolic event, whose exact reference tends to be indeterminate. In brief, then, evoking sensations and extending meanings into symbols are the two features of "interaction" metaphors, which are not shared by similes and metaphors that state both the terms. Such metaphors are, as Mrs. Nowottny rightly concludes, "a useful means of dealing with the area of unnamed experiences."[9] It is in these areas that the crucial difference between metaphor and simile becomes most apparent.

These are the two main categories in the figures of comparison that I shall use in the present enquiry: The first one includes both similes and metaphors which state both the tenor and the vehicle; one

[8] Ibid., p. 67.

[9] Ibid., p. 60.

figure is easily convertible into the other with the commission or omission of "like." The second category, which I shall call for purposes of clarity, the "interactive metaphor" is, as explained above, distinctly different from the other kind.[10] The issues that will engage this chapter are, first, Is there a method of comparison which the poet prefers? And if there is one, then, what are the predominant figures of comparison that characterize the method? The second issue that will engage the later part of this chapter is the exploration of those metaphors which seem to touch the poet's deeper concerns, and thereby reveal the poet's attitudes to human experience.

The answer to the first question is that there exists in Frost's poems a preferred method of comparison. The poet is wary of using interactive metaphors. He is more apt to use a simile or metaphor (which gives both the terms) than an interactive metaphor, because the former, with its literal statement and figurative expression, would lend itself easily to his discursive method. In "The Silken Tent" the method, as seen earlier, led to an elaborate, yet subtle, sentence structure,

[10]A confusion of terms usually arises at this point. Richards, Max Black (Models and Metaphors), and Mrs. Nowottny all acknowledge the unsatisfactory nature of terms available for use. Metaphor, as a generic term, means a figure of similarity, as Jakobson uses it; and, used as such, it includes simile as a subclass. It is in this sense I have used it in other chapters as distinct from metonymy and synecdoche. In the present chapter, however, when further distinction is made between metaphor and simile, the need arises for greater particularization. Metaphors, which state both the terms, the tenor and the vehicle, and so behave almost like similes--the difference being negligible for my purposes--are simply noted, and then classed under similes. And metaphor, when used singly in this chapter, will mean either in the generic sense, or in the special sense of interactive metaphor. I hope the context will make clear these distinctions.

wherein a good many resources of grammar were put to use. Frost would use a simile, at times, even in poems where he is trying to create a symbolic situation.

In an excellent poem "The Onset," snow is identified with death in a simile:

> ... when on a fated night
> At last the gathered snow lets down as white ...
> I almost stumble looking up and round,
> As one who overtaken by the end
> Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
> Upon him where he is ...

And what appears to be an interactive metaphor, with "hissing" of falling snow as in "hissing on the yet uncovered ground," and picked up later in the last lines of the poem, "a slender April rill/That flashes tail through last years' withered brake," gets tamed, finally, by the explicitly mentioned vehicle "like a disappearing snake." Of course, the symbolic situation remains, but it is sustained by the similes in the poem. The degree of formality of metaphor found in the language of the poem is low, and just enough to let the figurative continuum remain parallel to the literal discourse. In fact, the overall restraint exercised in the use of metaphor is to be accounted for by the poet's ability to work with syntax and metonymy. The first eleven-line stanza, written in couplets, forms a single sentence, into which is packed an incident and a feeling of the imminence of death.

The strong sense of literal fact that the poet's use of metonymy emphasized almost logically points to the more frequent use of similes. And this is largely true both with lyrics and narrative poems. "Design," to return to a familiar example, illustrates clearly the ways in which

Frost handles both similes and metaphor, and his greater reliance on the former.

The first three lines specify the ground of comparison: The spider, flower, and moth, all are white. Then each object is compared separately to something other than itself, sometimes even opposed to itself by nature. The moth is "Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth"; the flower is "like a froth"; "The snow-drop spider," which has the form of a simile--'the spider is like snow-drop.' Then all the three objects put together are ascribed additional qualities by the appositive, again a simile: "Assorted characters of death and blight," and then, followed by another simile, "Like the ingredients of a witches' broth."

There are, strictly speaking, two interactive metaphors in the poem: One at the beginning, one at the end. "Dimpled spider" in the first line can be read literally, but "dimpled" with "fat and white" would, as explained earlier, evoke an unpleasant sensation and, as such, constitutes an interactive metaphor. The second, introduced almost unobtrusively, is the crowning metaphor of the poem, "the kindred spider." "Kindred," as applied to spider, makes the sudden link with "design of darkness," thereby springing on the reader a whole complex of emotion. In fact, through "kindred" the poet deploys all his resources of metaphorical energy: "kindred" brings together through the shared quality of whiteness the three objects, each characterized by an explicit simile, and puts them together in the context of "design of darkness." Resemblance turns into kinship. And, since "kindred" also implies a

blood relationship, we can see the powerful design holding together the three seemingly separable, different objects. It is important to realize here that the power and operation of the final metaphor depend very much on the gradual stages by which the earlier connotations, consisting of different associations of objects, are charted through illustrative similes.

Because of the gradual strengthening of associations through similes and one crowning metaphor, additional meanings gather: "design of darkness" read in the context of "witches' broth" and "the morning right [rite]," followed by "flower like a froth," point to the great power of evil concentrated in these little objects.

Similes and metaphors follow each other in the same pattern in "Directive," as they did in "Design." But with one difference: The similes in "Directive" sometimes drag in with them subjunctives, the grammatical construction 'as if.'[11] And the subjunctives are so hesitantly committed that they do not offend one's literal sense of things. The following lines will illustrate the poetic method:

> The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you
> Who only has at heart your getting lost,
> May seem as if it should have been a quarry--

Since the poem is a narrative, and the narrator is being felt strongly at the center of the poem, the first subjunctive in the above lines

[11]The world of the subjunctive, as Francis Berry remarks, is the world of hope, despair, of fantasy, a world "outside time," and, therefore, has no foundation in the "indicative business of the world." Poets' Grammar, pp. 7, 9.

"if you will let a guide ...," has a way of merging in the nuance of the narrative voice, characterizing it with light-hearted banter. Then comes the simile and the subjunctive in "May seem as if it should have been a quarry," which prepares the way for the striking interactive metaphor in the next lines: "Great monolithic knees the former town/Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered." The use of "as if" constructions in Frost, remarked in the previous chapter, underscores the poet's tendency to use the subjunctive-simile either to qualify the metaphoric moment or else to initiate the slow discursive processes of comparison at the literal level before springing on the reader the clinching metaphor. This way of representing facts and experience is, of course, in keeping with the whimsical speaker in "Directive":

> Nor need you mind the serial ordeal
> Of being watched from forty cellar holes
> As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.

Everytime the poet springs on the reader a bold simile or metaphor, he seems to feel the need to soften the shock of novelty or surprise; so he tones it down with an explanatory "as if." And the voice tones of the narrator are heard at this point. The poet seems to fight shy of committing himself to a bold metaphor, and hence the need to match with his literal sense, and the persona in the poem is strong. Toward the end of the poem, there follows a series of similes: "The only field/ Now bigger than a harness gall./ ... children's house of make-believe ... a cellar hole,/Now slowly closing like a dent in dough./ ... a broken drinking goblet like the Grail." Even the crucial goblet in the poem is

no grail, but only "like a Grail," and therefore cannot claim the grail's traditional authority. The final interactive metaphor, however, is reserved for the last lines of the poem: "Here are your waters and your watering place."

It is clear from the above examples that the poet makes a preponderant use of similes. Furthermore, similes help organize whole lyrics, and determine their structure, as in "Tree at My Window," "Bond and Free," "Fire and Ice," "Desert Places," "Moon Compasses," and "Leaves Compared with Flowers." As the titles suggest, each poem deals with two terms, and develops them logically before effecting a metaphoric link. Examining some of them would clarify the point.

In "Tree At My Window," the first stanza initiates the relationship between the two terms, man and tree. In fact, the speaker wills the relationship: "But let there never be curtain drawn/Between you and me." The second stanza introduces a bold metaphor to characterize the tree as "Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground," in which the tree gains a certain enlarged nightmare feeling. The tree is further described in a terminology used for humans: "Not all your light tongues talking aloud/Could be profound." The third stanza establishes firmly the similitude without calling in any grammatical means such as "like" or "as," but setting man and tree in a frame of syntactic parallels:

> But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
> And if you have seen me when I slept,
> You have seen me when I was taken and swept
> And all but lost.

Furthermore, the terminologies are interchanged; man "was taken and swept" like tree, and the tree, after "talking aloud" in the previous

stanza, has "seen" the man's condition. Both terms approximate toward a middle ground in this stanza, wherein the tree is less of a tree and more human, and man more of a passive object, "taken and swept." The similarities, then, are further affirmed through syntactic equivalence, and this helps give an effective closure to the poem in the next stanza: "Your head so much concerned with outer,/Mine with inner, weather." In the first stanza the speaker initiates the process for comparison, and, in the final stanza, "Fate" is imagined as putting the seal on it--as if the fulfilment of the analogy is something ordained, and beyond the speaker's control.

A variation on the method is seen in "Desert Places" (1936). In it the theme of the outer and inner "weather" of "Tree at My Window" (1928) is taken up again, but treated in a darker mood. In "Desert Places" the correspondence between the two terms, man and snow, is not, however, effected in the first stanza, but in the third, by an appositive:

> And lonely as it is that loneliness
> Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
> A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
> With no expression, nothing to express.

Both the terms, man's loneliness and the "blanker whiteness of benighted snow," the vehicle introduced as an appositive, are marshalled into the analogical structure of the outer and inner "weather," similar to the earlier poem. But what gives an effective closure to this poem is the sudden metaphoric identity achieved in the last line: "I have it in me so much nearer home/To scare myself with my own desert places." The outer becomes the inner.

Occasionally, the poet gets so carried away by the vehicle that he develops it until the last line, and then restores the comparison by bringing in the literal reference. "Moon Compasses" is a case in point. The overbalance is clearly in favor of the vehicle. The scene of the moon on the "cone mountain," and the extended images such as "cone," "compass," "calipers," "estimate," and "measure," which occur to fill out the vehicle, are from the context of geometry. When one comes to the final line which gives the tenor, "So love will take between the hands a face ...," one realizes that the poem is wasted ingenuity; the correspondence established between the vehicle and tenor is tenuous, unconvincing. A similar, though limited mathematical image, however, is introduced with tact in the love poem "Meeting and Passing":

> ... We met. But all
> We did that day was mingle great and small
> Footprints in summer dust as if we drew
> The figure of our being less than two
> But more than one as yet. Your parasol
> Pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust.

There is a fine reticence about love in the poem, and even a touch of "metaphysical" wit in the line "The figure of our being ..."

In "An Old Man's Winter Night" there is the close transaction between the two contexts, the old man and the things which constitute his immediate surrounding. The old man shares his physical existence with the circumambient objects, and there is no visualizing him apart from them. The initial personification helps in moving both, person and object, toward a middle ground:

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
> That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.

A couple of lines later, the old man's motions and reaction to night are recorded in the lines:

> He stood with barrels round him--at a loss.
> And having scared the cellar under him
> In clomping here, he scared it once again
> In clomping off;--and scared the outer night,
> Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
> Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
> But nothing so like beating on a box.

The verbal focus, through constant shift from person to things and back to the person's gestures, interrelates man with the surrounding:

> ... The log that shifted with a jolt
> Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
> And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.

The log "shifted"; the old man "shifted" too in this middle ground. The log shifts "with a jolt"; the humanity is shared equally between man and his place. This transaction will, certainly, imply the close working of metonymy and metaphor as we have defined them.

A simile gives two terms to play with, and will enable a poet to keep the options open. "Fire and Ice" weighs the two terms one against the other, and presents a neat, simple structure. The equation that fire is desire, and ice hate, helps organize the poem in syntactic parallels. The first two lines, "Some say the world will end in fire,/ Some say in ice," give us the two vehicles. The first equation between fire and desire is gained by directly rhyming the two words: "From what I have tasted of desire/I hold with those who favor fire." And the link between ice and hate is achieved by rhyming them alternately: "Twice-ice-

suffice" and "hate--great." The syntactic connectives "but" and "also" manage to keep both the options open. "Bond and Free" is another poem with its structure supported by a simile. "Bond" is as to love as "free" is to thought; the two arms of the simile are able to get hold of one of the basic themes in Frost, love versus thought.

If similes, then, have helped determine the structure of these lyrics, and suggest effective closures to them, they seem to do more to the fables. They lend their basic form to the latter. Beast fables are narratives in which animals, principal agents, talk and act like humans; the analogy is kept clearly before the reader's mind. The genre from Aesop down to La Fontaine, and in our own time in Orwell's Animal Farm, has been used as a satiric device to point out man's follies. In Frost's fable poems, many innovations are discernible. The later poems for instance, "The White-Tailed Hornet" (A Further Range) and "A Considerable Speck" (A Witness Tree), both seem to be closer to the Horatian Sermo[12] than to a fable. This range of variation within the genre is possible because of the analogical mode inherent in the form of the genre. The mode lends itself easily to the discursive, satirical handling of speculative and social issues as in "The Bear," "Departmental," "A Considerable Speck," and "The White-Tailed Hornet."

[12]Literary talk, discussion, or debate which Horace used in his satires or sermones, in which the interest in the fable, if introduced as in the sixth satire of the second book, is only subordinate to, and illustrative of, the poet's ideological posture. In R. A. Brower's Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion, see pages 170-74. And refer to Horace in Lillian Feder, Crowell's Handbook of Classical Literature, p. 383. Also see Brower's The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 205.

The early fables like "The Runaway" and "The Cow in Appletime" are least interesting, beause the literal human reference is vague and naive. In the latter poem, the scene of the drunk cow, thinking of wall-builders as fools, is pretty funny, if not naive. The real interest in satire begins with the poem "The Bear" (The West-Running Brook). The first nine lines of the poem describe a "free" bear, and are strictly in line with the genre. The human reference becomes explicit only when the poet draws the moral - the moral the fable is supposed to enforce:

> Such is the uncaged progress of the bear.
> The world has room to make a bear feel free;
> The universe seems cramped to you and me.

The free bear is spontaneous, and has a direct approach to nature; in the poem, it is first seen in itself, as a single term, with no reference to a free man, for instance. Then comes man as the chief agent, who acts "more like the poor bear in a cage." It is at this point that the poem slides from fable into open satire. The analogy is explicitly made, the human has replaced the animal as the prime subject, with the result that man becomes the tenor and bear the vehicle. The rest of the poem from this point on is taken up with describing man in terms of action of the caged bear, which "paces back and forth and never rests," or which "sits back on his fundamental butt/With lifted snout and eyes (if any) shut." The caged bear, which "all day fights a nervous inward rage,/ His mood rejecting all his mind suggests," surely, does not suggest the

picture of a rational man.[13] The lines suggest, instead, a restless man, a doubter, even a neurotic. Intellectually, he is confused; caught between two extremes, he sways from telescope to microscope. Evidently, he is the scientifically oriented man of our space age (the scientific man is not necessarily a rational man, as Swift has reminded us). And, caught between two metaphysical extremes, he is a skeptic: "He almost looks religious but he's not." The satire, however, turns louder, the rhymes coarser, so less amusing, toward the end: "A baggy figure, equally pathetic/When sedentary and when peripatetic." The description of the "free bear" is vivid and convincing, while that of the caged bear, wherein satirical intent touches the poem, tends toward crudity. The free bear is seen and described in comic terms, but the comedy is lost in the second part. The simile helps, however, in maneuvering the changes and shifts in focus.

"The White-Tailed Hornet" has more comedy than satire. It is written midway between a beast fable and what Brower calls "the classic essay poem, the Horatian sermo."[14] The subtitle of the poem, "or, The Revision of Theories," gives the clue to the Horatian aspect. The poem, like "The Bear," begins with the description of the chief agent,

[13]Winters interprets the caged bear as being "compared to rational man." The Function of Criticism, p. 166. Gorham Munson takes issue with Winters' interpretation in "The Classicism of Robert Frost," Modern Age, 7-8 (Summer, 1964), 299.

[14]Poetry of Frost, p. 203.

the hornet, which is supposed to be the model of unerring instinct. The speaker converses with the hornet, as when the latter strikes a little huckleberry: "'wrong shape, wrong color, and wrong scent,' I said." The essential comedy is reflected in the rhythm which characterizes the all too erring flight of the hornet:

> I watched him where he swooped, he pounced, he struck;
> But what he found he had was just a nailhead.
> He struck a second time. Another nailhead.
> 'Those are just nailheads. Those are fastened down.

The major premise with which the speaker started is: "To err is human, not to, animal." But the flight of the hornet seems to enforce the moral: "Won't this whole instinct matter bear revision?" By comparing man to animals, and their instincts, which is what fables, in effect, do, "we are lost piecemeal to the animals." The poem at this point seems to reject the assumptions of a fable and move toward the sermo. For, the poet argues,

> As long on earth
> As our comparisons were stoutly upward
> With gods and angels, we were men at least,
> But little lower than the gods and angels.

Instinct and reason are being tested each against the other in the comparisons, and instinct is found to be fallible as illustrated by the hornet. The poem is divided into three sections, and the last section concerns itself with the revision of theories, the hornet as specific example being replaced by the general concept of all animal instinct.

"A Considerable Speck," a late poem (A Witness Tree, 1942), is least fable-like, and most Horatian. The moving speck, beneath the eyes of the speaker-writer, on the page he has written on, turns into "a living mite/

With inclinations it could call its own." The speaker, as he watches its movements, its dodges, its "racing wildly" in terror, realizes that "Plainly with an intelligence I dealt." Toward the end the speck helps him establish the unity of all life: "I have a mind myself and recognize/Mind when I meet with it in any guise." In effect, the poet has discarded "the downward comparisons" implicit in the fables. Instead, as he innovates on the fable, he renders the speck as "considerable," representing a "display of mind."

"Departmental" and "A Drumlin Woodchuck," both from an earlier collection, A Further Range (1936), are comic poems, and delightful to read. And both are fables in the true sense of the term, because in both poems the animal characters, the ants and the woodchuck, are the main subjects, and the human reference is implicit. The woodchuck in "A Drumlin Woodchuck" provides a comic metaphor for smugness, as it preaches to his mate the principle of survival, "how to make snug in the limitless."

There are a number of poems with birds as principal actors in them, which can be read as fables. The most notable of them is the sonnet "The Oven Bird." The attitude that the bird represents is somewhat closely allied in feeling to that of the woodchuck; the bird has learned, as Hyatt H. Waggoner puts it, "to make-do, to adjust and adapt in order to endure and keep on singing."[15] Further, it is "no act of faith but a practical maneuver" that the oven-bird recommends. In

[15]American Poets, p. 298.

brief, the animals and birds in the fables provide significant similes which enable the poet to be discursive in style, and comical, even satirical, in attitude toward social and philosophical issues.

(2)

Frost's method shows overwhelmingly the presence of a method of comparison, in which similes and metaphors that state both the tenor and vehicle, play a significant role. They help organize short poems, and determine the structure of his fables. In proportion to the large number of similes, the interactive metaphors in the poems are small in number.

This method would appear all the more striking if one thinks of poets such as Hopkins or Dylan Thomas, who seem to rely chiefly on interactive metaphors for evoking sensations and conveying their meanings. Robinson and Frost, on the contrary, rely more often on discursive statement and similes. This way of considering essential differences is, however, only preliminary. It does not follow from this that Hopkins and Thomas are better poets because their interactive metaphors carry the main burden of meaning. The difference only consolidates the feeling that one has about Frost that he is more given to explicit analogical modes, that is, logical ways of comparing, than to quick metaphoric interaction achieved by fiat.

But there are exceptions to be noted. Interactive metaphors evoking sensations are surely a rare phenomenon in Frost. The rarity becomes more emphatic if one looks at "To Earthward"--an unusual poem. The poem devotes itself entirely to the mystique of sensation. In it the poet seeks,

manifestly, to direct the reader "to the sense, not to the exact term" (to use Mrs. Nowottny's words),[16] to sensations not otherwise available to precise verbalization:

> I craved strong sweets, but those
> Seemed strong when I was young;
> The petal of the rose
> It was that stung.
>
> Now no joy but lacks salt
> That is not dashed with pain
> And weariness and fault;
> I crave the stain
>
> Of tears, the aftermark
> Of almost too much love,
> The sweet of bitter bark
> And burning clove.

The vocabulary for differentiating degrees of sweetness or pungency being limited in language, the poet's only recourse is to metaphors of this kind.

If this poem of sensations is an exception in Frost, so is the poem sustained by a single metaphor, a single sensory feeling. The exception, a narrative which keeps up the metaphor, is "A Hillside Thaw." The poem describes with unusual vividness the sensation of witnessing the snow melt on the hillside:

> To think to know the country and not know
> The hillside on the day the sun lets go
> Ten million silver lizards out of snow!

The vehicle "Ten million silver lizards" strictly refers to the tenor, the snow's melting. But as the vehicle develops ingeniously under its own impetus till it assumes the dimensions of an anecdote, its tenor extends, correspondingly, to convey the speaker's feeling of vivacity and self-abandonment:

[16] The Language Poets Use, p. 59.

But if I thought to stop the wet stampede,
And caught one silver lizard by the tail,
And put my foot on one without avail,
And threw myself wet-elbowed and wet-kneed
In front of twenty others' wriggling speed,--
In the confusion of them all aglitter,
And birds that joined in the excited fun
By doubling and redoubling song and twitter,
I have no doubt I'd end by holding none.

Such sustained metaphoric efforts are, however, rare in Frost.

Metaphors which turn into symbols are proportionately greater in number than metaphors which seek to evoke sensations. Frost's poems, and "some of the best of them," as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren point out, "use natural symbols the reference of which we find it difficult to control."[17] These metaphors or symbols are seen to engage, significantly, certain domains of experience in the poems, and lead the reader to a perception of the poet's deeper concerns.

Even the similes, examined earlier for method, are, after all, no casual figures drawn on the spur of the moment and at random. They are comparisons drawn mostly from two distinct contexts, Man and Nature, though there is one other context occasionally resorted to in the poems, the context of science or astronomy, as in "Moon Compasses," "All Revelation," and a few other poems. The contexts of man and nature may, however, be further qualified so as to avoid reference to other nature poets. Man in Frost's poems is usually a farmer, a backwoodsman, or a poet interested in farming. And nature consists of the calm rural

[17]"Natural symbols" as opposed to "private symbolism" of Blake and Yeats. Theory of Literature, p. 194.

setting, as in "The Mountain" or "From Plane to Plane"--of beasts, birds, and flowers of the region, as well as the wilderness of woods reclaiming abandoned houses and farms. So the encounter between the two is not apt to suggest anything like a cityman's going back to the village, but a day-to-day living that the farmers scrape together in the face of a recalcitrant nature. Furthermore, this kind of nature provides the only available milieu in which the Frostian man is seen evolving and formulating general attitudes toward life and society. In the rest of the chapter, I propose to examine metaphors[18] related to three major preoccupations of Frost: the question of seeing or knowing, of fear, and of love.

First, the question of seeing. L. S. Dembo has argued that one of the favorite interests of American poets has been the problem of seeing and knowing--seeing, knowing often determining their basic approaches to the world around.[19] Frost seems no exception to this epistemological preoccupation, as many of his poems testify: "For Once, then, Something" (1920), "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" (1934), and "All Revelation" (1938).

[18]Any critic, in trying to bring economy and significance to his study of metaphor, can scarcely help paying heed to Frost's warning in "Education by Poetry": "The only materialist--be he poet, teacher ... --is the man who gets lost in his material without a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order." Selected Prose, p. 41.

[19]Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry, p. vii.

"For Once, Then, Something," considered earlier, is solipsist in attitude. It teases the reader with the idea that beyond one's own image reflected in things, there is not much one can be certain about. For the "whiteness" seen by the speaker may be "truth," but may as well turn out to be "a pebble of quartz." "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" deals exclusively with the act of looking. And the subject of "looking" is "they," not "I" as in the previous poem. It is they, the people; they "look" (the word appears five times in the poem), but don't see; and there is only the stubborn persistence in their looking. The result is that "they" cannot look out far nor can they look in deep. But in "All Revelation"--a poem I shall consider in some detail soon--the "Eyes" seek "the response of eyes," they don't just look. Epistemologically, the latter poem represents a definite movement away from the positions held in the earlier poems.

In "Neither Out ...," which insists on the fact of looking, the image of a "ship ... raising its hull" in the distance, and the reflection of a "standing gull" on "the wetter ground," in a way, fix the limits of human sight. The abstract word "truth" used in the third stanza, similar in function to the "truth" in "For Once, Then, Something," gives the poem an epistemological interest:

> The land may vary more;
> But wherever the <u>truth</u> may be--
> The water comes ashore,
> And the people look at the sea. (emphasis added)

The impersonal precision with which the symbolic situation is rendered seems to make for what Trilling has called the "terrifying" Frost. It is

the metaphor of people looking blankly at the sea which defines man's predicament in general; this "looking" takes place, according to the poet, under great metaphysical "uncertainty." But, when the religious strain got the better of the skeptic in Frost, this is what he made Keeper, his mouthpiece in A Masque of Mercy, say:

> I can see that the uncertainty
> In which we act is a severity,
> A cruelty, amounting to injustice
> That nothing but God's mercy can assuage.

In fact, the religious strain in Frost often yields a different kind of poem, poems with Emersonian affirmation. This religious feeling, when it touches the problem of seeing, elevates style, and leads to a note of affirmation. The poem to look at with this in mind is "All Revelation," Frost's "most symbolist"[20] poem, as Brower calls it.

Although the poet uses a bold scientific metaphor to create a symbolic situation in "All Revelation," the core of meaning depends on the deft use of grammar. In fact, Frost, in contradistinction to a symbolist poet, manages to strike a balance between the metaphoric and metonymic relations of meaning. The poem deals with the subject-object relation in human perception and, therefore, implies in its grammatical structure the categories of active and passive voices.[21] The first line, "A head thrusts in as for the view," gives the subject of the poem.

[20] Poetry of Frost, p. 139.

[21] Classical grammarians, as Francis Berry remarks, believed that the categories of grammar portrayed the structure of mind. Poets' Grammar, pp. 10-11.

The thrust of mind, its explorative nature, is a reality; but its origins, its end, whether it has any purpose behind it, these things are unknown. The mind has only speculated on these questions. The first two stanzas, in a way, portray the defeat of the mind, defeat because it can not find answers for any of the questions it poses about its own thrust into material nature. The questions posed in repetitive parallels come in thick: " ... Where it is it thrusts into ... What can of its coming come ... And whither it will be withdrawn,/ ... And what take hence or leave behind"; there is playing with words here, but the playing merges into the seriousness of the theme. After this close discursive questioning, there comes the central image of the poem, the crucial confrontation of mind with the principal object, the geode.

> But the impervious geode
> Was entered, and its inner crust
> Of crystals with a ray cathode
> At every point and facet glowed
> In answer to the mental thrust.

A geode is a piece of stone whose inside is hollow, and lined with crystals, which glow "at every point and facet" when a cathode ray is passed through them. There are low key metaphors, perhaps, in "impervious" and "entered": low key, because the geode is literally exposed to the cathode ray. And what is brought to the fore, and as analogue to the epistemological problem, is the grammatical voice categories. Frost, who uses the passive voice so rarely, resorts to it deliberately: "But the impervious geode/Was entered ..." "But" in the beginning changes the tone; still, the cautious reservation held is demonstrated in the active-passive hesitancy of the voice. "Was

entered" is in the passive and, therefore, the next unit of syntax anticipates, because of the conjunctive "and," the passive to follow, but gets the active "glowed" in the line: " ... its inner crust/Of crystals ... glowed/"; thereby asserting ever so slightly the material happening independent of the mind. But then comes the surprise, " ... in answer to the mental thrust." The syntax has turned active, but the overall emphasis is still the passive voice; the agent is still "the mental thrust," and the inner crust, though it "glowed," remains acted upon. The passive emphasis overwhelms the active "glowed," and renders it weak in effect.

There is in the syntactic shift from the active "glowed" to the passive sense the epistemological problem, very similar to what Wordsworth says in "Tintern Abbey": The eye in a sense "half creates" what it "perceives." The scientist "half creates" the glowing by passing a cathode ray through the geode. After the central image which turns in favor of mind's thrust, the next stanza launches into the active voice, and into an explicit metaphoric situation:

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

The stanza, obviously, closes the poem with a triumphant note. Now what has led to this triumph? It is the active mental thrust, in which is implicit the conquest of matter, suggested in "Eyes seeking the

response of eyes" and so on. The literal meaning refers to the continuity of mind and matter, to an experience of single design which unites them, "So none need be afraid of size." The poem as a whole portrays a journey of the mind from a set of tentatives, interrogatives of the first two stanzas to the triumphantly reassuring last line. The affirmation of the mental thrust is posited, despite the fact the mind does ponder on several questions, and "asking," has "gone."

The images, eyes, stars, and flowers are conventional, but they come alive in striking configuration as they enter into an integrated function of "eyes seeking the response of" other eyes, and establish a correspondence of experience among men.[22] If the mind half created the situation in the third stanza, in the fourth it is involved in the total process of creation.

The balance achieved between subject and object in the poem represents a change in the epistemological position Frost took in his earlier poem "For Once, Then, Something." In the present poem, the voice is impersonal, serious, and in keeping with the classical allusion "Cyb'laean avenue." In the earlier one, the speaker's voice was teasing and sly, the attitude skeptical.

[22]The passage occurring in Frost's "Introduction to King Jaspers" seems to be relevant to this poem: "It has been said that recognition in art is all. Better say correspondence is all. Mind must convince mind that it can uncurl and wave the same filaments of subtlety, soul convince soul that it can give off the same shimmers of eternity. At no point would anyone but a brute fool want to break off this correspondence. It is all there is to satisfaction; and it is salutary to live in the fear of its being broken off." Selected Prose, p. 61.

If "All Revelation" is any indication, then probably Frost grew more and more Emersonian in his affirmations in the later phases of his career. And this is borne out by several poems in the last collection, In the Clearing (1962). The metaphors of sight and insight offered in the present poem, at any rate, do point to the positives, and to an assurance in human creativity. The note of affirmation in the last line "All revelation has been ours," is similar to the one accomplished in the last line of "Directive" (1947). This note is different from the usual, skeptical undercutting that Frost often employs in his poems, the ironic defensiveness that his deliberate use of voice tones enables him to adopt. But this is no development as such, given the tendency of the poet to "counter-balance contrary attitudes or viewpoints."[23] For only a few poems later in A Witness Tree, we have "The Most of It," wherein the universe has no "counterlove" as such to offer. The "All" in the line "All revelation has been ours" stands in emphatic contrast with the "all" in the last line of "The Most of It": "--and that was all." I think it is more a question of certain elements coming up to the surface--and these perhaps come up in the later phase. The evidence of poems on ways of seeing, at any rate, points to this change in orientation, the change looking forward to the poems of In the Clearing; and, correspondingly, fear, one of Frost's major emotions, seems to lessen if not disappear completely in the last poems.

[23]Thompson, Robert Frost, Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlet, p. 27.

Frost has written both poems of fear, and poems of love, but fear plays a major role in his poems, both in explicit and implicit ways. The poet himself has formulated in poetic statements an overall theory of both fear and love, and an examination of these would lead us to conclude that love signified one specific idea of resistance to fear that the poet developed through the poems.

The most serious statement Frost has to make on fear is found in A Masque of Mercy. The character who makes the statement is the Keeper of a bookstore in New York, and is drawn with sympathy. Toward the end of the play, Keeper, a skeptical rationalist, realizes that what he needed most in life was courage:

> ... the courage in the heart
> To overcome the fear within the soul
> And go ahead to any accomplishment.
> Courage is what it takes and takes the more of
> Because the deeper fear is so eternal.

Fear is conceived as part of the human mind or soul, and this is the deep-seated Puritan fear that Thompson notes as being part of the poet's intellectual heritage.[24] The inevitability of fear is further emphasized, of fear as something that a person cannot escape from, in "Escapist -- Never," a late Emersonian poem printed in In the Clearing (1962). This poem seems to be an apologia, for Frost was often accused of being an escapist--in "New Hampshire," didn't the poet write, "Me for the hills where I don't have to choose"? Of special interest here, however, are the lines:

[24]The Early Years, pp. 47, 199, 364.

His fear is not behind him but beside him
On either hand to make his course perhaps
A crooked straightness yet no less a straightness. (IC, p. 27)

The awareness of fear in Frost makes itself felt, again, in the following statement on humor: "Any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness."[25] If Frost's frequent use of whimsy, the ironic defensiveness with which he guards himself, is humor, then there is built into the texture of a large number of poems this element of fear. But, then, there are more overt forms of fear available for examination in the poems. For, fear appears both as explicit theme and as recurring motif in several poems of Frost.

Poems like "Storm Fear," "The Fear," "The Fear of God," and "The Fear of Man," as the titles suggest, set out, explicitly, to deal with the theme of fear. Among them, however, it is only "Storm Fear" from A Boy's Will, the earliest poem to focus on the theme, which offers an effective metaphor of fear through hostile nature. "The Fear," on the other hand, a narrative, is more a study of fear in a social situation, and so deals with the incident of a commonlaw wife who mistakes someone in the dark for her former husband, and insists with her lover upon confronting the situation herself, alone, to deal with her fears.

"The Fear of God" and "The Fear of Man," both from Steeple Bush (1947), have less to do with any striking metaphors, and rely mostly on statement and situation respectively. But they seem to make explicit Frost's central tenets of fear as he formulated them in his preface to

[25] Letters to Untermeyer, pp. 165-66.

King Jasper (1935): "Two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is the fear of Man--the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them."[26] (emphasis added)

"The Fear of God" is a thirteen line blank verse poem and, as Thompson remarks, is "in essential accord with basic elements of Christian doctrine."[27] It points to the puritan fear that "If you should rise .../From being No one up to being Someone," then, you don't really deserve that "rise"; and that God's "mercy to you rather than to others/Won't bear too critical examination." The poem relies mainly on statement, and the metaphor involved in "uniform," "apparel," and "curtain"--the clothes image--is unusual in Frost. The statement varies between the subjunctive, "If you should ...," and the imperative, "Stay unassuming," and another subjunctive, which closes the poem. "The Fear of Man," despite the suggestive title, fails to focus on fear in any significant way; it gets too specific, and bogged down in local details. It describes a girl returning home "at midnight from a friend's," unescorted, and "by the rude/ ... her exposure misconstrued." Then the speaker in the last lines butts in with, "May I in my brief bolt across the scene/Not be misunderstood in what I mean." It is hard to make out from the poem whether it was meant to be read as a parable, and if so,

[26] Selected Prose, p. 60.

[27] The Early Years, p. 562.

whether it could be an adequate vehicle to embody "the fear of Man--the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them." Anyhow, the examples we have looked at help establish the fact of fear as a major preoccupation with Frost.

But it is to "Storm Fear" that one returns for both motif and metaphor. Moreover, this early poem makes the first explicit reference to a winter landscape, a rendering of which was soon to become the poet's forte. The poem sets up a paradigm of fear, the fear of being wiped out by hostile nature; trapped by wind and snow, the speaker with his small family doubts whether he has enough courage in him to survive nature's fury:

> And my heart owns a doubt
> Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
> And save ourselves unaided.

The other poems in which fear appears as motif, and in which it has impelled the poet to some of the most memorable metaphors, may be examined. The metaphors that have persistently appeared in Frost's poems--metaphors that surely bear the poet's identity, and so would provide a major stylistic differentiation--would include among others, woods, snow, and stars. Woods often bring in the concomitant images of trees and leaves. And woods and trees frequently appear in Frost as "dark woods" and "dark trees," the word "dark" taking on the sense of death or evil as in the phrase "design of darkness" in "Design." With this context in mind, compare the first and last poems of Frost, "Into My Own" (1913) and "In Winter in the Woods" (1962). The

comparison will enable us to note the metaphoric, stylistic differences, and the change of attitude they convey.

"Into My Own" is a sonnet written in couplets and with three quatrains. As structural device, the poem employs the grammatical subjunctive and the negative construction for the stanzas and for the couplet. Each stanza is, therefore, posed negatively; the first stanza has this grammatical form: "One of my wishes is that those dark trees ... Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,/But stretched away into the edge of doom./"; the second stanza follows a similar pattern: "I should not be withheld but ..."; the third has "I do not see why I should e'er turn back/"; and the couplet closes the poem with "They would not find me changed ..."

The first four lines establish the explicit connection between "dark trees" and "doom"--an association which becomes one of the most persistent metaphors in the poems. The grammatical tensions and the balanced parallels, imposing a restraint on the speaker's urge to escape, express the speaker's hesitancy; and the poem as a whole expresses only a wish, a longing to escape into the "vastness" of "those dark trees," and be "fearless of ever finding open land." So the longing is also for this state of fearlessness. The poem ends revealingly, and on what has come to be known as the poet's signature:

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

And this greater assurance promised in the last couplet is precisely what one finds in the last poem. The first stanza is as follows:

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

The negative construction is replaced by the positive "I go." And in place of the subjunctive wish to enter the woods, there is the declarative, "I go ... I mark ... lay the maple low." The word "alone" in the above stanza gets its peculiar force when we remember that in the previous poem, the speaker wishes that "those ... who should miss me here," would pursue him on his path. And, finally, in the last stanza, an agreeable relationship has been achieved between the speaker and nature:

> I see for Nature no defeat
> In one tree's overthrow
> Or for myself in my retreat
> For yet another blow.

This note on which the last of the volumes ends is highly significant; it is in keeping with the greater Emersonian influence, as suggested earlier. As for fear, the woods are no longer dark, or unknown.

But the word "dark" appears in earlier poems and takes on the meaning of death, as in "The Night Light":

> Good gloom on her was thrown away.
> It is on me by night or day,
> Who have, as I suppose, ahead
> The darkest of it still to dread.

In "Come In," the speaker resists entering the woods; and the phrase "pillared dark" obviously refers to darkness. But "dark" with "lament," in the next two lines, would change the nature of the darkness meant: "Almost like a call to come in/To the dark and lament." And if we read "dark" in the line "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" with the force of these associations, then we can see the speaker in the poem as resisting the death wish, which the speaker in "Into My Own" is consciously formulating.[28]

"In Hardwood Groves" offers a variant on the metaphor of death. The leaves die--"go down into the dark decayed"--before the flowers can come up. But this dying becomes a phase in the renewal of life, for the leaves are "put beneath the feet of dancing flowers." In "The Onset" the suggestions are clear. There is, first of all, "the fated night" when snow falls in "dark woods," and the speaker is caught in the middle of his "errand" with the feeling that he is suddenly "overtaken by the end/ ... and lets death descend/Upon him where he is." He is left with the feeling of unfulfilled mission, with "no important triumph won" in the battle against evil.

In "Once by the Pacific" the word "dark" comes at the end with climactic force. There is, perhaps, as Brower remarks, something approaching Wordsworth's mythological vision in the lines:

> The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
> Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.

[28]Thompson notes that "the fear of death was obsessively strong in Frost throughout his life ...," The Early Years, p. 559.

But the verbal echoes of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" are unmistakeable. Frost's poem suggests that elemental forces are at work, forces which are colossal, superhuman:

> The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
> The cliff in being backed by continent ...

And, after describing the particularities of the scene, the poem introduces the generalizing metaphor--to explain the significance of the turmoil:

> It looked as if a night of dark intent
> Was coming, and not only a night, an age. (emphasis added)

Finally, in "The Draft Horse," night has both fear and danger to offer; there is also the suggestion of the unmotivated crime. The couple in the poem drives through "a pitch-dark limitless grove"; the killer comes "out of the trees" and "deliberately" stabs the horse. After the strong active verb in "Deliberately stabbed him dead," there is in the next lines the verb "drew" coming with transitive force (because of expectation set up by syntactic equivalence), but used intransitively: "And the night drew through the trees/In one long invidious draft." The last lines of the poem have, however, a tame, unconvincing ending after the unmotivated violence as stated in the earlier lines:

> We assumed that the man himself
> Or someone he had to obey
> Wanted us to get down
> And walk the rest of the way.

Despite the overwhelming sense of fear that several poems, read together, would convey, one wonders whether Frost ever came to grips with the subject of fear, and tried to understand it; except perhaps

recognize it, and so accept it, as part of the human mind. There is no single poem in which the poet sets out to explore fear. Fear recurs often in the company of other feelings like death or doubt. The disturbance of fear remained, and Frost used his art, it seems, to keep it at a distance, to find metaphors for it - "a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order," to use Frost's words.[29]

If Frost did not explore fear in order to understand it, he still did try to resist it. He resisted its overtaking him, for in the poems there are images of resistance to fear, to death or deathwish, and to loneliness. And, even, love is conceived as another form of resistance that two individuals involved in marriage can develop.

Many of the social stances that the poems offer seem, however, to be images of defense, rather than of resistance. Even if we set aside the familiar example of "A Drumlin Woodchuck" on the plea that the poem is amusing, and the woodchuck's protective attitude and the accompanying smugness are qualities satirized within the framework of a fable, still the fact remains, as the short epigrammatic poem "The Triple Bronze" testifies. The poem sets out seriously, what the "woodchuck" poem did somewhat amusingly, to consider defenses against "The infinite's being so wide." It lists both inner and outer defenses: "For inner defense my hide"; "For next defense outside ... / A wall too hard for crime"; and for the third the "national boundary"--three defenses in all "Between too much and me."

[29]Selected Prose, p. 41.

There is, incidentally, one other thing to notice here, the wall as familiar image in Frost. It is there in "Mending Wall" as the bone of contention; and the balancing of contradictory attitudes toward the wall has been achieved so well that there can be no resolution. It is there in "Bond and Free" to protect love from fear--"Wall within wall to shut fear out." This "wall" image apart, in both the poems, "A Drumlin Woodchuck" and "A Triple Bronze," a reference is made to war and crime, which imply fears about survival. If the woodchuck can survive "the double barrelled blast/Like war and pestilence/And the loss of common sense, "it is because of the strong defense the woodchuck can build around itself. "The Triple Bronze," as the title suggests, is an image of triple defense. In "A Cliff Dwelling," the image of a fugitive is offered for contemplation: " ... a cavern hole/Where someone used to climb and crawl/To rest from his besetting fears" - a defensive action taken in the interests of self-preservation.

The poet moves, however, from a posture of defense to one of positive resistance. For, as John T. Ogilvie remarks,[30] at some mid-point in Frost's career as poet, his orientation seems to change, and the woods-image gives way in predominance to star-image. Reginald L. Cook says that "approximately ten percent in Complete Poems" are star-poems.[31] And this means a shift in interest from the introspective life (and I

[30]"From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry," South Atlantic Quarterly, 58 (Winter, 1959), 64-76.

[31]The Dimensions of Robert Frost, p. 203.

would add here, life which included love and fears) that the woods-image signifies to a life beset with social or metaphysical questions that the star-image represents. Of course, the star-image comes earlier too, but only to illustrate nature's brute indifference, as in "Stars" (1913). The crucial poem to indicate a shift in interest is "Come In" (A Witness Tree, 1942). It records effectively the idea of positive resistance to the entering of woods and what it signifies by way of fears, with a firm negative: "But no, I was out for stars:/I would not come in." After this, if the Frostian speaker enters the woods, it is for an utilitarian purpose, "not to lament," but as the last poem of In the Clearing puts it, "I mark a maple for my own/And lay the maple low." Now neither nature's nor his own defeat is a predetermined thing. Both have achieved a sense of mutual tolerance.

The notion of resistance is often conveyed in the poems through two special locutions: "stay" and "stand," words which occur in significant contexts, and turn into metaphors of resistance. They, also, occur to characterize love, and in a context of married love, to suggest a sense of permanence. In short, these two words convey the idea of resistance that Frost develops through the poems. This resistance, of course, is in keeping with Frost's general habit as a poet. He resisted all modern movements, and principally, Ezra Pound, and the cosmopolitan consciousness. He turned to rural subjects, and so to rural metaphors, and "gave gentle proof/That the city's hold on a man is no more tight/ Than when its walls rose higher than any roof" ("Not Quite Social"). In

"New Hampshire," he made a virtue of resisting being "a puke or a prude."

One of the significant contexts in which the word "stay" appears is in "Take Something Like a Star" (Steeple Bush, 1947). The poem deals with the formulating of an attitude to social issues, and as a result, the star-image comes into prominence. The "star" also offers some kind of a "counter-love," or a lesson as opposed to the ironical answer of a powerful buck appearing in "The Most of It." The metaphor has certainly a positive aspect here:

> Say something to us we can learn
> By heart and when alone repeat,
> Say something! And it says, "I burn."

The star "gives us strangely little aid,/But does tell something in the end." Then the poem spells out the lesson the star offers, the social stance that we should take:

> It asks of us a certain height,
> So when at times the mob is swayed
> To carry praise or blame too far,
> We may take something like a star
> To stay our minds on and be staid. (emphasis added)

The word "stay" gets additional meanings; it refers to a considered posture, a poise that the speaker recommends in the face of "the mob." Furthermore, the word "stay" has its Biblical association; it refers to Isaiah, 26-3, as Mrs. Sergeant has pointed out:[32] "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee; because he trusteth in thee."

[32] Trial by Existence, p. 383.

In "One Step Backward Taken," there is an explicit reference to the defensive action taken by the speaker to save himself from the general holocaust. First, the speaker feels his "standpoint shaken/In the universal crisis." But what restores his stand is the one step taken backward in time to save himself. It is the stance taken against the "drift of things" ("Reluctance"), which may be an avalanche, "A world torn loose went by me"; the speaker with his wisdom of survival can be trusted to take that important backward step before chaos overtakes him. In the same breath, the fear is experienced and the need for self-preservation felt in the lines from "On Being Idolized": "The wave .../ So undermines my barefoot stand I totter/And did I not take steps would be tipped over ...," and so on.

One of the earliest poems which touches this issue is "Reluctance" (A Boy's Will, 1913). The last stanza brings out the idea clearly:

> 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 stanza implies reason as favoring the acceptance of "the drift of things," and the heart of man as offering resistance. This is similar to the poet's saying in A Masque of Mercy (1947) that there is "courage in the heart" to resist fear and "go ahead to any accomplishment."

"The Middleness of the Road " (1947), once again, supports the idea that the poet has undergone a shift in interest; the woods do not seem to hold out any fears for him. On the other hand, the woods suggest "standing still," and "rest." The alignment of images is such that "the skies," "The universal blue," suggest "absolute flight"; and the "wood," the "local green" happens to be "The place of standing still," suggesting "rest." "Standing still" emphasizes the idea of resistance to "The mineral drops that explode/To drive my ton of car." And notably, even God in A Masque of Reason is conceived as truth, as "standing still":

> ... My forte is truth,
> Or Metaphysics, long the world's reproach
> For standing still in one place true forever. (emphasis added)

These locutions occur in love poems as well. Love in Frost is mostly married love. There are a few poems of courtship between lovers, though. The only poem, anomalous in Complete Poems, which has sex in it and renders it in terms of disgust the protagonist feels, is "The Subverted Flower." The poem makes "downward comparisons" with animals, and presents the two lovers as being subhuman. The girl-protagonist sees the boy deformed with animality, but toward the end the speaker sees the girl equally deformed with inverted virtue. With the sole exception of this poem, they are mostly poems of coursthip and married love, frequently conceived as a pattern of resistance against change, or chaos. And strikingly enough, in poems where lovers meet in woods, the woods are no longer "dark." Furthermore, married love seems to provide the context within which visionary and other fulfilments are possible. The husband-wife relationship provides for the poet a setting in which he seems to make his most vital affirmation of love.

In "West-Running Brook," married love provides the context in which to formulate, in metaphors, the ideology of resistance. Consequently, love comes to be identified as resistance to death. "The drift of things" of "Reluctance" becomes in this poem "the stream of everything that runs away," and "The universal cataract of death." The couple perceives in nature forces that resist:

> The universal cataract of death
> That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
> Save by some strange resistance in itself,
> Not just a swerving, but a throwing back ... (emphasis added)

The image of the white wave resisting the current of the black water, referred to earlier in the poem, and emphasized now by the image of "the backward motion toward the source" offers the composite image of married love within the context, and underscores the ethical center of man: "It is from this in nature we are from./It is most us."

Moreover, this image of resistance looks forward to "Directive," wherein the speaker offers the directive, the moral imperative after the manner of "the backward motion toward the source and against the current" of modern society. The "guide" moves back in time and down the accretions of civilization to a rural, prehistoric time and space. This pattern of resistance to change, and to urban sophistication, it should be noted in fairness to the poet, is a positive step taken from the mere self-protective stance and defenses of the woodchuck, discussed earlier.

A withdrawal into a simplified, pastoral existence in order to get clarity of vision, and spiritual health--"Drink and be whole again beyond confusion"--suggested in "Directive" is, again, emphasized by what the poet says in "An Empty Threat":

> Better defeat almost,
> If seen clear
> Than life's victories of doubt
> That need endless talk talk
> To make them out.

This clarity of vision has been made possible because of the consciously held attitude of resistance to "life's victories of doubt" that the "technologico-Benthamite civilization" (to use the phrase from Leavis) has thrown men into.[33]

The "endless talk talk" is one way of courting "doubt," and it is also "getting overwise." So, in a lighter vein, in "Dust in the Eyes," the poet uses the opposing locutions:

> Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
> And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
> And blind me to a standstill if it must.

The "standstill" is offered in opposition to "getting overwise" in the second line of the poem.

The poem "Bond and Free" is truly germane to this discussion. First, a study of this poem will reveal the significance of some of the

[33]Frost took a zealous interest in the conflict between science and religion. He sided with William James and Bergson in their handling of the conflict and, as Thompson remarks, of the "'design' problem, as opposed to the Darwinian dismissal of such concepts as 'design and purpose'." He came to view science as the enemy of religion, and took "his battle-position on the side of religion." The Early Years, pp. 89-91, 118-20, 242-43, 383-85, 386. The Years of Triumph, pp. 288-96, 300-03, 645, 658.

recurring images in Frost I have referred to. Second, the poem appears, significantly, in Mountain Interval (1916) at a time when Frost felt secure as poet, and as such, it can be seen to crystallize the poet's preoccupations as well as a set of themes that the poet could later turn to for greater exploration. And above all, the poem underscores pairs of important terms such as love and thought, "staying" and fear. The poet toys with alternatives: in the beginning thought is preferred, but toward the end, "staying" through love in the face of fear is affirmed. The first three lines run as follows:

> Love has earth to which she clings
> With hills and circling arms about--
> Wall within wall to shut fear out.

The thing to notice here is that within the verbal context are brought significant words like "love," "wall," and "fear." Love has fear to contend with; so it has walls around itself "to shut fear out." Of course, fear is not conquered; it is only kept at bay for the moment. The importance of "wall" has been stressed earlier. What further needs to be noted is that love is identified with earth, and with "bondage" (as in "The Silken Tent"), as thought is identified with "flight" and "star" and, therefore, with "freedom." The contrast is further emphasized; for, as love leaves "On snow and sand and turf ... a printed trace," thought is seen to "cleave the interstellar gloom," and then "retrace his flight with smell of burning on every plume." After this, clearly, thought has no chance of winning the poet's favor: "His gains in heaven are what they are." The interest in stars, here clearly in disfavor, but later resorted to for social issues, refers to the shift in

orientation that Ogilvie talks about. But as far as this poem is concerned, the value of thought, which "sits in Sirius' disc all night," is doubted; for, in opposition to thought, love "by being thrall/And simply staying possesses all/In several beauty." (emphasis added).

Brower commenting on the poem says that the two stanzas "acknowledge perfectly the more celestial power of Thought while inclining to favor Love"[34]. But, actually, the stronger rhetoric goes with love, because the latter by "simply staying" commands a knowledge of things in their distinct particularity. However, it is interesting to note that the only poem in which love and thought are seen together in harmony is "The Silken Tent"; what "signifies the sureness of the soul" is found to be "loosely bound/By countless silken ties of love and thought."

"Going For Water" is an early love poem (1913), and one can already see in it the word "stay" acquiring contextual overtones. The poem presents an idyllic scene for lovers, who call the woods--"our woods" or "the field was ours," and so there is no mention of "dark woods" or "dark trees," even though it is night. They enter the woods on an "autumn eve" to get water from a brook. Their excitement of listening to the brook through the woods follows:

> 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.

[34] Poetry of Frost, p. 186.

The "staying" hand is a loving and reassuring hand that "each laid on the other."

After this poem, to read "Master Speed"(1936) is to realize the full implication of married love in the context of the Frostian world, and the connotational richness that the alternate locution "standing still" acquires. The sonnet is written in alternate rhymes, with octave-sestet division. In tone and feeling, it looks forward to "Directive," and back toward "West-Running Brook"; it is truly a transitional poem between the two. And yet, in its positive existence, it is a poem of vital affirmation. Stylistically, it is significant that the poem, through syntax and image, enacts the idea of resistance that man can put up against nature. The very first lines of the sonnet set up the correlative opposition:

> No speed of wind or water rushing by
> But you have speed far greater ...

In the next lines occur the images we are familiar with in "West-Running Brook": "stream" and "in the rush of everything to waste." And the possibility that the couple can "climb back up a stream" and "through history up the stream of time" anticipates the "guide" in "Directive" taking us "back in a time made simple by the loss/Of detail ..." Then comes a syntactic construction similar to the first two lines quoted above, reinforcing the idea of resistance:

> Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
> But in the rush of everything to waste,
> That you may have the power of standing still.

These lines offer the central image of resistance, of "standing still" against "the rush of everything to waste." The couple can realize in their shared identity the "power" they constitute in the face of danger or chaos. This is also, ideologically, what the couple in "West-Running Brook" feels when they see the current of water, "the fall of most of it is always/Raising a little, sending up a little."

In the sestet the disjunctive syntax is resolved into declarative statements with a faint subjunctive in " ... once you are agreed" and so on. But the syntactic tensions cease, and we have the affirmative stand taken and asserted, though negatively, against the onrushing flux:

> Two such as you with such a master speed
> Cannot be parted nor be swept away
> From one another once you are agreed
> That life is only life forevermore
> Together wing to wing and oar to oar.

Frost gets close in these lines to the idea he held so firmly, and expressed in a letter to E. S. Sergeant: " ... I take nothing back. I don't even grow. My favorite theory is that we are given this speed swifter than any stream of light time or water for the sole purpose of standing still like a water beetle in any stream of light time or water off any shore we please."[35] This attitude of "standing still," so highly significant in Frost's poetry is, after all, in line with what he said in the first poem of A Boy's Will: "They would not find me changed from him they knew--/Only more sure of all I thought was true." This

[35]E. S. Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence, p. xxi.

assurance won from life's doubts and beliefs is what the significant phrase "standing still" conveys; it is perhaps the poet's total achievement, summed up in one phrase.

To add a final comment on "Master Speed," the effectiveness of the poem depends equally on image and syntax, each assisting the other. The images generalize the concept and extend its scope to include metaphysical realities; the syntax gives the sonnet the precision and the particularity of thought.

The company of two, then, if the relation between them is one of harmony, enjoys special privileges in Frost. In married love or male friendship, the possibilities for insight, and moments of vision are far greater. "Two Look at Two" and "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," for instance, are two "insight" poems with lovers in them, and "Iris by Night" and "A Boundless Moment" are poems in which two friends have access to visionary moments. In "Two Look at Two," the metaphor of wave, anticipating the "wave" in "West-Running Brook," postulates the visionary correspondence between the human and the animal perception; sight turns into insight:

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

And, significantly enough, and unlike "The Most of It" in which a single person asks the question, "the earth" returns its "counter love" to the two lovers concerned.

One of the most striking metaphors of vision seems to be reserved in Frost for expressing a "relation of elected friends" in "Iris by Night," a poem written in 1914 to celebrate the long country walks that Frost took in the fruitful company of his English friend, Edward Thomas:

> A Wonder! Bow and rainbow as it bent,
> Instead of moving with us as we went,
> (To keep the pots of gold from being found)
> It lifted from its dewy pediment
> Its two mote-swimming many-colored ends,
> And gathered them together in a ring.
> And we stood in it softly circled round
> From all division time or foe can bring
> In a relation of elected friends.

The positives that Frost's poems have to offer are clear, and they are to be found mostly in his love poems and in poems of friendship. Metaphors of resistance, of visionary moments, point in particular to these love poems, and provide valid grounds for saying that in Frost's poetic belief, man in the company of two can feel the correspondence, the kinship with the animate and inanimate world; and, negatively, together in their feeling of oneness, which is their single source of strength, the couple can "shut out fear," and survive the hostile environment.

CONCLUSION

Frost's style belongs to a tradition whose features are common to both British and American verse, a tradition broadly designated as one of discursive style. The discursive style can achieve a great range of variation within its rational frame, extending from narrative or descriptive to terse, epigrammatic verse. Frost achieves this range in his verse, moving effortlessly from one kind of variation to the other as the poetic need arose. Within this range his narratives are distinctly American in idiom and rhythm; his didactic poems such as "The White-Tailed Hornet" and "The Lesson for Today" are Horatian in manner, and conform more to the British Augustan verse style than any other; while his short poems, decidedly, show an influence of such poets as Hardy, Emerson, and Emily Dickinson. Furthermore, his poems of love and courtship, few as they are, seem to relate to the verse style of wit and grace of the Caroline poets.

One of the basic features of Frost's style is metonymy. Both the short and narrative poems exemplify a method based upon contiguous detail. The poetic discourse in these poems proceeds mostly in close relation to the objects named in them. Such a procedure enables the poet to evoke the rural world of New England, of barns, stone-walls, witness trees, brooks, mountains, woodsmen, and farmers. The style of the poems, cumulatively, denotes such a concrete world because the local concentration of detail in them gradually helps build the total image of of a region. Furthermore, the poet tends to animate the objects of his

poetic world because of a certain metonymic reciprocity, which takes place between the poet as perceiver and the objects seen around him; he renders even abstract thought in terms of concrete action. This brings into the poet's syntax an unusual number of action verbs. The strength and stability of Frost's world are those of the resources of syntax, of the belief in the qualities of clarity and coherence. This commitment to syntax, to different ways of saying, while it commits the poet to the rational frame of his style, helps him realize a sense of moderation, even indulge his inclination to weigh one thing against the other. The syntax in the poems often mimes this tendency to balance things or attitudes:

> We're always too much out or too much in. ("Build Soil")
>
> What I was walling in or walling out ... ("Mending Wall")
>
> But where it is it thrusts in from
> Or what it is it thrusts into ...
>
> And what take hence or leave behind ... ("All Revelation")

These syntactic features often point to the contrary ways in which the poet shapes his experience. Further, the use of subordinate clauses, and the continual qualifying tone that the poet brings to his verse, as in "Onset" or "Goodby and Keep Cold," characterize his style.

If metonymy, thus, helps posit a regional world, then the imaginative interaction of the poet with the facts of this world is limited mostly to drawing conclusions from them. The poet can, of course, draw them from various angles, and can change the perspectives as the mood or will directs. This does not, however, entail changing the

facts. The poet looks at nature from one angle and finds it unresponsive, even ironic in its noncommittal--as in "The Most of It." But from another angle, in a changed situation, nature responds--as in "Two Look at Two" or "All Revelation." But in neither poem is there an imaginative interpenetration of facts of the kind as in, say, Yeats--whose "Second Coming," for instance, refers to war as "blood-dimmed tide" and whose second Christ turns out to be the Egyptian Sphinx, who "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born." In contradistinction, the buck in "The Most of It" is simply presented as a fact, and almost without comment. Frost himself seems to be aware of his distinctive approach to poetry when he said: "Love, the moon, and murder have poetry in them by common consent. But it's in other places. It's in the axe-handle of a French Canadian Woodchopper ... You know the Canadian woodchoppers ... [make their own] axe-handles, following the curve of the grain ... Art should follow lines in nature, like the grain of an axe-handle. False art puts curves on things that haven't any curves ... [Puritanism] hasn't had its day, and it might be fun to set it up as an artistic doctrine."[1]

So the poet cannot go against the "grain" of facts, according to this poetic, and change them to fit his feeling. This is a restriction which the poet willingly imposes on himself. In his narrative poems he is seen moving in such a restricted world; the language used is strongly

[1]Unsigned article, "Poetry of Axe Handles Urged by Robert Frost: Sentiments True to Nature's Grain Are Advocated by Yankee Versifier Who 'Recently Arrived,'" Philadelphia Public Ledger, 4 April, 1916, p. 11; pp. 18-21; see Years of Triumph, p. 77.

denotative and the connotative elements of style are not strong enough to convince the reader that the narrative poem--say, "Out, Out" or "The Fear"--is a "sample" of the larger world. The reader is only made aware of the strong regional ties of the poet in these poems.

But even facts can acquire additional meanings in certain contexts. The tower clock striking "One" may come to represent universal order; snow may carry associations of death or annihilation. These extensions of meaning are synecdochic in nature. And they occur in many didactic and short poems, whose fidelity to details of a regional world is, nevertheless, beyond question. However, synecdoche in Frost works under diminished possibilities. "Dust of Snow" records in mild, literal language a quiet change of mood; the crow by shaking down on the speaker dust of snow makes physical contact with him--no divine contact is invoked here--and induces "a change of mood" in him, saving "Some part/ Of a day I had rued." Surely, things do not appear here, as they do in Wordsworth, "Apparelled in celestial light." Synecdoche suggests only the next contiguous step to be taken in the extension of meaning. The poet starts from a closely observed non-social fact and works his way through--as in "I'll Sing You One-O"--to a synecdochic generalization: the tower and the steeple "Spoke for the clock/With whose vast wheels/Theirs interlock." The links or interlocking are meticulously established before the synecdochic meaning of oneness is invoked.

But, if we set aside the few "Emersonian" poems, then, more frequently, synecdoche functions in the poems in less obvious ways. It functions through voice tones; the poet characterizes his men and women

through them. The voice tones mime people--as in "Death of the Hired Man" or in "Snow"--into poetic realities. Furthermore, the poet through several of his poems projects himself as a credible character. In the regional poems, such as "A Time to Talk," "Birches," "Mending Wall," "Two Tramps in Mudtime," and "Directive," to mention a few, the poet's persona figures prominently; and one can see how the general world and the specific speaker both are held together, cumulatively, by the poems. J. M. Cox's saying that "[The poet] is the central figure his poems make over and over again,"[2] adequately qualified, has an element of truth. The strong parallel to this in American verse is, obviously, Whitman. This aspect of Frost occurring in several, but not all of the poems--a qualification that Cox does not make--is similar to Whitman's rather aggressive presence in his poems. The regional poems in which the Frostian speaker is strongly felt also offer what Cox calls "the Yankee wisdom in which Frost specializes."[3] It appears, however, that this wisdom does not always stand the poet in good stead in many of his short poems. The "wisdom" surely seems to abandom him--as in "Acquainted with the Night" or "Desert Places"--exposed, unarmed, to moods of loneliness.

[2] Kenyon Review, 21 (Winter, 1959), 153.

[3] Profile, p. 25.

These moods seem to find their unique expression in several short metaphorical poems, the poems gathering meanings through similarity. Metaphors in Frost are often conceived within the frame of contiguous narrative, that is, figures of similarity arise out of a metonymic structuring of poetic discourse:

> The sparks made no attempt to be the moon
> They were content to figure in the tree
> As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades. ("Evening in a Sugar Orchard")

The first stanza of "A Serious Step Lightly Taken" will perhaps illustrate this aspect better:

> Between two burrs on the map
> Was a hollow-headed snake.
> The burrs were hills, the snake was a stream,
> And the hollow head was a lake.

The stanza gives both the figure of similarity and the literal explanation. Metaphors contribute to the rational narrative structure here; the expository links are clearly stated: A is B, or like B. Furthermore, similes and metaphors which offer both the literal and the figurative terms--as in the above stanzas--are common in Frost. And, correlatively, interaction metaphors and the metaphors that evoke sensations are rare.

Certain literal words in Frost tend to become symbols through recurring associations. "Woods," "Trees," and "Snow" acquire overtones of death. Similarly, verbs such as "stand" and "stay" by occurring in like contexts gather the additional meaning of resistance. The poet weaves these metaphors into the syntactical texture of his verse, and they do not override the functions of syntax. These symbols constitute a distinctive feature of Frost's style.

These several stylistic features imply, however, attitudes to experience, and to life in general. Perhaps a comprehensive statement about them may be attempted at this point. Frost's narratives present both a rural world and its men and women. The rural world presented is concrete and credible. The men portrayed often sound very casual (as the farmer in "The Mountain") and whimsical (the town reporter in "A Hundred Collars"), but they turn out, in reality, to be stoical in endurance and committed to a certain work ethic. The women are mostly lonely, very often distraught and on the verge of insanity. The relationships of the hill wife in "The Hill Wife," the common law wife in "The House Keeper," and the housewife in "Home Burial" with their respective husbands are all on the verge of collapse, and the ties snap in the first two cases. The reader, however, gets the feeling that they are single, isolated cases and may not represent the general norm of social living in New England. Further, the values of stoicism and goodhumored understatements are seen to exist in the simplified relations of man and nature. Such an outlook would necessarily avoid the full complexity of human relations.

In fact, Frost could see only limited possibilities in social intercourse. In "Build Soil" the poet advocates isolationism as a viable social doctrine for the individual:

> ... Steal away and stay away.
> Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any,
> Join the United States and join the family ...

This withdrawal, it becomes evident in the poem, is based upon the fear of being "imposed on" by someone "Who in rate/Of speech and thinking is

so much my better." "A Drumlin Woodchuck," amusing as it is, touches a deeper chord in the poet, and points to the fear of the external world. Life, therefore, is a question of survival. The fear of new contacts, of new experience drives the poet to be conservative in his political poems. In his remarks on urban intellectual movements, he is equally conservative: Freud represented the "new school of the pseudo-phallic" ("New Hampshire"); Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot a surrender to the Old World. In resisting these movements of the century, Frost seems to have resisted his own growth. And this is seen in the way he shuts out experience from the political poems--"Editorials"--and lets in his personal opinions to overtake perception. The style of these poems is loose, rambling, and unimpressive. The verse tends to be insipid and characterless.

His gospel of resistance as enforced through his metaphors is based upon fear and his need to survive in the face of fear. Even his interest in William James and Henri Bergson helped in strengthening this need to survive.[4] While resistance to an ever-encroaching environment in the present day world--as seen in "One Step Backward Taken" and "Take Something like a Star"--is almost an imperative, the person who applies the principle of resistance uncritically will end up resisting everything including the good. The poet is frequently seen withdrawing, witholding, protecting, and resisting. And the result is, in general, the poems

[4]Thompson records Frost's early attraction to James's essay on suicide "Is Life Worth Living?" in The Will to Believe, to James's saying, "Fear of life in one form or another is the great thing to exorcise ..." And Bergson's Creative Evolution offered the poet his central metaphor of resistance of life against the forces of death, an image whose offshoot is the woodchuck's instinct for survival against hostile environment. Early Years, pp. 231-32, 537-38; Years of Triumph, pp. 299-304, 624-26.

exhibit no openness to experience, no participation in life. In short, a lack of critical awareness of issues involved in the stance of withdrawal touches the poet's attitudes to life. What F. R. Leavis says of Hardy can be said, perhaps with greater justice and force, of Frost: "His originality was not of the kind that goes with a high degree of critical awareness. It went, indeed, with a naive conservatism."[5]

Like Hardy, Frost is original. But Frost's originality is of the kind based on unsound, unexamined attitudes. And the "naive conservatism" in Frost is the result of a consciousness which has felt the paramount importance of survival--survival as a poet[6]--to the exclusion of everything else. And the naivety is often seen in the kind of simplification of issues the poet is obliged to make in his poems in order to appear rational, and to keep the rational frame of his style. The stuff of experience, therefore, that Frost could draw upon for his poems comes to be limited. And it is by exclusion of all that makes for chaotic experience that Frost conserves his stubborn common sense, and the general ease and smoothness of his style. It is perhaps a heavy price to pay.

But on the positive side, what engages the deepest level in the poet are themes of loneliness, and companionship of man and woman amidst nature. This engagement is usually seen in his didactic and short poems. "The Most of It," "Acquainted with the Night," and "Neither Out Far Nor

[5] New Bearings, p. 58.

[6] Frost had frequent nagging fears: the fear "he would fail as a poet"; the "jealous fear of having anyone excel over him." Early Years, pp. 214, 476, 606, 504-05, 509, 510.

in Deep" display powers of generalization transforming the very specifically stated situations. But such poems are not very many. And poems such as "West-Running Brook," "Master Speed," "Going for Water," "Two Look at Two," and "Happiness Makes up in Height ...," offer a positive suggestion that man in the company of woman he loves can constitute something positive on the strength of their togetherness amidst nature. But if these didactic and short poems are worth several readings, they are also the ones which plunge the reader into a variety of counterbalanced attitudes. This is where the reader encounters the poet's doubts, beliefs, and uncertainties.

Poems counter other poems. If "To a Thinker" or "Accidentally on Purpose" glorify impulse or instinct, the "The White-Tailed Hornet" downgrades it in order to uphold reason. If "Stars" posits a blind universe, "A Prayer in Spring" specifically points to "God above/To sanctify to what far ends He will." Similarly, "The Most of It" counters "Two Look at Two." The Emersonian poems generally contradict the non-Emersonian poems. Each poem, of course, attempts what Frost called "a clarification of life,"[7] the clarification of outlook or vision coming through a poetry of statement. "A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written," says Frost.[8] But the clarification of life attained in one poem is often vitiated by a counterbalancing clarification attained in a different poem. Both

[7]"The Figure a Poem Makes," Selected Prose, p. 18.

[8]"The Prerequisites," Selected Prose, p. 97.

clarifications clash in the reader's mind to produce confusion, a confusion which the poet instead of resolving, seems to have quietly shifted to the reader.

It is with respect to this besetting uncertainty of attitude that the reader may have to face the problem of whimsy. Whimsy often suggests an easy way out of the demands of logic especially if the problem faced is serious. The need to back up an affirmative statement such as "Drink and be whole beyond confusion" with a lot of whimsical, tourist talk points to the surrounding miasma of ideological uncertainty, from which emerge poems offering contrary clarifications. Even if whimsy helps create the strong persona of the poet in the poem, it slackens the verse style. The style of "Directive" combines rambling talk with impressive--if somewhat fanciful--pictorial details. But whenever the poet transcends his immediate whimsical self, he can rise to a great occasion, wield a style of impersonal dignity, as in "The Gift Outright," an almost imageless poem whose effectiveness depends on refinements of grammar and rhythm.

This stylistic inconsistency in Frost, seen in the way he combines the minutely observed with the loose statement of opinion, has behind it looming a poetic which Frost has elaborated on various occasions. His stress on poem as "performance," like playing a game of baseball,[9] often cut into the consistency of his thought. "All the fun's in how you say a thing" can override the importance of what you say. Therefore,

[9]"Perfect Day--A Day of Prowess," Selected Prose, pp. 88-91.

reason can be upheld from one point of view, just as can impulse from another point of view, and with equal conviction. This is essentially a pluralist's dilemma. Like Whitman and Hart Crane, Frost is an Emersonian; but unlike them he works within the rational frame of a style. He disagrees with Emerson discreetly, whenever it suits his poetic need; yet he does not break away from the tradition so that he could write both kinds of poems: "Design" or "Canis Major."[10] The contrary views look equally tempting, equally viable. So the poet appears, on the whole, indecisive in his ideas; he cannot make up his mind. However, he does the second best. He presents the contrary attitudes with vivid clarity. Intellectually, he may appear wavering; but rationally, he takes the first step of examining contradictory views: "walls" or national boundaries are essential and yet could be dispensed with.

While the holding of contrary views and attitudes helps the poet chart the extent of his poetic consciousness, the reader perhaps will never know how seriously the beliefs mattered to the poet. He is, as Thompson remarks, "primarily a subjective lyric poet," with "contradictory moods of response to experience."[11] Each poem dealing with the poet's mood expresses a possibility; and there are, in effect,

[10]Even when the metaphors of seeing, and those of resistance, increasingly point to a change in orientation, as suggested in chapter four, this change did not bring about any appreciable resolution of doubts. At best it helped the poet write a greater number of "Emersonian" poems for the last volume. Perhaps he had in his later life a smaller number of doubts to wrestle with. Scholarly opinion seems to point to this conclusion. Waggoner, American Poets, pp. 319-21.

[11]Robert Frost, Minnesota Pamphlet, p. 15.

as many possibilities as there are moods to deal with. Every passing mood for the poet is a temptation, and a fulfilment in itself; for there is no scrutiny or evaluation involved here--"I take nothing back. I don't even grow."[12] And every poem achieved, as the poet likes to look upon it, is "a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader."[13] Frost's poems, therefore, invite the reader to read them as attempts at self-discovery on the part of the poet rather than as authentic conclusions offered by the poet on human experience.

[12]E. S. Sergeant, p. xxi.

[13]"The Figure a Poem Makes," Selected Prose, p. 19.

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