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SPIRITUAL PARADOX AND ROBERT FROST

by

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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August, 1985
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Professor John Gorman, who first introduced me to the depth and complexity of Robert Frost's poetry, and for the excellent suggestions and guidance he has provided from the beginning of my research through the final stages of writing.

I would also like to thank Professor Gretchen Mieszkowski for her invaluable support and practical advice during the development and completion of this project.

To Professor Curtis Smith, I am indebted for his exemplary role as teacher and advisor during my earlier semesters of graduate school, and for his assistance with the final reading of my thesis.
Abstract

Robert Frost is frequently thought of as a poet of nature, a lyric poet of enchanting New England scenes and quaint New England folk. At the same time, he has been variously described as a "dark" poet: a cynic, a religious skeptic, and, by Ivor Winters, a spiritual drifter. In fact the conflicting messages in Robert Frost's poetry convey a mysterious and inscrutable Frost image, one which he himself helped to perpetuate. This study will examine the paradoxical aspect of Robert Frost, particularly as it pertains to his struggle with the issue of faith and skepticism. It will become apparent that Frost was not a drifter at all, that he was deeply concerned with some of the age-old fundamental questions, and that he spent most of his life examining them, using poetry not only as an expression of his doubts and anxieties, but also as a means by which to resolve them.

The introduction is an account of some of the criticisms of Robert Frost's poetry, beginning with the most censorious commentators and concluding with those which make allowances for the individualistic approach taken by Frost. This section includes examples of some of the enigmatic poems that have generated concern and misunderstanding.
The next section is a brief explanation of the significant events in the poet's life which formed his questioning, seeking personality. It examines the ways in which Frost's personal and poetic approach to life was influenced by his parents, his peers, his wife, his confrontation with Darwin's theory of evolution, and, finally, his struggle to overcome emotional and financial obstacles and establish himself as a poet.

The third section, The Poetry: Four Aspects, is a comprehensive study of those poems which best illustrate Frost's pursuit of a reconciliation between his religious faith and his intellectual inclinations. It is divided into four subsections, each of which examines a particular aspect of Frost's spiritual paradox. "Contraries" examines poems expressing Frost's awareness of the contradictions in life and introduces his method of dealing with them. "Doubt and Affirmation" explores first those of Frost's poems that appear to express skepticism, and then, his poems of religious affirmation. This section illustrates the necessity for reading both groups in order to understand fully Frost's beliefs, and the reason for his "heretical" pose. "Mystery" explores Frost's appreciation for the perplexity of God's ways and explains how Frost's "dark" themes are often merely expressions of the inexplicability of the universe—a circumstance that does not drive him to despair. These poems carry the message that we not only cannot understand the mystery
of God's ways but are not intended to. "Faith and Science" studies another aspect of Frost's spiritual expression, dealing specifically with the universal conflict between man's rational and spiritual natures. The poems considered, many of which were written late in Frost's career, refer to man's preoccupation with scientific exploits and Frost's misgiving that this preoccupation might cause us to lose touch with our intuitive, spiritual gifts.

The conclusion of this study is that Frost was by no means a spiritual drifter. Though his ironic stance and his insistence upon "not-knowing" contributed to the confusion in interpreting his poetry, he was simply trying to provoke his readers to think creatively and independently, free from the stagnation of complacent beliefs or current ideological trends. His direction was, by choice, an individualistic one, but he always came back to his original tendencies to favor the intuitive, "believing" side of his nature. Frost's poetry reflects a religious belief which, though tempered with a healthy amount of questioning, nevertheless qualifies him as a poet of affirmation.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Life of Robert Frost</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Poetry: Four Aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Contraries</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Doubt and Affirmation</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mystery</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Faith and Science</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The challenge of interpreting the poetry of Robert Frost seems to increase with repeated reading. He has long been admired in the classroom as a charming elderly bard whose nostalgic verse commemorates the folk and countryside of his beloved New England. Yet some poems arouse confusion and concern by their "dark" tones and obscure implications. One cannot make a careful study of this complex man and his equally complex work without soon realizing that he is much more than a local colorist. Nor is he predominantly a poet of disillusionment and despair. His career encompassed a lifetime of intense joy and profound grief. His poetic expression, frequently motivated by personal experiences, reflects many extremes of human emotion. For this reason Frost has accurately been described as a poet of "opposites." His constant concern with antithetical themes qualifies him as one of the most difficult poets of his generation.

Frost's poems explore such counter-themes as transience and permanence, isolation and society, man and nature, and man and God. Early and late, his poems indicate a lively concern for problems of faith and reason. For Frost, as for many other authors coming of age in the decades following
the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the problem of balancing personal faith with rationality was a particularly important one. His lifelong attempt at reconciliation between the religious influences of his childhood and his strong sense of intellectual integrity led him to a particular form of skepticism—a paradoxical belief in each of "these opposed halves."¹ His method of coming to terms with his problem found its way into many of his best poems.

Frost's profound subtlety in expressing his paradoxical views is the element that distinguishes him as a master of his craft. This same subtlety, however, is also responsible for generating the steady flow of criticism that he encountered throughout his poetic career. Frost's very "fund of sensitivity and intelligence" in many ways "added up to a debit when it was assessed by critics who had little conception of his methods and aims."²

Conflicting charges against Robert Frost's poetry abound. Frost has been variously labeled a spiritual drifter, an agnostic, and a Romantic Pantheist, with a message that is incomplete and suggestive at best.³ He has been accused of being a poet who lacks commitment, and who, in old age, appeared "as a standard exemplar of irresponsible Romantic irony."⁴ These assessments do indeed raise the question of whether Frost was essentially a skeptic or a man of faith. The critics have cited poems considered in this study as the bases for their conclusions. For that reason, it is useful at this point to examine more closely some of
the charges and criticisms that have been aimed at Frost and his work.

Ivor Winters is perhaps the poet's bitterest critic. The thrust of his criticism is aimed at Frost's apparent lack of commitment in his "religious" poems. Like many critics, Winters emphasizes the relationship between Emerson and Frost. According to Winters, Emerson was Frost's favorite poet. While asserting that Frost was something of an Emersonian himself, Winters makes it clear that, in his estimation, Frost does not compare favorably:

In Frost ... we find a disciple without Emerson's religious conviction. Frost believes in the rightness of impulse ... ; as a result of his belief in impulse, he is of necessity a relativist, but his relativism, apparently since it derives from no intense religious conviction, has resulted mainly in an ill-natured eccentricity and in increasing melancholy. He is an Emersonian who has become skeptical and uncertain without having been reformed; and the skepticism and uncertainty do not appear to have been so much the result of thought as the result of the impact upon his sensibility of conflicting notions of his own era—they appear to be the result
of his having taken the easy way and
having drifted with the various currents
of the time.6

In these remarks, Winters cites some of the key themes in
Frost's poems: irony, relativism, skepticism, and conflict.
For this reason, Winters' analysis, though unduly harsh,
is germane to the present study.

Two of the poems cited by Winters as examples of
Frost's lack of a complete or definitive message are "West-
Running Brook" and "A Masque of Reason." "West-Running
Brook" is a dialogue between a husband and wife who have
observed a brook near their farm, which runs west instead of
east; they discuss at length a ripple in which water is
thrown upward and back against the current. In an important
passage that must of necessity be quoted at length, the
husband says,

    Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
    In that white wave runs counter to itself.
    It is from that in water we were from
    Long, long before we were from any creature.
    Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
    Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
    The stream of everything that runs away.
    Some say existence like a Pirouot
    And Pirouette, forever in one place,
    Stands still and dances, but it runs away;
It has this throwing backward on itself
So that the fall of most of it is always
Raising a little, sending up a little.
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.
It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.

According to Winters the theology in this passage, "if we may call it theology, is tenuous and incomplete," and he concludes that "the substance of the poem is negligible." Yet it is not overly speculative to consider the possibility that Winters, overly concerned with the issue of "orthodoxy," has overlooked the importance of Frost's implications in these lines. The reference to our "beginning of beginnings" having originated "long before we were from any creature," is decidedly subtle, but its affirmation of Darwinian theory can hardly be described as tenuous. It is likely that Winters is looking in the wrong places for the "theology" he is seeking:

"A Masque of Reason," according to Winters, is "the same kind of poem on a larger scale." In brief, it is the story of a satirical dramatic debate among Job, Job's wife,
God and the devil. The action takes place on the Day of Judgment, as Job and his wife discuss God's treatment of Job and attempt to get some answers to the question of why God subjected him to such travail. In God's speech of explanation to Job, He says:

... you helped

Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
"Twas a great demonstration we put on.
I should have spoken sooner had I found
The work I wanted. You would have supposed
One who in the beginning was the Word
Would be in a position to command it.
I have to wait for words like anyone.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.10

Winters acknowledges that the ideas in this passage reflect the "fideistic tradition of New England Calvinism," but he insists that the "carefully flippant tone ... belongs to the tradition of Romantic irony ... and is used to make the ideas seem trivial." Winters further states that
Frost's ideas and tone "express the Romantic ennui or disillusionment which is born of spiritual laziness . . . justified by the Romantic doctrine that one can best apprehend the truth by intuition without labor."\textsuperscript{11} He ends his indictment with the conclusion that for Robert Frost, "impulse is trustworthy and reason is contemptible," that Frost's views cut him off from "any really profound understanding of human experience," that Frost "advises us to turn away from serious topics," and that when Frost can't avoid them himself, "his treatment of them is usually whimsical, sentimental, and evasive."\textsuperscript{12} Although Winters has accurately perceived Frost's tendency toward a "whimsical" tone in much of his poetry, his characterization of Frost as a poet lacking in personal conviction does little to explain the real motive of Frost's satire and irony. If, in fact Frost truly wanted us to "turn away from serious topics," he would probably not have treated such themes so extensively in his poems.

If Winters attacks Frost from the right, Malcolm Cowley, approaching on the opposite flank, also seems unable to discern the sincerity and depth of Frost's messages. He views Frost's poems as having "smaller goals or social passions," and none of the "grand sweeping humanitarian aims" of Emerson, Thoreau or Hawthorne. He feels that Frost is concerned mostly with himself and his neighbors, that while he sets before us an ideal of separateness, this separateness is only half of that Emersonian self-reliance that qualifies
Emerson's poetry for social purposes. In addressing the struggles and crises of his age, according to Cowley, Frost "seems to suffer from nearsightedness or want of imagination," and, "lost in space, . . . manages to overlook the misfortunes under his eyes." Cowley cites Frost's "Build Soil" as the best of Frost's long philosophical poems, "and perhaps the only one worth preserving." In this poem, Cowley believes that Frost "sets limits upon the exploration of himself," and "is always building defenses against the infinite:"

We're always too much out or too much in.
At present from a cosmical dilation
We're so much out that the odds are against
Our ever getting inside in again.

Yet another critic who draws unfavorable comparison of Frost with Emerson is Thomas McClanahan, who states that Frost's explanation for the problem of the existence of Evil "centers around an awareness of human and divine finitude." Frost, he says, lacks Emerson's "ultimate optimism regarding man's fate," and contends in his poetry that man "must learn to accept his epistemological, religious, and metaphysical limitations, if he is to survive in a universe which grants him little in the way of certainty." In "Nothing Gold Can Stay," McClanahan interprets Frost as saying that the Golden Age is gone, and "Eden has sunk to grief." Lacking the influence of Emerson's optimism, McClanahan feels, this poem
exemplifies the pragmatic emphasis found in Frost when dealing with the problem of Evil. For McClanahan, the poem indicates a decidedly skeptical orientation toward traditional religious concerns:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

In Joseph W. Beach's assessment of Frost's poems is another reference to a lack of commitment by the poet. He describes Frost as a "refined modern agnostic in religion and philosophy, a clear-headed and fastidious realist," who has managed to retain "the aura of a New England transcendentalism without a trace of its philosophy." In A Boy's Will, he contends, Frost "quietly and bluntly states that 'there is no oversight of human affairs.'" Although Frost displays the "spiritual refinements possible to human life" quite exquisitely, "... none of our poets has more steadily declined to formulate his thought in philosophical terms." Laurence Perrine seems to concur with Beach, at least in part, in labelling Frost an agnostic. He notes that this stance is clearly revealed in "A Masque of Reason."
In a dialogue between God and Job, Job asks God about immortality, and he gets no answer:

You could end this by simply coming out
And saying plainly and unequivocally
Whether there's any part of man immortal
Yet you don't speak. 21

In Perrine's estimation, this passage indicates that Frost was more than willing to "rest in a state of uncertainty" and to accept "the inability of man to answer the ultimate questions." 22 Although Perrine shares other critics' awareness of Frost's contradictory messages, his interpretation of the poet's tone is a more positive one. Acknowledging that Frost frequently arrives at differing answers to the questions he "persistently put to the universe," Perrine describes Frost's poems as "explorations of truth, conceivably ways of looking at things, not assertions of unquestioning dogma." 23 Despite these inconsistencies, however, Perrine finds a distinct pattern of thought, "grounded in agnosticism," although he is quick to explain that Frost's thinking does not end there. He cites lines from "A Soldier" as having a rare "note of certainty . . . unequalled in the rest of his poetry." 24

But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
Further than target ever showed or shone. 25
The overall notion in Perrine's analysis is that Frost found value both in uncertainty regarding a future life and in a faith in it.

A few critics have approached an even more sympathetic understanding of the element of contradiction in Robert Frost's poetry. In slight contrast to Winters' label of "spiritual drifter," Maurice Brown terms Frost a "spiritual explorer . . . in search of God--any God whose reasoning he can understand." 26 Jac Tharpe conjectures that Frost probably thought of himself not as a "wandering Christ," but as "Man Thinking," an idea borrowed from Emerson. Tharpe believes that, as a thinking man, Frost made a conscious effort to synthesize the ideas of the major figures of the nineteenth century, and the result was that his poetry conveys dark messages. 27

Tharpe maintains that "Frost's view is genuinely agnostic--not a theological or even philosophical position, but merely a recognition that one does not know." He justifies Frost's frequent contradictions by saying,

... the explanation is quite simple:
he tried to tell the truth. In the everyday world, a thing appears at times to be true, and at times its opposite appears to be true. Either is a poetic occasion. 28

Commenting further on Frost's "agnosticism," he ascribes to the poet yet another Emersonian epithet: "Consistency
is an ideological hobgoblin, and 'truths' are suspect."  

Besides the consistent "inconsistency" in Frost's poetry, many of the poems dealing with metaphysical themes are blatantly irreverent in tone, if not in content. Frost has frequently been accused of flaunting heresies and attacking orthodox religious doctrines. Lawrance Thompson, Frost's official biographer and author of several critical works on the poet, addresses the issue of Frost's "pose as heretic" throughout his writings. Thompson's view of Frost's intellectual tendencies gives us what is perhaps the most significant clue to understanding exactly what Frost is doing in so many of his paradoxical poems. Thompson believes that, though a "posture of heresy" would seem to serve a poetic or artistic purpose, it is more accurate to attribute Frost's pose to "his inability to derive adequate intellectual-emotional-spiritual satisfaction from any systematic dogma which imposes intolerable limitations on a temperament which delights to seek truth through questions and dialogue."  

Thompson, like Perrine, acknowledges that Frost frequently permits himself to assume the posture of not-knowing. In contrast with the other critics, however, Thompson contends that, sooner or later, Frost reveals quite clearly that there really is little left in doubt for him, and that "he cannot play metaphorical hide and seek too long without trailing clouds of puritanic certainty."
The poem, "Too Anxious For Rivers" is an interesting example of the mixed symbolism so often employed by Frost, which contributes to the confusion of interpretation:

The truth is the river flows into the canyon
Of Ceasing-to-Question-What-Doesn't-Concern-Us,
As sooner or later we have to cease somewhere.
No place to get lost like too far in the distance.
It may be a mercy the dark closes round us
So broodingly soon in every direction.32

According to Thompson, the symbolism here suggests a Puritanical admonition to one "who has a tendency to ask too many questions about life and death." Then Frost, replacing a Christian notion with a pagan one in the last stanza, blends the ambiguous and the didactic:33

Time was we were molten, time was we were vapor.
What set us on fire and what set us revolving,
Lucretius the Epicurean might tell us
'Twas something we knew all about to begin with
And needn't have fared into space like his master
To find 'twas the effort, the essay of love.34

Thompson also notes that this poem develops in such a way as "to mock the attempts of both science and religion to explain the first causes and last effects."35 This observation will prove to be a valuable one in this study of Frost's seemingly ambivalent spiritual stance.

Thompson's analysis of this poem, as of many of Frost's other works, has provided useful insights into the poet's
contradictory approach. Thompson had a close personal relationship with Frost and studied his poetry extensively, attaining a unique depth of understanding. Thompson's studies of Frost's use of antithesis and paradox have yielded valid insight into Frost's methods of attaining honest answers to the questions that concerned him. We have examined various critical appraisals of Frost's philosophical position, from the narrower viewpoints of Winters, Cowley, McClanahan and Beach, to the more moderate assessment of Perrine, and, finally, to Brown and Thompson, who may have come closest to an accurate analysis of the poet behind the poetry.

Frost's poetic method and purpose were inseparable from his philosophical position. At heart he was a truth-seeker, willing to ask whatever questions were required, and unafraid of whatever answers he might find. A man of the utmost intellectual integrity, he possessed the capacity for looking at all sides of an issue to come up with a conclusion free from dogmatic assertions or simplistic ideas. Maintaining a strong religious faith imbued in him at an early age, he nevertheless employed a serious and carefully crafted method of "posing" as one in doubt or uncertainty, in order to lead his readers more deeply into themselves—to the "source" of understanding of the world around them.
The Life of Robert Frost

In order to solve the riddle of Robert Frost's poetry, it is helpful to be familiar with some of the personal experiences in early life that colored his later thinking. Lawrance Thompson, Frost's official biographer from 1939 until Frost's death in 1963, worked with him in an atmosphere of close friendship borne out by his numerous accounts of conversations and letters between them. In addition to the personal aspect of their relationship, Thompson made an intense examination of the poetry of this complicated man.

In the introduction to the first volume of his biography Thompson points out that Frost himself "was so fascinated by the story of his life that he never tired of retelling it." Frost was a good storyteller, and he frequently varied his accounts. When the "bare facts" became too uncomfortable for him, he would mingle his self-deceptions with falsehoods so subtle even Frost became convinced of their truth.

How he developed this myth-making tendency is an involved story, but the basis for his frequent escape into automythology is the profound literary and religious influence of his mother. From an early age Frost's active imagination was stimulated by hours of listening to his mother's many accounts of mythical heroes and deeds. Well-educated in the classics and especially fond of the poetry of Robert
Browning, Mrs. Frost filled little Robbie's mind with heroic notions of striving toward ideal behavior in all daily efforts. The emphasis upon excellence was further reinforced by her devout attention to the Biblical admonition, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which in Heaven is perfect." In addition to his mother's pious admonitions, the child was exposed to her esoteric personality. Mrs. Frost believed that she had inherited through her father a capacity for "second sight," and the ability to see "beyond the material hindrances of the world." Reared as a Presbyterian in her native Scotland, she later joined the highly mystical Swedenborgian Church, into which Robbie was subsequently baptized. Frost was heavily indoctrinated in his mother's strong belief in religious visions and encouraged to console himself during times of difficulty with self-protective retreats "into sanctuaries created by his own imagination."

In contrast to the gentle but persuasive influence of his mother was the forceful personality of his father. William Prescott Frost, Jr., a native New Englander, maintained a severe brand of Puritan authority by brutal beatings administered to the young boy with whatever weapon was handy. Robbie's mother; in an attempt to compensate for his father's frequent outrages, smothered the child with love and overindulgence.

On many occasions Robbie's mother offered stoic advice to help him accept whatever punishment he received—
either his "earthly or his Heavenly Father."7 She used these repeated opportunities to stress her belief in the Christian doctrines of humility, obedience and submission. Frost became even more convinced of the necessity for submission as he grew older. Years later, in explaining his reconciliation to those early-taught doctrines, he would smile and say, "They put salt on my tail when I was young."8

One such crisis, in which a paternal beating was narrowly averted, provided young Frost with a profound spiritual lesson. Returning from an errand to the grocery store for his father, Robbie was tossing the change in the air and promptly lost it in a crack in the board sidewalk. Unable to retrieve it even after a lengthy and desperate attempt, he arrived home panic-stricken. His mother, sharing his apprehension, took him to his room where they both knelt and prayed for deliverance from what they feared would be another show of nearly intolerable wrath on the part of Robbie's father. When Mr. Frost finally heard the explanation he was in the midst of an absorbing project of his own and merely dismissed Robbie with a distant "never mind." To Robbie, this was a miraculous demonstration of the power of prayer.9

Yet at other times, he was confused. Prayer did not seem always to bring about expected results. Repeatedly his mother would explain that the ways of God are very mysterious and that one should not attempt to comprehend them.
Although Robbie never completely understood this explanation, he learned to accept it.10

The overall effect of the first ten years of Robert Frost's life with a mother who was tender, indulgent and zealously religious, and a father who was harsh and sometimes cruel, was predictable. A pattern of internal confusion had begun, and Frost would never be able fully to resolve certain personal conflicts that paralleled the opposed attitudes of his parents.11

Many times in his life Frost was asked about his religious views, and how his parents influenced them. In response to one such query by Thompson, Frost answered in a veiled manner not unlike that of his poems:

You seem to reason that because my mother was religious, I must have been religious too at any rate to start with. You might just as well reason that because my father was irreligious, I must have been irreligious, too. Theology fascinated me from very young.12

Later in this letter, Frost addresses Thompson's inquiries about his feelings about prayer:

I used to try to get up plausible theories about prayer like Emerson. My latest is that it might be an expression of the hope that my offering of verse on the altar may be acceptable in His sight. Whoever He
is. Tell them I am, Jehovah said.
And as you know, I have taken this as
a command to iamb and not write free
verse.  

The ironic tone is characteristic of Frost, as is his tend-
ency to mask his meaning with humor. Between bouts of
flippancy, also characteristically, Frost injects a note of
serious tenderness, a reminder of the depths of his sensiti-
vity:

I looked on at my mother's devoutness
and thought it was beautiful. She had
purity of spirit. . . . I'm afraid I
stay a semi-detached villain. But only
semi. My passion for theology must mean
something.  

Many years would pass before Frost would have to con-
front seriously the inner conflicts that began in his child-
hood years. Following the death of his father in May of
1885, the eleven-year old boy, his sister and his mother,
moved from San Francisco back to Lawrence, Massachusetts,
where they joined the Universalist Church attended by
Frost's grandfather. Robbie's exposure to Universalism had
its own significant effect upon his ultimate religious
beliefs.  

It was during Rob's sophomore year of high school, how-
ever, that his friendship with a senior named Carl Burell
resulted in an experience that possibly had the most
profound effect of all in helping to shape his cosmic views. In the previously cited letter to Thompson, Frost describes his exposure to a completely new kind of thinking and counts it one of the most significant events in the formation of his thoughts and beliefs.

Carl Burell, ten years older than Frost, had dropped out of school after the eighth grade. Before returning, Carl read extensively and had accumulated a serious, though eclectic, library consisting of works about his main interests: botany, American humor and evolution—including books dealing with the post-Darwinian battle between science and religion. In this collection were volumes by Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Edward Clodd, Grant Allen, Henry Drummond and Richard Proctor. Burell himself had had devout religious beliefs at one time, expressing them in Christmas and Easter poems published in the high school Bulletin; but he confided to Frost the doubts that had developed in his own mind regarding long-held orthodox Christian doctrines. Though Rob's initial reaction to Carl's three major preoccupations was apparently a detached one, the foundation had been laid for a developing curiosity in each of these areas. Frost's nature poetry strongly reflects these interests.

One work that particularly impressed Rob was Our Place Among Infinities, by the British astronomer, Richard Anthony Proctor. Interestingly, this book, which articulated Proctor's apparent rejection of certain traditional beliefs, was also treasured by Rob's devoutly religious mother. Its
first essay, "The Past and Future of the Earth," was a survey of the current best theories of the evolution of the solar system, and included geological information about the age of the earth. Rob was encouraged to find that the book, in spite of its scientific insights, did not contradict all his early notions. In essence the essay concluded that the eternal questions are answered by science "as they were answered of old,—'As touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out.' "18 These reassuring words, reminiscent of his mother's frequent Biblical litanies, were echoed in the next essay, "Of Seeming Wastes in Nature." Here Proctor expressed his belief that, though we would indeed be wise if we could understand the whole of the world around us, we must never mistakenly suppose that we can. Proctor asserted that we must neither be troubled in our faith in God's benevolence, nor doubt the obvious facts of scientific discovery. "In a word," Proctor said, "our faith must not be hampered by scientific doubts, our science must not be hampered by religious scruples."19 For Frost this rather Victorian answer to the unsettling conflict between science and religion provided a resolution that would come as close as any other to satisfying him throughout his life.20

By the time Frost was a senior in high school he began to be troubled by an awareness that he would never be able to return to the comfort and serenity of his mother's pure religious convictions. Evidence of growing concern about
the changes in his attitude can be found in an essay he wrote in May of 1892 for the Lawrence High School Bulletin. This article, much in the line of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, emphasized the need to "re-think" any accepted idea in order to make it truly one's own. According to the young Frost, there are three categories of individuals who respond to customary ideas: followers, enemies and re-thinkers. He described the re-thinkers as "a class who have generally gone through both of these to return to the first in a limited sense." He attacked the "enemies" for their haste in grouping re-thinkers with non-thinkers and for trying to create a dogma of liberalism. Accusing this "enemy" group of putting the other two into one general category, he said that this practice "is best exemplified in religious thought and controversy." The critical eye with which Frost viewed dogmatic liberalism is manifested throughout his poetry. It is important to recognize the strong anti-pathy Frost had for dogma of any kind, whether religious, scientific, philosophical or political. This characteristic of his is largely responsible for the seemingly contradictory points of view that his poetry expresses.

The religious doubts that began to trouble Frost after his exposure to Burell's library and to Burell's growing religious skepticism would continue to return at various times throughout his life. Beset with both real and imagined hardships and tragedies, Frost was not immune to moments of grave doubt about the purpose of life's griefs.
It was at these moments that he wrote his most desparing poems; but it was also at these moments that he sought that "momentary stay against confusion," which accounts for the hopeful tone of so many of his others.

It was at Lawrence High School, too, that Frost met and fell in love with Elinor White. He soon discovered that she also wrote poems and had a wide knowledge of English poetry. In Elinor, Robert found an intellect that matched, if not surpassed, his own. This fact became a source of concurrent delight and insecurity that would complicate their relationship for the rest of their lives together. There followed a rocky three-year courtship, during which Frost suffered self-inflicted humiliation from exaggerated fears that she would reject him. On December 19, 1895, the two were married. His dependence on her support and approval of his feelings, thoughts and work would plague him and would play a significant role in his adoption of the taunting and enigmatic manner in which he expressed his deepest concerns in poetry.

In the summer of 1897 Frost decided to attend Harvard College, partly so he could get a job as a high school Greek and Latin teacher. Another reason was that he wanted to study psychology and philosophy with the well-known William James, who had recently attracted so much attention with the publication of his latest work, *The Will to Believe*. The optimistic tone of the second article in the
book, "Is Life Worth Living," appealed strongly to Frost, who by this time was seeking encouragement in overcoming the sometimes overwhelming troubles of life. James introduced Frost to the possibility of surviving the temptations of despair and suicide by taking the risk of willfully placing one's faith in a hoped-for outcome. Admitting that science discourages religious assertions of a positive function for earthly pains and evils, James insisted that between the "maybe" of the doubter and the "maybe" of the believer, it is the believer's maybe that is the more courageous. In James's words Frost found the encouragement he so desperately needed for his subsequent determination to overcome his own dark moods of despondency and doubt:

It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true.

Evidence that Frost adopted some of these Jamesian ideas as his own can be seen in his frequently quoted essay, "Education by Poetry," in which he discusses his well-known "Four Beliefs." "Self-belief," "love-belief," and "art-belief," he says, are all closely related to our "God-belief;" and he states that "the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future."
Yet another example of James's influence upon Frost is found in an interview Frost had with Mark Harris in 1961, more than sixty years after Frost's first reading of The Will to Believe. In this interview Frost said "The Founding Fathers didn't believe in the future. They believed it In. You're always believing ahead of your evidence. . . . The most creative thing in us is to believe a thing in, in love, in all else. You believe yourself into existence." 

Upon arriving for his first year at Harvard in 1897, Frost found that he would be required to take courses in elementary German and English composition. When he returned as a sophomore the following year, he was planning to take the long-awaited course in philosophy from William James. He was quite disappointed, therefore, to discover that James had been granted a year's leave because of illness. In James's absence Frost signed up for two philosophy courses, one entitled General Introduction to Philosophy, and the other, History of Philosophy. In the introductory course, a semester of the study of logic was followed by a study of psychology; the instructor, Professor Hugo Munsterberg, used as his text William James's Psychology, which had been published only a few years before. In this volume, as in The Will to Believe, Frost found reinforcement for his efforts at reconciling his own spiritual conflicts. Especially appealing to Frost was James's ability to combine skepticism with an affirmation of religious faith. In this book James discussed the conflict that occurs when we hear
on one hand from enlightened scientists many reasons why we
should not pray, and on the other hand, from persuasive
religious leaders, reasons why we should. The conflict
raised by these opposing arguments had occurred to Frost,
as well. He was delighted, therefore, at the way James got
to the very heart of the matter by saying that more attention
should be given to the reason why we do pray, "which is
simply that we cannot help praying. It seems probable,"
James continued, "that in spite of all that science may do
to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of
time..." The "Epilogue" to this work further convinced
Frost that he had found a scientist who spoke his language.
In this section James pointed out that the sciences deal
with data that provides obscurity and contradiction, but
that "from the point of view of their limited purposes these
defects may be overlooked." Any man, James continued, who
is content with only a narrow understanding of the cosmos,
will disparagingly tend to label a discussion that is too
subtle for him, "metaphysical." Expanding this theme James
insisted that one's purpose must be to seek insight into the
world as a whole, and that no point of view or perspective,
whether it be that of the geologist, the mechanist or the
philosopher, is irrelevant. Combining our efforts toward
solving the overall cosmic puzzle, he continued, must become
the most urgent purpose of all.

After the congenial atmosphere of this first philosophy
course, Frost found himself startled and, ultimately,
offended by the other. The instructor was George Santayana, to whom Frost at first reacted warmly. Before the survey of Greek philosophers was over, however, Frost found Santayana's subtle but sarcastic treatment of religious matters difficult to take. Santayana, himself a former student of James, agreed with James in that he acknowledged a justification for the choice to believe. Yet Santayana referred to the object of belief as "illusion" or "myth." Frost found no fault with Santayana's contention that these higher forms of idealism have resulted in highly creative and imaginative capacities in man and have even taken on a sacred significance. When Santayana went on to say, however, that neither a belief in a Providence nor practice of prayer "among sane people" has ever been able to replace the effectiveness of "practical efforts to secure the desired end," Frost quickly became disenchanted with his professor.

Frost was affronted by Santayana's uncompromising materialism and his manner of cutting squarely across the inspirational utterances of William James. Confronted with the choice, Frost asserted his own will to believe in the words of James. Like James, Frost was instinctively "pluralistic" and sought to combine naturalism with idealism, physics with metaphysics and skepticism with mysticism. This characteristic of Frost's mind would manifest itself throughout the rest of his private, public and poetic
existence, and would continue to produce inconsistencies that puzzled not only his family and readers, but himself as well.  

During the spring semester of Frost's second year at Harvard, he was burdened with personal problems that resulted in his leaving Harvard before the term was completed. His wife was expecting their second child, and was becoming more dependent upon him. At the same time he developed a recurrence of an illness he had suffered the previous summer which the doctor had indicated could have been tuberculosis.

Elinor's frequent taunts to Robert about his spiritual beliefs provided a further test for him. Following the tragic death of their four-year old son Elliott in 1900, Frost blamed himself and declared this was God's punishment for failing to get medical help in time. Elinor suffered her grief with several days of characteristic silence. When she finally would speak to Frost she berated him severely for his self-pitying remorse and belittled his belief that there was such a thing as divine justice, or for that matter, any benevolent oversight of human affairs. Her bitterness influenced Frost and provided him with themes of disillusionment found in several of his poems. Her ridicule of his religious faith quite possibly motivated Frost to develop an ironic, spoofing manner about such matters.

One of Frost's closest friends throughout his life was the poet and anthologist Louis Untermeyer, with whom Frost shared many of his innermost feelings during many years of
correspondence. In a letter written to Untermeyer in 1920, ten years after the devasting loss of Elliott, Frost told him, "Elinor has just come out flat-footed against God. . . ." Frost had apparently countered mildly by suggesting the concept of a sort of Shelleyan compromise. She had insisted, "Nonsense and you know it's nonsense, Rob Frost, only you're afraid you'll have bad luck or lose your standing in the community if you speak your mind." Frost dealt with Elinor's outspoken agnosticism, coupled with his own inner debate between faith and skepticism by adopting a position of seeming neutrality. In yet another letter to Untermeyer, Frost elaborated upon the value of humor and irony for disarming critical attack:

I own any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. So is a twinkle. It keeps the reader from criticism. . . . Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke. We only joke about it to avoid an issue with someone to let someone know that we know he's there with his questions: to disarm him by seeming to have heard and done justice to his side of the standing argument. Humor is the most engaging
cowardice. With it myself I have been able to hold some of the enemy in play far out of gunshot.  

The years following Elliott's death were discouraging ones for Frost. He tried several ventures in farming and raising chickens. Having suffered several bouts with pneumonia throughout his life, and perhaps even tuberculosis, he was always fraught with chronic weakness of health. During this period his health again declined, and he was more and more inclined toward moments of darkness. He was bothered by his apparent lack of success as a farmer-poultryman-poet and by Elinor's growing indifference to his efforts. During this period he was rescued from total despondency by the words of Thoreau and Emerson, which inspired Frost to see his farmwork as a symbol of hope and as a reason for cherishing and caring for the world around him. Frost was attracted to Thoreau's idea that simply contemplating the facts around us is a form of worship. Emerson expressed the thought even more appealingly when he spoke of prayer as "the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. . . . As soon as the man is at one with God . . . he will then see prayer in all action." These words were the very encouragement Frost needed. He never completely aligned himself with the Transcendentalists, and frequently denied that he was one. Yet he did adopt certain aspects of this philosophy; for example, the notion
that any "fact" may be viewed as a symbol, or evidence, of a divine plan. To him the transcendentalist example amounted to a pragmatic method of upholding metaphysical idealism while justifying a somewhat less strict interpretation of theological doctrine. Frost came to see a kindred goal among transcendentalists, pragmatists and Christians: spiritual salvation and eternal life. This discovery marked the beginning of a slow ascent toward a personal resolution of some of the conflicting ideas that had troubled him in the past.

Frost found further encouragement several years later. In 1911 he had accepted a teaching position in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Though he and his family lived there for only a year, it would prove to be a significant period. Many years before he had dismayed his mother by declaring himself a freethinker and had espoused the Shelleyan concept of rebellion against conventions. Now, with a gradual increase in self-confidence, Frost was growing more comfortable in asserting his originality in thought as he dealt with various arguments against orthodox Christian belief. From the other side his exposure to the ideas of James, Thoreau and Emerson had already begun to provide the ideal approach to handling the skepticism he found in his wife, his friends, and in himself. While in Plymouth Frost discovered a work that reinforced the philosophy that was becoming so uniquely his own. In a newly published American translation of Creative Evolution by Henri Bergson he found
poetic images for endowing with spiritual meanings the scientific theories of the evolutionists. Frost was impressed with Bergson's insistence that life forces cannot be explained in purely materialistic terms, and that the life spirit is a dynamic and creative one that transcends matter. Frost particularly liked Bergson's metaphor of the flowing stream of matter moving ever downward while the life force resisting it tries to climb back upward, through matter, toward the Source. To Bergson the chief hindrances to this life force are the scientific and analytical pretensions of the intellect. This idea was quite congenial with Frost's own leanings toward instinct over intellect. Frost was further impressed by Bergson's claim that it is the creative individual—the poet—who is always helping man to achieve the proper responses through spiritual change and growth to secure freedom from the enslavement of matter.

Frost's friend, the Reverend William Hayes Ward, a devout Congregationalist, found the new book a thoroughly atheistic tract. Offended by the inflexibility of Ward's beliefs, Frost defended Bergson's position even more strongly. Endeavoring to restore his faith after the days of his disillusionment and temporary religious unbelief, Frost found that the corroboration of the thinking of Bergson and James, along with its kinship to the idealism of Thoreau and Emerson, provided him an approach that allowed him to maintain both the optimism of his childhood beliefs and a position of skepticism.44
While teaching at Plymouth, Frost also read James's *Pragmatism.* Frost perceived James's goal in that book as being at one with Bergson's: to uphold a point of view which is neither purely Christian nor purely scientific, but which is founded on a practical observation of the facts. *Pragmatism* appealed to Frost. He had the need to construct a belief in the assurance that God was in his Heaven and all was right—at least with Frost's world. He wanted to be able, like James, to carve out a highly individualized place for himself from which he could aim his criticism at the misuse of the intellect by logicians, materialists and dogmatic Christian system-builders.45

Frost's rebellious tendency to criticize both scientists and theologians is reflected in some remarks he made over a period of several years regarding his feelings about scientists. He admitted in a letter to Untermeyer in 1917 that he liked to see "our theories knocked into cocked hats."46 Admiring Bergson for his distrust of scientific reasoning and the scientific concept of time, Frost was equally approving of the views of the French naturalist Jean Henri Fabre. The publication of Fabre's *The Hunting Wasps* had attracted attention in America by its doubt of evolution as a credible scientific theory. Frost admired both men for their ability to attack cherished scientific hypotheses, and told Untermeyer, "What I like about Bergson and Fabre is that they have bothered our evolutionism so much with the cases of instinct they have brought up."
Frost's equal distrust of strict religionists is revealed in his admiration for Emerson's poem, "Uriel." He referred to it as "the greatest poem written in America" in a letter to his friend Wilbert Snow, and as "the greatest Western poem yet" years later in *A Masque of Reason*. In Uriel Frost found his own rebelliousness idealized, for Uriel attacked dogma in general and religious dogma in particular. Like Uriel, an angel who attempted to correct false notions regarding the natural laws of God, Frost liked to oppose the blindness of complacent thought, and to speak with scornful voice "against those who misunderstood . . . the God in whom he believed." Many years later, in a talk given at Bread Loaf English School in Breadloaf, Vermont, in 1948, Frost described sectarian theology with the metaphor of an animated egg beater, which he pantomined, saying, "Religion's the froth. All froth." In the same year he remarked to Reginald Cook that religion occurs when we can aspire to a "full consent," but that we can't do this if we are loaded down with dogma and infected with superstition. Insisting that the key word is "aspiration," he added that religion is "a straining of the spirit forward to a wisdom beyond wisdom."

One of the evidences of Frost's refusal to conform was his disinclination to get involved in futile arguments about such matters as politics or religion. In a letter to his good friend Sydney Cox in 1926, he described his philosophical reasons for resisting debate:
Clash is all very well for coming lawyers, politicians and theologians. But I should think there should be a whole realm or plane above that—all sight and insight, perception, intuition, rapture. . . . Having ideas that are neither pro nor con is the happy thing. Get up there high enough and the differences that make controversy become only the two legs of a body the weight of which is on one in one period, on the other in the next. . . . I should think too much of myself to let any teacher fool me into taking sides on any one of those oppositions. . . . I have wanted to find ways to transcend the strife-method. I have found some. . . . It is not so much anti-conflict as it is something beyond conflict—such as poetry and religion that is not just theological dialectic.52

This letter to Cox, with its emphasis upon the importance of intuition in transcending conflict, offers some understanding of apparent ambiguities in some of Frost's poems. Three years after Frost wrote the letter, Cox himself commented further upon the poet's thinking:
He doesn't reason geometrically or arithmetically. He declines argument. He shows his preserved ordinary manhood in resisting the convention of intellectuality, that truth is arrived at by a metronomic swaying between pros and cons. He says, "The trouble with philosophers is that they are always trying to reduce life to one thing."\textsuperscript{53}

In his old age Frost was still maintaining this position. In a televised interview on "Meet the Press" in December of 1956, he declared, "No poet can honestly have one and only one philosophy running through all his work. It's all a matter of mood."\textsuperscript{54} Elizabeth Isaacs places much importance upon this aspect of what she calls the "centrality" of Frost. Like Thompson she finds this tendency to avoid extreme viewpoints a result of the lasting effect of a childhood with a volatile, but nevertheless rationalistic, father, and an indulgent, emotionally religious mother. Through it all Frost developed an early capacity for synthesizing the opposing influences in his life. His decision to "steer a middle course" enabled him to apply certain "checks and balances" of skepticism whenever he feared he was near a rash judgment of acceptance or denial. Isaacs further contends that "the majority of Frost's poems celebrate this conflict and exult in the evenly-matched elements which he recognized within his own spirit." Even
in his humor, she continues, this "theory of opposites" is apparent, and paradox is more than just part of the mood of the poem—it is the whole reason for it.55

In the letter to Untermeyer, expressing his admiration for Bergson and Fabre, Frost also made an illuminating remark about his use of "opposites" to achieve subtlety of expression:

You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate—that almost but don't quite formulate. I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious. The casual enough person would assume I meant nothing or else I came near enough meaning something he was familiar with to mean it for all practical purposes.56

Frost himself coined the word "ulteriority" to describe his way of saying one thing and meaning another. For him all of poetry was "hinting." His extensive use of metaphor is well-known, but it is important to note that his subtle mastery of it brings to his poetry a uniquely deceptive simplicity, often missed by the casual reader. For this reason Frost has at times been mistaken for a forthright
poet dealing only in statement of fact, who does not need to be read as closely as T. S. Eliot or Wallace Steven. The truth is that Frost is never completely free from complexity, irony or whim. Though his is serious poetry, "he doesn't stay on the plane of high seriousness. He keeps cutting traverse all planes." This characteristic of his poetry must be kept in mind. Otherwise, it is all too easy not just to underinterpret Frost's poems but to overinterpret them.

During the ten years that Frost spent farming, he was also writing poems, and was able to sell them to various periodicals and literary magazines. By the time he sold his farm in Derry, New Hampshire, in 1911, he was relatively independent financially, and was as confident as he had ever been regarding his right to try making a name for himself as a poet. In the summer of 1912, Robert and Elinor Frost and their four children sailed for England. During their two and a half years there Frost's first two books of poetry, A Boy's Will and North of Boston, were published. When he returned to the United States in February of 1915, he was surprised to find himself a well-known, already controversial, poet.

His earliest works reflect the complex character of the man, and this complexity runs through the whole collection of his poems. Throughout his career, even in the wake of multiple personal tragedies, Frost's philosophical outlook remained essentially unchanged. In a letter written in
1938, Frost responded to Bernard de Voto's apparent reference to "negative" aspects of change in Frost's personality and views in later life. Because the letter constitutes such a clear expression of Frost's views and is a rare example of his seeming not to hide behind ironic suggestion, a major portion of it is reproduced here (spelling and punctuation intact):

... If just because I once said, "They would not find me changed from him they knew / Only more sure of all I thought was true," they needn't work up a theory that my philosophy is altogether static. Any decent philosophy and all philosophy has to be largely static. Else what would there be to distinguish it from science: It is the same with religion: It must be the same yesterday today and forever. The only part of Genesis that has changed in three thousand years and become ridiculous is the science in it. The religion stands. My philosophy, non-Platonic but none-the-less a tenable one, I hold more or less unbroken from youth to age. But it wouldn't be fair to my flesh and temper to say that I am always tiresomely the same frost I was when winter came on last year. You must have marked changes coming over me this summer. Who cares whether they were for the worse or not? ... One of the greatest changes my nature has undergone is of
record in To Earthward and indeed elsewhere for the discerning. In my school days I simply could not go on and do the best I could with a copy book I had once blotted. I began life wanting perfection and determined to have it. I got so I ceased to expect it and could do without it. Now I find I actually crave the flaws of human handiwork. I gloat over imperfection. Look out for me. You as a critic and psychoanalyst will know how to do that. Nevertheless I'm telling you something in a self-conscious moment that may throw light on every page of my writing for what it is worth.61

In old age Frost seemed to retain a composed attitude about the "human condition." Yet, though he was not unduly critical of scientific effort itself, he was convinced that as man became more sophisticated in science and technology he became "less and less capable of reason, wisdom and love."62 When analyzing poems that seem especially cynical about scientific endeavors, it is worth remembering Frost's remarks on the subject in a letter to Louis Cohn in 1951:

We ought not put on humanistic airs to make fun of science because though it can postpone death, it can't do away with death. I for one, I am willing to be under obligation to it for postponing
death. I count every year beyond the
time I had pneumonia in 1906 as velvet.
I had hardly accomplished a thing then
that I had in my heart if not in my mind
to do.

No we mustn't forget to give science
its due. It is much though not everything
that it prolongs my individual life and
yours. It is much though far from every­
thing that it maintains the human race on
the planet beyond all expectation.63

Thompson observes that the "pagan" side of Frost's
divided consciousness caused him to react to obsessive
religious assertions in others, among whom was his friend,
G. R. Elliott.64 Yet it was to Elliott that Frost wrote
the following words in a "deathbed letter," on Jan. 14,
1963:

Why will the quidnuncs always be hoping
for a salvation man will never have from
anyone but God? I was just saying today
how Christ posed himself the whole prob­
lem and died for it.65

Thompson contends that anyone who is puzzled over Frost's
"inconsistencies" regarding his religious convictions "might
do well to start by working backward from this last
letter."66
When Robert Frost died on January 29, 1963, he was eighty-eight years old. The memorial service in February was attended by 700 guests, including Chief Justice of the United States, Earl Warren, and many of the poets, politicians, relatives and friends who had been moved by his verse. The Rt. Rev. Henry Wise Hobson, a close friend who well understood the character of Robert Frost, delivered remarks which are worth quoting for the insights they provide:

... His chief quarrel with dogmatic and traditional orthodoxy was that it too often tells us what we should and must think and hereby deprives us of the discovery of the truths through the process of doing a lot of hard thinking for ourselves. He was against dogma and routine because he saw so many people go to sleep in it. ... 

Robert Frost's search for truth was constant and unwavering. He believed that the source of all truth is God, and the passion of his life was to discover more truth. ... 

Yet he never felt it was possible to gain more than a very partial knowledge of the whole truth. ... He sought for
more light but even when it seemed dim, he bravely went forward to use what light he had. 68

This brief account of Frost's life points out the major events that contributed to the formation of the complex personality behind his poetry. The family conflicts of Frost's youth helped create a sensitivity to the subtleties of life's many paradoxes. An early exposure to a mystical form of religion, and, at the same time, to a highly intellectual mode of thinking, both inspired by his doting, indulgent mother, led to a natural tendency toward questioning and introspection. His later encounter with new scientific hypotheses, coupled with his deep need for spiritual reassurance, simply reinforced the pattern of independent thinking, already begun, which characterizes Frost and his work. Exploring Frost's "divided consciousness" and his method of dealing with the contradictions in his life is helpful toward understanding the contradictions found throughout his poetry. Having had the opportunity to "know" the poet a little better, it is less tempting to make hasty conclusions about the "dark" themes or the irreverent tones in so much of his work. The disturbing questions he dared to ask were his method of eliciting from his readers the same degree of intellectual integrity and disciplined self-discovery that he demanded of himself.
The Poetry: Four Aspects

1. Contraries

One of the most consistent elements in Frost's work is paradox. Interpretation of poems so often characterized by subtlety and innuendo is complicated by their frequent use of contradiction. In many poems Frost deals with pairs of opposites, or "contraries." Such opposites are most important to his central themes when the opposites involve philosophical or religious categories. This section will examine poems that illustrate Frost's sensitivity to his own "contraries" and the method of resolution he devised for dealing with spiritual paradox.

We have seen Frost's personal confrontation with concepts that challenged his religious faith. The poems in his fifth book, West-Running Brook, are full of suggestions of that faith. Here, as elsewhere, Frost hints with skillful subtlety at his beliefs, maintaining a religious, though rather nonconformist, personal doctrine. It is in this book, however, that he deals most specifically with the contrary aspects of his divided consciousness.

Frost's awareness of his own confusion provided him with a particular gift for recognizing as a common one the problem of spirituality versus rationality. He was especially adept at incorporating this conflict into metaphorical
scenarios relating human weakness and foibles in everyday situations. One such metaphor involves a person who, in trying to carry too many bundles in his arms at one time, finds he cannot manage for very long without dropping them all. His lyric poem, "The Armful," was inspired chiefly by his increasing frustration at family demands and chores that distracted him from his writing. As is the case with many of Frost's poems, the central metaphor invites a metaphysical interpretation as well:

For every parcel I stoop down to seize
I lose some other off my arms and knees,
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns—
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast.
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
Then sit down in the middle of them all.
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load.

This poem is a literal description of conflict between family and career, but it is also a statement of deeper significance. Frost's reference to "extremes too hard to comprehend at once," and to his unwillingness to "leave behind" any of them suggests the "divided consciousness" that frequently confused him. His dropping of the armful and
attempting to "stack them in a better load" is an appropriate metaphorical suggestion of his habit of "rethinking" concepts in order to arrive at an acceptable synthesis of opposing ideas.

During the year in which "The Armful" was written, Frost began to accumulate several more poems and he began to organize them for publication as West-Running Brook. He structured these poems to illustrate various ways of viewing the "contraries" that complicate the human condition. The original book was divided into six sections, one entitled "My Native Simile," followed by the caption, "The seven-fold sophie [wisdom] of Minerve." This rather obscure motto, borrowed from the sixteenth-century poet Nicholas Grimald, provides a clue to Frost's metaphorical meaning of the expression "native simile," in the first poem in that section, "The Door in the Dark:"

In going from room to room in the dark
I reached out blindly to save my face,
But neglected, however lightly, to lace
My fingers and close my arms in an arc.
A slim door got in past my guard,
And hit me a blow in the head so hard
I had my native simile jarred.
So people and things don't pair anymore.
With what they used to pair with before.

As in "The Armful," Frost here deals with a situation in which one is forced to reorder his past ways. There is
significance in the fact that the blow was a painful one, and that, his "native simile" having been "jarred," the old ideas and concepts no longer matched or "paired." Frost's own difficulties in confronting new ideas, and his earlier period of religious doubt, reinforced by his wife's bitter taunts, indicate the probable inspiration for the deeper meaning of this poem, suggested by the metaphor of a literal situation which may also have been an occurrence in Frost's life. The poem is simultaneously humorous and serious, a consistent characteristic of his poems. While it describes an almost comical scene, it speaks in earnest of the painful process of acquiring new wisdom through the experience of discovering that truth is sometimes other than that which we had formerly perceived it to be.

The last poem of this section is "The Bear," another example of Frost's style, mingling humor with subtle seriousness. The narrative describes a big bear, lumbering with "uncaged progress" through the woods. Making effective use of rhymed couplets, Frost conveys another example of "contraries." In implying an ironic juxtaposition of human and animal behavior, Frost illustrates how man has caged himself by his chronic discontent with limited knowledge:

The world has room to make a bear feel free;
The universe seems cramped to you and me.
Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage,
That all day fights a nervous inward rage . . .
His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.
He paces back and forth and never rests
The toenail click and shuffle of his feet,
The telescope at one end of his beat,
And at the other end the microscope,
Two instruments of almost equal hope. 8

Describing the societal tendency to sway, pendulum-style,
from one extreme trend to another, Frost continues:

Or if he rests from scientific tread,
'Tis only to sit back and sway his head
Through ninety-odd degrees of arc, it seems
Between two metaphysical extremes.

And back and forth he sways from cheek to cheek
At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,
At the other agreeing with another Greek,
Which may be thought, but only so to speak. 9

As in "The Armful" the humorous tone of this poem conveys a
satirical thrust at those who cannot, or will not, establish
some kind of balance between extreme points of view. "The
Bear" is also a scathing commentary on the arrogance of
man's quest for scientific knowledge. Frost chose to end
the section with this poem so that this charge against his
favorite target, though subtle, should linger in the minds
of his readers. 10

In the middle of the third section of West-Running
Brook Frost placed the title poem, giving it strategic and
thematic significance. "West-Running Brook," a unifying study of contraries, is a dialogue between a husband and his wife who have discovered a brook that runs westward, rather than eastward toward the sea. They notice at one point "The black stream, catching on a sunken rock, / Flung backward on itself in one white wave." These lines signal the key message of the poem, elaborated by Fred, the husband:

Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The strength of everything that runs away.

While the poem appears to endorse the general outline of Darwinian theory, in Fred's description of the way the wave runs counter to itself, Frost is reflecting the imagery of Bergson's Creative Evolution. Bergson, as we have seen, described life as a counter-force to the downward flow of matter: "Life as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrusts it into the world, will appear as a wave which rises, and which is opposed by the descending movement of matter." In this poem Frost, consistent with his own contrary resistance to prevailing trends, expressed skepticism of the deterministic materialism found in modern scientific
theories. In a later passage Frost characterizes the main current of the stream that "spends to nothingness." Then, like Bergson's insistence upon the capacity of the human spirit to resist the downward flow of energy, the contrary wave resists the current.

It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love—
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness—and unresolved,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred.14

Although parts of this poem seem to reflect Frost's personal rebelliousness, the suggestion of faith is, nevertheless, prominent in his description of that "strange resistance" with the capacity to overcome the "cataract of death / That spends to nothingness." The "regret" that "... were sacred" is one of Frost's more obscure references, but it is not unlikely that he is recalling the sadness and pain that often accompanies the effort, in the lifelong search for truth, to resist the downward flow. Near the end of the poem, Frost reiterates his belief that "this life-force exists in the human spirit:

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.15

What is particularly interesting about the water imagery in this poem is that the brook contains the suggestion both of "flow" and of "counter-flow." Here, unlike the single-layered symbolism of water in the poem "Directive," in which the water is a source of salvation, Frost is employing his familiar "contraries" to depict the larger human conflict between matter and spirit. In light of Frost's concern with the effects of Darwinism upon theological thought, it is a logical conjecture that he is depicting the deterministic view of the evolutionary scientists in the mainstream flow of the brook. Yet he continues to defend the hope that this materialism can be overcome by the intuitive power of the human spirit. Most significantly, however, Frost is not merely attributing this power to man alone, but is careful to explain that we are driven in this "backward motion toward the Source." The movement backward is, in fact, "the tribute" of the stream to this "source." Here he makes clear his conviction that our sense of spiritual awareness, that "tribute," is "most in us."

The poem is a dialogue between Fred and his wife. They speak in an atmosphere of mild contradiction; continuing a gentle argument over the significance of this wave "flung backward on itself." At one point Fred remarks that "It wasn't waved to us," and his wife counters, "It wasn't, yet
it was. If not to you, / It was to me—in an annunciation."
Later Fred tells her, "It is your brook! I have no more to
say." Here again his wife counters him by insisting, "Yes,
you have, too. Go on. You thought of something." It is
worth noting the contrast in the tone of Fred's speeches
and those of his wife's. While his remarks are matter-of-
fact or darkly mystical observations, the comments of his
wife have an air of the sentimentally romantic. This kind
of good-natured rebuttal continues to the very end of the
poem, and, in fact, provides a reinforcement of the "con-
trariety" that Frost has intended the reader to perceive.
Following Fred's philosophical discourse regarding "this
in nature," which "we are from," and which is "most us,"
his wife remarks, this time with a hint of wry mock-
earnestness, "Today will be the day / You said so." Here
it is Fred who counters her, by saying, "No, today will be
the day / You said the brook was called West-Running-Brook."
There is a sense of rising action in this debate, which
Frost neatly, and purposefully, has designed to lead to a
final statement. Consistent with his aim in finding a con-
ciliatory solution to the problem of conflicting, yet valid,
arguments, he caps the discussion with the dramatic simplic-
ity of the words of Fred's wife: "Today," she quietly con-
cludes, "will be the day of what we both said."

In this remarkable poem Frost has dealt with a complex
issue that he knows is of concern, not only to himself, but
to all of humanity. The poem is a reconciliation, arrived
at by Frost's acceptance of the paradoxical nature of human existence. In addition to the theme of acceptance in this poem is the underlying message of mutuality and trust set forth early in the dialogue, when Fred's wife speculates that "It must be the brook / Can trust itself to go by contraries / The way I can with you--and you with me." This note of implied affirmation can be found throughout Frost's poetry. Often the antagonist-dialecticians are bodies of ideas as when he conveys, through subtility and understatement, his tenacious belief in a higher spiritual law, while at the same time acknowledging the validity of scientific and materialistic reality.

A later example of Frost's theme of "contraries" is found in his last book, In the Clearing, in the poem "Quandary." Here Frost displays his mastery at treating a serious subject by apparent spoofing. Again he deals with the antithetical notions of reason and intuition. In a unique and unlikely choice of metaphors, Frost contrasts the value of "brains" versus "sweetbreads." He first describes, ironically, the intrinsic function of human reason:

It was by having been contrasted
That good and bad so long has lasted.
That's why discrimination reigns.
That's why we need a lot of brains
If only to discriminate
'Twixt what to love and what to hate.
Further on, however, he alludes to the possibility that intelligence alone is not enough:

We learned from the forbidden fruit
For brains there is no substitute.
"Unless it's sweetbreads," you suggest
With innuendo I detest.
You drive me to confess in ink:
Once I was fool enough to think
That brains and sweetbreads were the same,
Till I was caught and put to shame,
First by a butcher, then a cook,
Then by a scientific book.
But 'twas by making sweetbreads do
I passed with such a high I.Q. 23

There is a deeper significance in this poem than the apparent inanity suggested in terms of animal organs and exotic cuisine. Frost's reference to "brains," both literally as a food source, and metaphorically as the center of reason, is fairly clear. His choice of "sweetbreads," which are actually the thymus, or pancreas, is better understood if one knows that that region of the body was regarded by Classical anatomists as the seat of emotions. 24 Frost's metaphor is useful for describing two sets of "contraries." On the one level is the simple argument over the relative merits of "heart versus mind." The debate becomes more complex when the issue involves dependence upon one or the other
to make moral decisions. Frost consistently affirms his acceptance of the duality of human nature, and is acutely aware that it is frequently difficult "to discriminate / 'Twixt what to love and what to hate." Yet he concludes the poem with a declaration that "... 'twas by making sweet-breads do / I passed with such a high I.Q." It is quite apparent, therefore, that he wants the reader to know of his belief in reliance upon intuition in making decisions, pragmatic or moral, and that he is fully confident that one can easily "make do" that way.

In a work he had in progress, but apparently never finished, Frost makes a particularly vivid statement of his own "trust ... to go by contraries." The poem is repeated here as it was reproduced in the Washington Post on March 27, 1947, in its uncompleted, rough-draft form:

Tendencies Cancel
If any tendential force
Ever Ran out its logical course
The alarmist might well be scared
There were reason for being
But tendencies seem to be paired
And there seems to be provision
The pairs shall be in collision
And many collisions shall lace
Entangle and mass in space
To make a bristling sun.
It's then comes in the One.
Thats [sic] where the One comes in
He has let the action begin
And let a lot get done
And been at no least expense

"The One" here is an obvious reference to God. It is noteworthy that Frost first introduces the notion of "the pairs," describing their "collisions" which "Entangle . . . in space / To make a bristling sun." Only then, according to the poet, "comes in the One." This assertion by Frost is closely related to his belief in Eternal Truth as a "continuing dialectic of opposites." His concept of universal opposites was partially influenced by his boyhood exposure to the fundamental Puritan concept of the struggle between Good and Evil. In his "Introduction" to The Autobiography of Sarah N. Cleghorn, he wrote about "the strain we may have been under for years trying to decide between God and the Devil . . ." and "between endless other things in pairs ordained to everlasting opposition."27

Throughout his life Frost maintained a strong interest in man's dilemma of having to cope with a world of evil and suffering which, nevertheless, is supposedly ruled by a merciful God. This concern provides a major theme in many of his poems of apparent disillusionment. The "Masque of Reason," for example, is an extremely enigmatic poem, containing passages that, to the casual reader, might appear highly irreverent, even heretical. It is easier to
understand some of Frost's grim references if one can remem-
ber that he was strongly influenced by the Puritan tenet
that man is a mere human, living in a world ruled by an
"arbitrary God,"28 and that "Earth's a hard place in which
to save the soul."29 In practically these identical words, he has Job's wife declare: "Job says there's no such thing
as Earth's becoming / An easier place for man to save his
soul in."30 Frost is not voicing despair. He is simply
accepting the inevitability of the "contrary" aspects of
a dualistic universe.

In his 1941 poem, "The Lesson for Today," Frost grants
that the very "groundwork of all faith is human woe,"31 but
he also notes a distinction. First he observes that "space
ails us moderns: we are sick with space. / Its contem-
plation makes us out as small / As a brief epidemic of
microbes. . . ."32 He then broadens his point by illus-
trating that man is just as humble in his pursuit of spiri-
tual answers as he is in his search for scientific dis-
covery:

You were belittled into vilest worms
God hardly tolerated with his feet;
Which comes to the same thing in different terms.
We both are the belittled race,
One as compared with God and one with space.
I had thought ours the more profound disgrace,
But doubtless this was only my conceit.
The cloister and the observatory saint
Take comfort in about the same complaint.  
So science and religion really meet.\textsuperscript{33}  

By now we are sufficiently aware of Frost's creative approach to his notion of "contraries." Bearing in mind the influences from Frost's earlier life, we can better understand the basis for his seemingly ambivalent stance. Frost was not one to remain content with a mere awareness of the "contraries" in his life. Through his poetry he sought to express a reconciliation of opposing ideas and stubbornly refused to accept any extreme point of view. According to the critic Jay Martin, Frost's ability to find equal arguments for and against almost any kind of "absolute" was partially influenced by John Dewey, who asserted that the individual must free himself and his mind from older absolutist systems. Frost was aware of his own "will to believe," but he persisted in an "unwillingness to look through a chance universe to a comforting system of absolutes."\textsuperscript{34} Throughout his poetic career Frost maintained a stubborn insistence upon being "unwilling to explain."\textsuperscript{35}
2. Doubt and Affirmation

In this section we will examine two groups of Frost's poems. The first group will be those that deal with religious doubt and appear to represent a skeptical side of Frost's nature. They range in tone from cynical, disillusioned despair in poems like "Stars," to pure satire in others, like "Masque of Reason," and "Forgive O Lord." The second group of poems, however, clearly affirms the poet's personal faith. Because each of these groups represents but a part of the mind of the poet, they need to be read and studied together. The skeptical poems, taken alone, might well indicate a pessimistic outlook. Yet, when we read them in context with the other, more affirmative, group, we begin to see the poetic purpose behind Frost's posing. At this point we begin to "get into the spirit" of what Frost is saying and how he is saying it. We can now feel that we are "getting used to" Frost's irony and the subtle tricks he is fond of playing on his readers. By reading the two groups together, we can be assured that Frost, when bitter, is not bitter for long. When he is in doubt, he doesn't stay there, because his own broad sense of perspective and his ultimate faith and optimism bring him back, at least to a central position.
Few would deny that "Stars" is a poem of disillusionment and, perhaps, despair. Frost's use of astral imagery throughout his poetry has various functions, but its occurrence here leaves little doubt, even at first glance, about mood. He is beholding the countless stars. While they may seem to be interested in human affairs, they are, in fact, quite detached and disinterested:

As if with keenness for our fate,

Our faltering few steps on

To white rest, and a place of rest

Invisible at dawn--

And yet with neither love nor hate,

Those stars like some snow-white

Minerva's snow-white marble eyes

Without the gift of sight.¹

Frost's meaning is further amplified by the circumstances that occurred in his life prior to the publication of the poem in A Boy's Will in 1913. There is evidence that it was written sometime during the year following the death of Frost's four-year old son Elliott in July of 1900.² Frost, as we know, was stricken with grief and unwarranted guilt, and was particularly vulnerable at this time to Elinor's declaration that there was no God, and that the world was "completely evil." This poem appeared in A Boy's Will under its simple title, but the gloss on it in the Table of Contents read, "There is no oversight of human
affairs,"³ a frank allusion to Elinor's words of denunciation. Despite Frost's overall optimism and belief in a benevolent, all-powerful God, this poem reveals Frost's disillusionment during this time. Although he subsequently recovered a more hopeful outlook, Elinor's cynicism about religion affected him, prompting his somewhat guarded, even defensive, posture about his own beliefs.⁴ One can readily identify lines of Frost's poems which, while appearing discreetly noncommittal, serve as evidence that he is addressing her atheistic contentions.⁵ An example of this can be found in the poem, "Goodby and Keep Cold," published in New Hampshire in 1923. Here Frost describes the chances of an orchard's surviving the harsh winter. He expresses his concern that he cannot be there to give the orchard his attention:

I wish I could promise to lie in the night
And think of an orchard's arboreal plight
When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
Its heart sinks lower under the sod.⁶

Up to this point Frost has suggested despondency, even hopelessness, about the orchard's "plight." But he concludes the poem with a single contradictory line, characteristically ironic and understated, that provides a resigned resolution: "But something has to be left to God."⁷ This last line was, in fact, Frost's answer to Elinor, who believed that there was less risk in leaving nothing to God, even to the point of viewing Him as non-existent.⁸
"Design," one of Frost's most controversial and disturbing poems, appeared in 1936, in *A Further Range*. In it Frost describes contemplating a fat white spider that is clutching the wings of a dead white moth on a white flower. The grimness of the scene in which the pitiful moth has fallen victim to the cunning spider is evoked by Frost's vivid description of these "assorted characters of death and blight." The white-imagery is repeated throughout the poem: "fat and white," "white heal-all," "white piece of . . . cloth," "snow-drop spider," "being white." In stark contrast to all this whiteness is the suggestion of the moth's having been "steered thither in the night," and the "dark" image suggested by Frost's enigmatic reference to the "design of darkness." Yet Frost's biographer, Lawrance Thompson, asserts that this poem is not an indication that Frost himself subscribed to so dark a point of view. Thompson cites the poem as an example of Frost's tendency to tease and mock certain religious views that he felt were sentimental to an absurd extreme. He contends that Frost had remembered lines of William C. Bryant's "To a Waterfowl:"

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky that certain flight . . .

and, in a mock echo, parodied them in lines 11 and 12 of "Design:"

What brought that kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
The frequency of parody and satire in Frost's poetry lends Thompson some support.

Thompson knew Frost quite well personally, and had access to information that provided a rather thorough knowledge of the poet's thoughts and beliefs. Throughout his comprehensive biographical and literary study of Frost, Thompson staunchly defends Frost's religious views as having been consistently affirmative. Thompson admits that Frost was "prey to dark moods which temporarily upset his religious affirmations," but maintains that, unlike Melville in his bitter chapter in *Moby Dick*, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Frost never fell to "the agony of luxuriating in blasphemous negations." This is an important point, but even more important is for the reader to be aware that Frost squarely and determinedly confronted, through his poetry, the questions and fears that have plagued mortals throughout history. One does not need to scrutinize Frost's religious orthodoxy to accept him as a truth-seeker. Certain poems examined later in this chapter are somewhat more obvious in their "spoofing" intent, and do not, therefore, have the same heretical tone that might be ascribed to the earnest-seeming "Design." It is easy to overinterpret the message in "Design," unless one remembers that Frost was never willing to take the easy way in his quest for honest answers. For many critics, Frost's reference to the "design of darkness to appall" is a troublesome phrase. Yet, if the entire second stanza of the poem is read as a whole, it is easily seen that Frost, as he so
often does, is merely asking the kind of questions that provoke the reader to think more deeply:

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 a thing so small.14

In this poem Frost is expressing not dismay, but acceptance that in Nature good and evil coexist. If one remembers Frost's strong convictions regarding the existence of evil, it is not difficult to see this poem as a further statement of his acceptance of it as a fact.

Another of Frost's poems, "For Once, Then, Something," has been called a companion piece to "Design," because of its similar metaphorical suggestion of "whiteness."15 The poem lacks the disturbing sinister tone of "Design," but is enigmatic in its own way. At the beginning Frost declares that "others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light. . . ."16 As we know, Frost had many critics who faulted him for lacking a more definitive spiritual statement in his poems. The following passage, in which the poet elaborates upon the thought initiated in the first two lines, is an example of the kind of expression that may have given his detractors some reason for their point of view:
. . . 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. 17

At this point Frost seems to be explaining his own inability, in seeking some glint of God's presence in nature, to see anything other than his own reflection with the heavenly sky above, godlike, at best. The skeptical note is maintained when Frost continues with a sort of confession about one time when he came as close as ever to "seeing"

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. 18

At this point Frost admits that this experience of attempting to see the vision clearly was unsuccessful, but he also tells why:

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. 19

The use of the word "rebuke" is, of course, wholly consistent with Frost's conviction that we can never understand with total clarity the mysteries of the universe. This feeling is the theme for a great many of his poems and will be
discussed at length in the next section. For now it is sufficient to be aware that Frost always seemed to have a notion that not only are we unable to understand these things completely but are also not supposed to. Again Frost is posing questions, for in the last two lines, he asks, "What was that whiteness? / Truth? A pebble of quartz?" Knowing no answer to these questions, he contents himself with the summation, "For once, then, something." In this poem, with its frank confession of a "blurred" vision of the "Truth" that the personna is seeking, Frost's message is, characteristically, a veiled one. But the tone of spiritual confusion is misleading, and should not be allowed to obscure the overriding spirit of affirmation that is evident as the poem ends.

In some of his poems Frost went further than merely to appear skeptical and enigmatic. "Masque of Reason" displays a drollery that to some must have seemed nothing less than blatant irreverence. Yet Frost wrote the poem with serious intent, despite his satirical treatment of its topic. A one-act play in blank verse of more than 450 lines, it deals with a theme especially important to Frost. Having suffered much frustration and sorrow during his own lifetime he had always been interested in the story of Job, a man who had to undergo a long period of undeserved adversity. The opportunity to explore the "reason" behind human suffering appealed to Frost, who chose, "audaciously, to fashion a 'forty-third chapter of Job.' The "audacious" manner in which the poet
describes the characters and the flippant tone of the dialogue account for the "irreverence" that we find in this unusual work.

In the opening scene the first two characters, "Man" and "His Wife" notice that a tree is on fire. They exchange comments as they discover the significance of this "strange light:"

MAN: . . . Yes, and look, the Tree is troubled. Someone's caught in the branches.
WIFE: So there is.
He can't get out.
MAN: He's loose! He's out!
WIFE: It's God.
I'd know him by Blake's picture anywhere.
Now what's he doing?
MAN: Pitching throne, I guess. 22

Here Frost's "play" approaches a level of humor that undoubtedly accounts for the frequent charge that he was taking a heretical stance in his work. The "stage directions" included in the text of the poem describe God making a decidedly undignified appearance and, as Job so wryly puts it, "pitching throne:"

The throne's a plywood flat, prefabricated,
That God pulls lightly upright on its hinges
And stands beside, supporting it in its place. 23

Frost's incongruous depiction of God in such an unseemly manner is exceeded in a subsequent scene when God is
interrupted in the middle of a sentence by the collapse of
this throne on which He is now sitting. At this point, "He
picks it up / And this time locks it up and leaves it."24
Still later in the poem, the Devil enters, and Job's wife
comments sarcastically, "Well, if we aren't all here, /
Including me, the only Dramatis / Personae needed to enact
the problem,"25 and then, in a moment of apparent spontaneity,
decides that this scene should be preserved in a snapshot:
"Wait till I get my Kodak.-- / Would you two please draw in
a little closer?"26 To those believing that any reference
to God, or even the Devil, must be serious, this depiction
of a meeting such as the one just described must have seemed
blasphemous and highly offensive.

Frost's "irreverence," however, is a prime example of
his "poetic playfulness," appropriately summarized by a
terse, untitled entry in his last book, In the Clearing:

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.27

As we have seen, Frost was capable, even among his
"skeptical" poems, of a wide range of mood and purpose. His
interest in the theme of skepticism is exemplified by the
appropriately entitled "Skeptic," which appeared in the 1947
publication of Steeple Bush. Yet the poem also contains a
subtle hint of religious affirmation, discernible through a
careful scrutiny of Frost's meaning. Because of this, the
poem serves as a thematic bridge, linking the opposite
notions of doubt and affirmation through Frost's unique way with contraries. The first of the three stanzas is the description of the poet addressing a faraway star, and concludes with his statement that "I don't believe I believe a thing you state. / I put no faith in the seeming facts of light." As usual Frost is deliberately vague as to whether he is assigning some religious significance to what the star seems to "state," or that the "seeming facts of light" refer to scientific theories. It is not unlikely that Frost is implying both at the same time, describing skepticism in an all-inclusive sense.

The irony of the title becomes apparent in the second stanza:

I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,
I don't believe you're anywhere near the last,
I don't believe what makes you red in the face
Is after explosion going away so fast.

Remembering Frost's reference in "West-Running Brook" to the materialists' notion of the "downward flow" of matter, it is not difficult to realize that Frost is also questioning any finiteness of space in this poem. In his own veiled manner his affirmation of spatial infinity hints at his belief in an Eternity. Mainly, however, he seems anxious to assure the reader that he is still avoiding dogmatic thought, for he concludes the poem with an equivocation of any conclusion one may have been about to reach prior to this point:
The universe may or may not be very immense.

As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt
To feel it close in tight against my sense
Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.

Understanding Frost's use of the word caul is helpful in
determining the intended tone of this poem. Defined as the
membrane that sometimes envelopes the head of a child at
birth, it was also formerly believed to bring good luck.

Lest the critic dismiss this poem as another form of "confession," in which Frost admits to a grim view of the cosmos,
the double significance of the closeness of this caul must
be noted. Frost has made his point subtly, and we must
remember that Frost repeatedly fills his work with wry senti-
ment. Some of his poems are more obviously intended as
satirical, containing irreverent or "blasphemous" jabs at
the spiritually complacent, and the intellectually complacent
as well. A poem with an apparent extreme earnestness should
be regarded with caution, for it is likely that Frost is
using mock-seriousness to bait those who attempt to inter-
pret it.

Reginald Cook has devoted some study to the nature and
motive of Frost's mischievous use of humor. He points out
that, in general, "the essense of humor consists in getting
the jump on the object of our laughter," and that "in Frost
it is expressed by his cutting an abstraction down to size
or in exaggerating the pretentious for the laughter it has
coming to it." Foremost in Frost's wit is the determination
to uncover "folly and stupidity." His humor is sharply pointed at "savantism of every persuasion, and he frequently satirizes cozy thoughts, smug rejoinders and adherents of the simple life—" Yet, according to Cook, there is no bitterness or anger in his humorous bites. It is not the scathing satire fed by external rancor. "His humor is the inner man surfacing and its origin is in the sanity of the senses." If one had only those poems of Frost's that seem particularly flippant or acerbic, he might reasonably assume that the poet were nothing but a cynic, a bitter wise-cracker. As Cook notes, however, Frost "mixes up his stuff," and it is important to consider Frost's humor as a means toward a greater goal.

Frost seemed to wear his charge of heresy and his oblique humor like badges of defiance. In a characteristically flippant explanation of his use of humor and ambiguity, Frost penned these lines which appear on the last page of his last book of poems, *In the Clearing*:

> It takes all sorts of in--and outdoor schooling.  
> To get adapted to my kind of fooling.

In contrast to the "skeptical" poems are those that express a strongly affirmative sentiment. The glimpse we have had of Frost's early life and of his personal philosophy reveals that the cynical was only one side of his complex personality. It certainly was not the most prominent. There is a large body of his poetry that reinforces the view that Frost's spiritual expression, though enigmatic,
proceeded from a deep and abiding faith. Some of his poems, in fact, seem almost simplistic, childlike declarations of his belief of a God in His Heaven. With these we must distinguish between mock-earnestness and genuine sincerity.

"A Prayer In Spring" is a good example of the pure and lyrical expression of affirmation of which Frost is capable. It suggests a sentimental romanticism similar to that of Wordsworth when he wrote, "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky:"\(^{35}\)

\[
\text{Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers;}
\text{And give us not to think so far away}
\text{As the uncertain harvest; keep us here}
\text{All simply in the springing of the year.}\(^ {36}\)
\]

This entreaty continues for three more stanzas, but it is the fourth one that brings into focus the appeal of Frost's expression of spontaneous awareness of the cooperative relationship between God and man:

\[
\text{For this is love and nothing else is love,}
\text{The which it is reserved for God above}
\text{To sanctify to what far ends He will,}
\text{But which it only needs that we fulfill.}\(^ {37}\)
\]

The devotional tone of this poem offers a dramatic contrast to the cynicism in "Stars," yet both appeared in Frost's first book, \textit{A Boy's Will}. While he was given to moments of disillusionment, he had the capacity to balance them with the pervasive lifelong faith, which he never really lost.
The last line tells us that man must act in a way that fulfills the "far ends" that God "wills," and reflects Frost's belief, noted in The Life of Robert Frost, that this cooperation is a "relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future." 

"A Soldier" is another of Frost's "affirmative" poems. Here Frost, telling of a man who has been killed in battle, uses the metaphor of the "fallen lance" to describe first the soldier then the limitations of man's perception of the cosmos:

If we who sight along it round the world,
See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
It is because like men we look too near,
Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
Our missiles always make too short an arc.

The theme of man's limited perception is consistent in Frost's poetry, but the striking message in these lines is his assertion of the immortality of the soul:

But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
Further than target ever showed or shone.

One of Frost's shorter poems, entitled "Not all There," is typical of him, for in the first stanza it appears to be expressing cynicism:

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there. 41

If Frost had ended the poem there, he would have left little doubt for those looking for agnosticism, but the ironic twist in the second stanza provides yet another example of Frost's mischievous ploy of "baiting" the reader, particularly the righteous or complacent one:

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh);

God found I wasn't there--
At least not over half. 42

The parenthetical admonition in the second line of the last stanza is further evidence of Frost's self-consciousness about expressions of religious conviction. By maintaining a flippant tone, he is freer to deliver his didactic assertion that man, in order for God to demonstrate His presence, must first become attentive before God.

As we have noted, star imagery appears frequently in the poetry of Frost, but does not always serve the same poetic purpose. The mood of "Take Something Like a Star" bears no similarity to the pessimism found in "Stars." The first six lines introduce the star being addressed, its "loftiness" justified by "some obscurity of cloud." Yet this obscurity, Frost insists, "will not do to say of night, / Since dark is what brings out your light. / Some mystery becomes the proud." 43 His suggestion that it is the contrast of darkness that lends the light its brilliance is another example of
Frost's use of opposites, and expresses his feeling that we need that balance in life between positive and negative aspects to keep us in a constant state of challenge and flux. The poet then implores the star to "say something to us we can learn / By heart and when alone repeat." The star, however, replies only, "I burn." When the poet again appeals to the star to "use language we can comprehend," the star "gives us strangely little aid."

As in so many of Frost's poems, the first part of this one sets up a situation, or "problem." The rest of the poem then states a contrasting idea, or solution to the problem presented in the first part. With line seventeen we begin to detect Frost's purpose. He admits that the star, for all its apparent reticence, "does tell us something in the end." The last few lines, with stoically moralistic overtones, reflecting, in part, Frost's Puritan upbringing, urge us to be strong of heart and mind:

And steadfast as Keat's Eremite,  
Not stooping from its sphere,  
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.

While Frost advocates active involvement in human affairs, he is opposed to excessive pride. At the heart of
Frost's perception of man's place in the universe is his ultimate humility. His poetry frequently echoes his feeling that "many men have the kind of wisdom that will do well enough in a day's work... But if they have religious natures, they constantly, inside, they constantly tremble a little with the fear of God." Evidence of this belief accumulates as more of Frost's poems of affirmation are examined.

The familiar shifting of moods found in Frost's poems of "contraries" and those expressing religious doubt, exist also in the affirmative ones. Gentle spoofing, sometimes aimed at himself, is found even in the poems that reveal his religious convictions. "Astrometaphysical" first appeared in Steeple Bush and contains numerous "examples of his steadfast spiritual purpose." Yet it is a good illustration, not only of Frost's spiritual inclination, but also of that "strategy of mirth" illustrated in the previous group of poems. The poem begins like a simple devotional:

    Lord, I have loved your sky,
    Be it said against or for me,
    Have loved it clear and high,
    Or low and stormy.

In the next stanza Frost continues his "prayer," but with the addition of that gentle self-mockery:

    Till I have reeled and stumbled
    From looking up too much,
And fallen and been humbled
To wear a crutch.\textsuperscript{51}

The last two stanzas exemplify that uniquely "Frostian" expression of consolation and hope regarding the afterlife:

It may not give me hope
That when I am translated
My scalp will in the cope
Be constellated.

But if that seems to tend
To my undue renown,
At least it ought to send
Me up, not down.\textsuperscript{52}

This is clearly not one of Frost's didactic poems, for he is mocking his own "undue renown." Making a joke of his having "stumbled / From looking up too much," he intends a light tone for the poem. Yet there is still the subtle implication of the last line, which conveys Frost's humble hope that his contribution as a poet will at least send him "up, not down."

Another poem in \textit{Steeple Bush}, "Innate Helium," for all its seeming simplicity, suggests Frost's perceptive understanding of human nature and human needs:

Religious faith is a most filling vapor.
It swirls occluded in us under tight Compression to uplift us out of weight--
As in those buoyant bird bones thin as paper,
To give them still more buoyancy in flight,
Some gas like helium must be innate.53

At first glance this poem might seem lacking in substance—a mere observation that religious faith is "nice" and "uplifting." The last line, however, gives us the clue that Frost is not just "fooling around" with words. In this brief poem he is clearly implying that faith—this "most filling vapor"—has the ability "to uplift us out of weight," effecting a spiritual buoyancy not unlike the physical capacity of birds, with their thin, hollow bones for flight. The notion of this innate "buoyancy" in man echoes William James's belief, embraced by Frost, that man possesses an inborn capacity for spirituality, exhibited by his instinct to pray.

In "Bereft" Frost's theme is the existence of potentially threatening forces in nature. His feeling of ominous uncertainty is suggested in the first two lines by the question, "Where had I heard this wind before / Change like this to a deeper roar?" He describes himself holding open a "restive door" as he looks down the hill toward a "frothy" shore, producing a sense of uneasiness. He speaks with finality and a hint of melancholy in the next line: "Summer was past and the day was past." This imagery is expanded when Frost observes that the "somber clouds in the west were massed."54 The dread that the reader has already begun to feel is intensified in the next few lines, which heighten the drama of the poem to its climax:
Out in the porch's sagging floor
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.\(^\text{55}\)

The snake metaphor is a masterful touch on Frost's part. On one hand he has evoked fears, reminiscent of those experienced upon seeing ghostly shadows in the semidarkness, which appear threatening mainly to the already anxious mind. Yet Frost has deftly laced this fear with a restorative touch of humor. After all, these are just leaves, and Frost does not intend us to see a literal description of a supernatural phenomenon. It is, instead, a satiric commentary by the poet on an emotional response to the circumstances. He lets us know this immediately, for he explains what is really going on here:

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.\(^\text{56}\)

To those who have seen the view held by Frost that we are all at the mercy of an "arbitrary God"\(^\text{57}\) who has ultimate control over the universe, the irony in this poem is obvious. The comic tone of the poem does not, however, disguise Frost's assertion regarding man's place in this universe: Sooner or later we are all vulnerable to forces or circumstances beyond our control. At those times, Frost
feels, we cannot go anywhere to "hide," but a more personal
God remains as a final refuge.

Frost's belief in ultimate dependence upon God, as
reflected in this poem, is at the heart of the poetic mes-
sage throughout his work. This notion of "dependence" is
intrinsic to his belief that we must become totally sub-
missive, while remaining content with an incomplete under-
standing of God's "mysterious ways." In some poems, as we
have seen, Frost has expressed this idea in such an insolent
manner that it is no surprise that he should have aroused
controversy among the more orthodox of his readers. Yet,
as we have also seen, his intent is neither to enrage nor
to offend. He is simply applying his own droll wit to a
serious insight.
3. Mystery

In dealing with the theological implications of Robert Frost's poems, it is helpful to examine his intense appreciation of the "mystery" of God's ways and the treatment of this theme in his poetry. An appreciation of this aspect of Frost's thought makes the issue of recurring "dark" themes easier to resolve. In this section we will find that Frost's message is not so much one of morbidity as of astringency, and that his humor is marked not with bitterness, but rather an ironic delight in his awareness of the ultimate inexplicability of the cosmos.

One of the most direct of Frost's poems is "The Fear of God." Its thirteen lines give the reader a clear idea of Frost's concept of that "fear" and something of his interpretation of God's nature:

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,
From being No one up to being Someone,
Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
You owe it to an arbitrary god
Whose mercy to you rather than to others
Won't bear too critical examination.
Stay unassuming. If for lack of license
To wear the uniform of who you are,
You should be tempted to make up for it
In a subordinating look or tone,
Beware of coming too much to the surface
And using for apparel what was meant
To be the curtain of the inmost soul.¹

In this poem, as in others, we see the strong influence of Frost's Puritan background and particularly the pious teachings of his mother. The poem is one of Frost's most definitive statements of his belief in humility and obedience to God. In an obvious reference to his own rise to literary prominence, he is reminding us, and himself, as well, that every success we enjoy is a result of God's mercy. There is a literal sense of "fear" in Frost's awareness that this mercy extended "to you rather than to others / Won't bear too critical examination." Furthermore, Frost contends, we must not try to look too closely for explanations for God's acts, for it is not intended for us to know these things. Of course, a reader responding selectively to the "heretical" Frost might be tempted to see God as a metaphor and the final advice as a point of psychology. But we find repeatedly in Frost's poetry such assertions as "Heaven gives its glimpse only to those / Not in a position to look too close."² With this in mind it is not difficult to understand the spirit with which Frost wrote his terse, two-line "The Secret Sits:"

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.³
Marjorie Cook has used this poem to illustrate Frost's role as a "general ironist." She points out that Frost's particular brand of irony, characterized by ambiguity and detachment, sets him up for the criticism that he lacks commitment, and that he is unable to "risk a faith." Yet, as Cook contends, there is little ambiguity in his poems relating to the mystery of the "silent omniscience." As she further observes, Frost's "vision of irony" has given him a "corrective skepticism of truth-as-dogma," well illustrated in his poems attacking polaristic thinking. Cook astutely perceives that Frost moves beyond irony to balance idealism and despair. She points out that he, " 'seeing the irony of the ironic stance,' knows that belief is best."

This assertion is reinforced by what we know to be at the core of Frost's personal faith: his belief not only in the omnipotence of God, but also His ultimate goodness. The metaphorical use of the circle in "The Secret Sits" is explained by Frost's own description of his view of the cosmos in an essay he wrote in 1959: "As a circle it has one center--Good."

Frost's perception of God, then, was of omnipotence, goodness, and, of course, mystery. The poem, "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" is one of Frost's most direct commentaries on the subject of God's deliberate elusiveness. The poem begins with a description of a person observing the sensation of the sun on his hand:
When I spread out my hand here today,
I catch no more than a ray
To feel between thumb and fingers;
No lasting effect of it lingers. 8

The physical simplicity of this scene later develops into a metaphor of powerful metaphysical suggestion. In the second stanza Frost makes one of his few allusions to the possible evolutionary beginnings of life:

There was one time and only the one
When dust really took in the sun;
And from that one intake of fire
All creatures still warmly suspire. 9

The impact of this poem, however, derives from his use of antithesis. Frost hastens to add in the third stanza that as for the notion of Biblical Creation, man "must not be too ready to scoff." The last two stanzas parallel the image suggested at the beginning, with the extended implication that the lasting effect of God's presence "persists as our faith:"

God once declared He was true
And then took the veil and withdrew,
And remember how final a hush
Then descended of old on the bush,
God once spoke to people by name.
The sun once imparted its flame.
One impulse persists as our breath;
The other persists as our faith. 10
Frost perceives both tangible and intangible "proofs" of God's existence. This sentiment of Frost, the poet-farmer, closely parallels, with the exception of Frost's reference to "coarseness," Emerson's description of a farmer's contemplation of the "facts" of nature:

... His worship is sympathetic; he has no present definitions, but he is commanded in nature by the living power which he feels to be there present. ... A beauty not explicable is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end of. It is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life which he worships with coarse, but sincere rites.11

In "Sitting by a Bush" Frost sounds almost evangelical. He is asserting that, although the Act of Creation was "one time and only the one," and the miraculous appearances of God, as they are said to have occurred in the Bible legends, no longer do so, the impulse of faith nevertheless "persists." As such, it is as much evidence of God's existence as is the continuation of the life on earth that He created.

If one is tempted to wonder if Frost is again employing ironic detachment and "playing" with the reader, his sincerity can be verified by an anecdote told by Frost's friend and fellow poet, Wilbert Snow, in his autobiography:
I tried to spoof him once about a poem of his entitled "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight," and quickly found that I had made a mistake and touched a tender chord. Only later did I learn of his superlative sensitivity. He even told me that he considered the account of man's creation as recorded in the first chapter of Genesis as no more miraculous than the combined factors of air, heat, light, moisture, climate, and other conditions brought into exact harmony to make life upon this planet possible.12

In this poem, as in countless others, Frost consistently defends the value of intuitive faith in overcoming the materialistic and rationalistic limits that man has placed upon himself. According to Thompson, Frost and John Milton shared a mutual adherence to the Christian notion of "right reason,"13 which included the belief in a benevolently-ordered universe, as well as the virtues of submission and obedience and a willingness to keep the "desire of knowledge within bounds."14 Understanding Frost's attempt to adhere to this tenet helps us interpret the seemingly uncommitted attitude reflected in some of his poems. Rather than a lack of commitment, it is more likely a puristic
expression of acceptance of what the poet felt to be the will of God. In the aptly titled "Acceptance," Frost qualifies his occasional theme of "darkness" as a desirable condition:

Now let the night be night too dark for all of me.
Let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. Let what will be, be.¹⁵

One of the most controversial examples of Frost's handling of this theme of acceptance is "A Masque of Reason," which we have already examined for its irreverent tone, exemplifying Frost's frequently misunderstood sense of "play." As we discovered, Frost had a specific motive for writing this work. "Masque of Reason" was unlike anything Frost had ever before written. Though entitled a "masque," it had little resemblance to the lavish productions of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. Its underlying motivation was probably more closely related to that of Milton's Paradise Lost. Though Frost never actually said that his purpose was to "justify the ways of God to Man," he did intend, "by retelling and extending familiar biblical stories in an engagingly witty fashion, to show men how to take the mysterious ways of God."¹⁶

This notion becomes apparent in the poem when Job asks God to explain if Heaven is essentially a "letup" from life's travails, and adds that it would be a comfort to man to be able to "calculate" an Eternal existence free from strife. To this God replies,
Yes, by and by. But first a larger matter.
I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.\(^{17}\)
Several lines later God gives Job an explanation that provides the overall theme for the poem: God's insistence that we must endure our troubles without always being able to comprehend any reason for them:

Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.\(^{18}\)

Further in the poem Job appeals to God for "some help about this reason problem."\(^{19}\) He asks God, "Why did you hurt me so? I am reduced / To asking flatly for the reason. . . ."\(^{20}\)

Then he finally tells God, "You could end this by simply coming out / And saying plainly and unequivocably / Whether there's any part of man immortal."\(^{21}\) Job's wife, characterized by the sardonic manner she maintains throughout the poem, announces, "You won't get any answers out of God."\(^{22}\)

This terse summation, like "The Secret Sits," epitomizes the apparent flippancy that Frost uses to disguise his most
serious and earnest conviction: Whether we like it or not, God is in a position to "let fools bemuse themselves / By being baffled for the sake of being." Though we may continue to "dance round in a ring and suppose," only "the Secret" . . . knows."

The dark/light imagery in "Acceptance" is also found in Frost's poetic dialogue, "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus." There are two predominant themes in this poem, one of which, the science versus faith question, dominates most of Frost's later poems and is the topic of the last section in this study. The other important theme in this poem is the necessity of "darkness," for the "light" to shine its brightest. The first speaker is a traveler who has knocked at a farmer's door one evening. The two engage in a gentle debate over the function of the stars, particularly an unusually bright one that they have noticed. The traveler, having observed the appearance of even "more stars to character the skies," points out that, unlike an electric light bulb or lamp, "their purpose is to flash and spark, / But not to take away the precious dark." He then elaborates his meaning, explaining the deeper philosophical implications of the metaphor:

We need the interruption of the night
To ease attention off when overtight,
To break our logic in too long a flight,
And ask us if our premises are right.
Frost's use of this imagery, which by now should be rather familiar to us, is somewhat reminiscent of the poem, "Take Something Like a Star," which was discussed in the Doubt and Affirmation section. In that poem Frost pointed out that the star is in no way obscured by night, "Since dark is what brings out your light." Amplifying his point, he asserted, "Some mystery becomes the proud."  

Frost had a keen awareness of the temptation of human pride, and was sensitive to this struggle within himself. "Dust in the Eyes" is a declaration of his willingness to be reminded of his place in the universe:

If as they say, some dust thrown in my eyes
Will keep my talk from getting overwise,
I'm not the one for putting off the proof.
Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
And blind me to a standstill if it must.

Similarly, in "Too Anxious for Rivers," Frost says that "It may be a mercy the dark closes round us / So broodingly soon in every direction." Here, however, the emphasis is a little different. Employing the metaphor of the river as our search for knowledge and understanding about our existence, Frost has admitted that, in the final analysis, "the river flows into the canyon / Of Ceasing-to-Question-What-Doesn't-Concern-Us, / as sooner or later we have to cease somewhere." The notion of forbidden discovery that was in "The Fear of God" is in this poem. It is also echoed
in an earlier one entitled "Misgiving." Here Frost has personified leaves as those who have initially declared their desire to follow the wind, but eventually tire and bid the wind to stay with them, instead. At one time during the height of spring, these leaves "had promised themselves this flight," but now "would fain seek sheltering wall, / Or thicket, or hollow place for the night." As though the title of the poem weren't enough to key the reader to Frost's message, his comparison of himself with the leaves in the last lines makes clear his misgiving regarding the endless pursuit of "the knowledge beyond the bounds of life:"

I only hope that when I am free
As they are free, to go in quest
Of the knowledge beyond the bounds of life
It may not seem better to me to rest.

In "Too Anxious for Rivers" Frost inserts, almost casually, the comment that there is "no place to get lost like too far in the distance." The offhandedness with which he alludes to getting lost does not give the reader a full picture of the significance of the lost/found concept in Frost's work. The theme of "lostness" is of primary importance in the highly controversial poem. "Directive." Before examining "Directive" at length, however, it is worthwhile to look briefly at the poem, "One Step Backward Taken," which appears immediately before it in Frost's 1947 book, Steeple Bush.
The persona in this poem is feeling the tremors of a world that seems literally to be crumbling around him. Frost first published this poem in 1946. He is likely reflecting the heightened world-awareness, after the first atomic bomb explosion the year before, of this very possibility. In any case, this persona does manage to regain his equanimity by a last minute strategic retreat:

Not only sands and gravels
Were once more on their travels,
By gulping muddy gallons
Great boulders off their balance
Bumped heads together dully
And started down the gully.
Whole capes caked off in slices.
I felt my standpoint shaken
In the universal crisis.
But with one step backward taken
I saved myself from going.
A world torn loose went by me.
Then the rain stopped and the blowing,
And the sun came out to dry me.

Frost has once again resolved his conflict by the use of ironic reversal. Countering the conventional and accepted notion of "progress," and by moving backward instead of forward, he has demonstrated an ability to regain a secure footing. While he is dealing literally with physical survival, he is also suggesting, metaphorically, mental,
emotional, and perhaps spiritual, salvation. The poem describes a spatial dimension that symbolizes a return to a more secure state of existence.

In "Directive," one of Frost's most complex and significant works, he is at his esoteric best. The poem could almost be described as "devious," because Frost, through a screen of sentimentality and a series of false clues, gives the reader an immediate sense of confusion, a mood thematically entwined with his message and inseparable from interpretation. The poem is of the same period as "One Step Backward Taken," and, according to Lawrance Thompson, its "genesis can be traced to the same sense of terrifying dislocation."

In the former poem, the speaker saved himself by spatial retreat; in "Directive" salvation is achieved by going on a "ritualized journey" back in time, but also "inward to levels of perception unaffected by external circumstances." Frost begins the poem with the reference to returning in time:

Back out of all this now too much for us
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail . . .

The mood of confusion and contradiction is suggested by the enigmatic description of the setting:

There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.

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.  

These lines serve as a clue to the reader that Frost has no intention of making this poem easily understood. Deliberate obscurity is tightly woven throughout the poem, and appropriately so, since its theme is the notion of "lostness."
The interpretive significance of this theme is evidenced by the fact that references to the lost/found concept appear six times: "Lost" is used three times, "find" appears twice, and "loss," once. Frost's treatment of the lost/found, lost/saved idea will be shown to echo Biblical passages from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Frost frequently derived his poetic abstractions from scriptural references, but in this case, his heavy reliance upon Biblical symbol has a potency that earns the poem a unique role in the process of understanding both the poet and his poetry.

Images of volumes of long-gone time are summoned first by signs of "the wear of iron wagon wheels," and then "the chisel work of an enormous Glacier / That braced his feet against the Arctic Pole." The reader is taken very far back indeed during this "serial ordeal," but Frost also manipulates the imagination by an eerie suggestion that a person who once used this road could very well be "just ahead of you on foot / Or creaking with a buggy load of grain." Frost's juxtaposition of time and space gives this poem the desired atmosphere of confusion. The reader
is, by now, aware of a sense of struggle, of lostness, and of uncertainty.

The scenario might seem to evoke allegorical accounts of a Christian, beset with peril and fear as he "journeys" toward spiritual salvation. This suspicion strengthens as, approaching the remnants of this deserted farm, the reader is told that "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." Stated here is the paradox of being able to find oneself only if one is lost enough, a concept found in Matthew 10:39: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." A similar passage appears in Luke 9:24.

There follows a description of "the children's house of make-believe, / Some scattered dishes underneath a pine, / The playthings in the playhouse of the children." The sentimental suggestion of childlike simplicity is then broken by Frost's abrupt turn to a more rueful mood in the very next lines:

Weep for what little things could make them glad.
Then for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.
This was no playhouse but a house in earnest. The doleful tone here makes clear that Frost is not just lamenting the loss of youth and innocence. These lines reflect much more than a casually melancholy sight of a
house, once the scene of vitality and human presence, now abandoned and lifeless. The whole of the human condition is on stage.

The next four lines, laden with symbolism, lead the reader closer to Frost's "directive:"

Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.45

The imagery in these lines is of special significance in properly interpreting this poem. "The source" that Frost speaks of is strongly allusive to that "source" to which he refers in "West-Running Brook" (discussed in the section on Contraries). Although he evades the metaphysical directness of his metaphor a little by describing the brook as "Cold as a spring as yet so near its source," the implication is clear that the reader's "destination and . . . destiny" are directly related to this source. The "source," as described in "West-Running Brook," gives us our life, spirit and an inner force to resist the limiting "flow" of material and physical existence. This idea is reinforced in the later poem by the description of the "source" as being "Too lofty and original to rage." Frost's diction here, as throughout his poetry, is intentionally precise. "Lofty," besides meaning "very high," also has the definition, "elevated, noble or sublime."46 The word, "original" has among its
synonyms the words, "first," "creative" and "new." It is obvious that Frost, through implication, is creating a picture of a very "God-like" "source." Although we know that the poet was not one to evangelize about his faith, the consistency with which he hints of it is too evident to be disregarded. Yet, though we might be tempted at this point to oversimplify the conclusion that Frost is conveying a purely Christian message, certain pieces of biographical evidence alter this possibility considerably. In a conversation between Frost and Hyde Cox shortly after the appearance of "Directive" in 1946 it was suggested that some readers had interpreted the poem as one of the most Christian of Frost's works. Frost countered with his own interpretation, in effect, that in the midst of the present moment which is often "too much for us," we are instructed to go back . . . to whatever source each of us has. This source may be a conventional religion, but, according to Frost, any religion is most valuable when something of our own selves has been contributed to it. According to Cox's notes, Frost continued that, "'it would be the poet's directive that one must go back to what he believes in his heart to be the source; and to the extent that he had saved something aside, removed from worldly experience--unpolluted, he would be able to contribute something himself.' "

The culmination of Frost's mastery of paradox is in the final lines of the poem, in which he incorporates a Biblical
passage and adapts it for his own thematic purpose:

I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
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 musn't. 49

The notion of "getting saved" brings to mind at least two specific passages in the Bible. In conjunction with Frost's earlier reference to children and the "children's house of make-believe," those who "can't get saved" might be suggestive of Matthew 18:3: "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." A similar account is found in Luke 18:17: "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Certainly, this interpretation is consistent with what we know to be Frost's insistence upon humility before God, and must be considered a part of what he is saying.

The children's game of hide-and-seek, at least as Frost mimics it, is not the mischievous frivolousness that we might have first imagined. There is serious significance in the hidden goblet. It is likened to the Grail, thought to have been the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper, and to be found only by those who were absolutely pure. 50 But if these lines promise communion and salvation they also
reflect the irony and paradox found in Mark 4:11-12, to which most critics agree Frost was referring:

To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand.

Further explication of these lines is provided by Hyde Cox, who wrote that one evening in the early forties, he and Frost were discussing the reason that Jesus always spoke to crowds in parables. Upon reading with Cox the 4th Chapter of Saint Mark, Frost delightedly asked if that idea occurred anywhere else. Cox then read him Matthew 13:11-13, and the rest of the evening, the two discussed "the wisdom and the hardness of this thought." Frost pointed out that the same applied to poetry: Only those who came to poetry in the right way could understand it. And not everyone could understand it, because it "just isn't in them. They cannot 'be saved.'" It was at this point that Frost made the quick connection between this notion and that of the reader needing to come to the subject of poetry "as a child," in order to achieve complete understanding.51

This conversation, so characteristic of Robert Frost, is a key to interpreting the diverse and complex motivation behind "Directive." With his highly-developed sense of drama, Frost has led the reader up a difficult hillside, through a scene of desolation and ruin, toward the brook
that is "your destination and your destiny." The quest ends with triumphant finality as Frost concludes this remarkable poem with the "directive" that gives it its title:

Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.52

The promise is exhilarating until we stop to inquire whether our confusion about the poem is in fact overcome. As he so often does, Frost is speaking on many levels at once. The poem definitely seems to affirm the "source," the power behind all our human efforts, and he is obviously asserting a strong belief in, and a dependency upon, God. Yet Frost is not handing us an easy resolution of our confusion. He has no intention of solving the puzzle for us, for he makes clear to the reader that only through sometimes painful self-examination can one realize his own capacity for discovering whatever Truth he is seeking. These are, indeed, your waters and your watering place, from which you may "drink and be whole again beyond confusion."

This poem is a superlative example of Frost's best work: enigmatic, serious and multi-levelled. While it is a statement of faith, we have already observed that Frost "mixed up his stuff." In his acceptance of the mystery of God, Frost has chosen to be rather mysterious himself. His strong sense of religious commitment is frequently accompanied by worldlier messages urging independence and uniqueness. It is tempting to imagine that it is actually Frost himself who "sits in the middle and knows.""
4. Faith and Science

Robert Frost, as we have seen, had deep religious convictions, but was frequently bothered by the contradictions between his rational and spiritual inclinations. The sensitivity gained from his personal struggle probably provided him an extra degree of insight into this universal conflict. His method of reconciling his religious training with scientific fact is reflected in his poetry. This reconciliation forms the basis for the didacticism in what might be imperfectly described as his "anti-science" poems, the poems to be examined in this section.

It is important to realize that Frost was not "against" science, though, on the basis of the present group of poems many critics apparently concluded that he was. Frost himself affirmed the merits of science in a speech given at Middlebury College in 1943. "One of the glories of science," he said, "is that it is one part of the humanities." Citing Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* as one of his favorite works, he defended its value as a book of literature, as well as a book of science: "It ought to be everybody's book," he said, adding that it simply "comes into literature on the science side."¹

What he did resent was the intrusion of science into
things he felt had nothing to do with scientific principles. The way science and poetry differed, in his opinion, was that science did not attempt to express the spirit, and poetry did.² His strong belief in the value of spirituality, and his feeling that poetry was one of the best places for this kind of intuitive expression help explain the seemingly critical tone toward man's scientific endeavors in some of his works. For Frost, though, poetry was "intextured" with both science and religion.³ Once, in a discussion on the subject, Frost posed the question, "Where does poetry come in?" Happily, he answered himself, "It's on the loose. Poetry is out having fun," and he added, "it's interstitial!"⁴ The word conveys the idea of that which occurs in the small space or "crack" between larger, presumably more substantial things. Certainly this is not to say that Frost perceived poetry to be without substance. Rather, he considered it the perfect art form to transcend philosophical differences and join ideological gaps, thus bringing about a synthesis of understanding. Considering this notion of synthesis as another example of Frost's "centrality," we can better understand the several poems dealing with the issue of faith versus science.⁵ This understanding enables us to interpret from a clearer perspective Frost's commentaries upon modern science as not so much distrust or disapproval, as a feeling of "misgiving" that man was somehow losing touch with his basic spiritual, intuitive gifts.
In 1923 Frost published **New Hampshire**, which won him his first Pulitzer Prize the following year. The title poem, appropriately described as a "helter-skelter" satire," is, in fact, a rambling discourse of complex metaphors and excessive irony. It carries numerous themes, an especially relevant one being the Victorian controversy over faith versus science.

On one of several visits to Greenwich Village, Frost was offended by a discussion by various intellectuals who, he felt, used the writings of Freud to justify their liberal sexual views. In "New Hampshire" he offers his rebuttal:

> Lately in converse with a New York alec
> About the new school of the pseudo-phallic,
> I found myself in a close corner where
> I had to make an almost funny choice.
> "Choose you which you will be--a prude, or puke,
> Mewling and puking in the public arms."  

In contrast with the contemporary vernacular meaning of the word "puke," Frost is probably employing a slightly older context. According to the English Dialect Dictionary the word "puke" means 1) "a disgusting person," or 2) "a vain or conceited fellow."  

The next section is a lengthy digression satirizing opposed views toward nature, particularly as the conflict arose in the 19th century between proponents of science and religion. In a characteristic defense of Frost's
"orthodoxy," Lawrance Thompson contends that Frost, though humorously presenting both sides of the argument, clearly shows his commitment to the Christian belief that the laws of nature are a mysterious expression of the laws of God, and that man should strive for a harmonious relationship with nature:\textsuperscript{10}

I know a man who took a double ax
And went alone against a grove of trees;
But his heart failing him, he dropped the ax
And ran for shelter quoting Matthew Arnold:
" 'Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood';"\textsuperscript{11}
There's been enough shed without shedding mine.

He knew too well for any earthly use
The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
And never overstepped it save in dreams.
He stood on the safe side of the line talking—
Which is sheer Matthew Arnoldism,
The cult of one who owned himself "a foiled
Circuitous wanderer,"\textsuperscript{12} and "took dejectedly
His seat upon the intellectual throne"\textsuperscript{13—14}

"A foiled circuitous wanderer" is a loose quotation from one of Arnold's poems, as is Frost's reference to one who "took dejectedly his seat upon the intellectual throne." The line, "Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood," is from a sonnet, sardonically entitled "In Harmony with Nature," in
which Arnold maintains several lines later that "nature and man can never be friends." Interpreting much of Frost's poetry as generally reflecting the poet's anti-intellectual tendencies, Thompson astutely points to these lines in "New Hampshire" to justify his contention that Frost was strongly contemptuous of anyone who tried to sit "upon the intellectual throne."

Returning to the matter of choosing between "prude or puke," Frost arrives at the crux of his poem. Remarking offhandedly that "it seems a narrow choice the age insists on," he offers, with mock-seriousness, one possibility, and then immediately dismisses it as implausible:

How about being a good Greek, for instance?
That, of course, they tell me, isn't offered this year.
Resisting the polarism "religion versus philosophy," he evasively withdraws from the argument entirely:

Well, if I have to choose one or the other
I choose to be a plan New Hampshire farmer.

With characteristic irony, he intones his "decision." In effect he has reached no decision at all:

It's restful to arrive at a decision.
And restful just to think about New Hampshire.
At present I am living in Vermont.

"New Hampshire," though something of a thematic hodgepodge, is a valuable study for just that reason. Frost's satire throughout is relentless. Not only that, but we also derive a picture of one aspect of Frost's conservatism,
probably motivated as much as anything by his obstinate refusal to be drawn into one ideological camp or another. With his stubborn insistence upon self-belief, he resisted the flow of popular thinking, especially extremisms, religious and scientific.

In "A Star in a Stoneboat," which follows "New Hampshire" in the 1923 volume, Frost reaffirms this intellectual independence:

Some may know what they seek in school and church
And why they seek it there; for what I search
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch. 20

This poem is primarily a metaphoric description of a star, fallen like a meteor to earth, and loaded by a laborer onto a stoneboat, then turned into building stone. Discussing the possible cosmic significance of such a phenomenon, Frost quickly insists that it is "not, I say, a star of death and sin." In fact, there is no use in trying to examine it for the purpose of understanding heaven and earth, for it resists being held for long by any man:

It yet has poles, and only needs a spin
To show its worldly nature and begin

To chafe and shuffle in my calloused palm
And run off in strange tangents with my arm,
As fish do with the line in first alarm. 21

"A Star in a Stoneboat" is full of allusions to astronomy and evolution. Like "Sitting By a Bush in Broad Sunlight,"
this poem reveals Frost's sensitivity to the conflict between science and religion and his dissatisfaction with an "all-or-nothing" point of view. His impatience with extremist thinkers who are unwilling to accept any possible validity in the points of view of others is wryly expressed by his metaphor of the poles and of "strange tangents." For Frost, the heart and the mind each have distinct attributes and functions, and it is their mutual reliance that forms a necessary balance, outweighing their differences.22

While Frost was not opposed to scientific inquiry, he was personally content to find joy in contemplating the mystery of nature's secrets, a pleasure enhanced by his conviction that its processes were related to a "larger scheme of life in the universe."23 He apparently felt that there was reward enough in the "promise" of a relationship between God and the world around us:

Such as it is, it promises the prize
Of the world complete in any size
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.24

In "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," from his 1936 book, A Further Range, Frost again describes man's constant longing to understand the unknown. He likens mankind to a group of people standing on the shore:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.25
It is significant that the people "all turn and look one way," for this is a hint of Frost's intended message. Several lines later Frost refers to the sense of dissatisfaction shared by these people who have ceased, metaphorically to find answers in the familiarity of the land and instead look to the sea:

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

The key to the above passage is the phrase, "But wherever the truth may be," for Frost, as always, is suggesting, with a hint of irony, the uncertainty of "truth," though the people in the poem all seem to have resolved to seek it in only one direction.

In the next quatrain Frost expresses some degree of sardonic bemusement for these people who perhaps lack the spiritual capacity to look "out far" or the introspection to seek answers within themselves, "in deep." Yet these same people do maintain, as a group, their "watch," looking all the while in the same, single direction:

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

It is likely that in this poem, as in others, Frost is speaking on more than one level. His references to "truth"
and to looking "out far" and "in deep" certainly suggest a spiritual search. At the same time Frost, as we see in the later poems, was prone to commentary upon man's insatiable quest for knowledge about the cosmos and his constant efforts to explore the mysteries of the physical, as well as the spiritual, world. He finds that the general tendency in man, "though the land may vary more," is to keep extending his natural and intellectual boundaries, sometimes at the risk of leaving behind his resources at hand.

This view is reinforced in "There Are Roughly Zones," also from A Further Range. The poem is the description of a person who has been sitting inside a house during a fierce storm. He begins to think of a peach tree that he brought to this northern clime, and considers its chances of survival in the cold wind:

We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves, We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died. It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach. Frost then ponders the urge in human nature to defy our "limits and bounds:"

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind-- That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined? You would say his ambition was to extend the reach Clear to the Arctic of every living kind. In the next lines the poet expresses his uneasiness regarding man's blind ambition:
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed? 30
Later the speaker admits to a sense of betrayal along with his helplessness before nature:
But we can't help feeling more than a little betrayed
That the northwest wind should rise to such a height
Just when the cold went down so many below. 31
His powerlessness is expressed even further when he states that "the tree has no leaves and may never have them again. We must," he continues, "wait til some months hence in the spring to know." 32 Once again Frost has injected his sense of humility in a world in which we don't have all the answers. The last lines of the poem provide a stern admonition against excessive human pride (shared in this case by the speaker), and man's unwillingness to accept his place in the universe:
But if it is destined never again to grow
It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of man. 33
With this poem it becomes increasingly evident that Frost was still concerned with what he perceived to be an increasing reliance upon human intervention, rather than spiritual strength, in dealing with the uncertainties of life.
Although Frost continued to write about man's impatience with "not-knowing," his moods frequently varied. In "All Revelation," written a few years after "There Are Roughly
Zones," he seems to exult in the glory of man's inquisitive nature. With a whimsical description of a head thrust exploringly into a geode, he points out that it is difficult to assess the ultimate significance of all this probing:

But where it is it thrusts in from
Or what it is it thrusts into

And whither it will be withdrawn
And what take hence or leave behind,

These things the mind has pondered on
A moment and still asking gone. 34

The next stanza gives us a subtle hint of the poet's almost grudging awe at the effects of this inquiry:

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. 35

Here Frost concedes that perhaps the immense satisfaction derived from relieving one's curiosity is its own reward:

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. 36

Despite Frost's conciliatory tone, he is, nevertheless, giving a gentle satirical poke at humanistic smugness. The
more technological advances that were made, the more confident man was becoming regarding his determination to conquer the unknown.

Although allusions to the faith-versus-science issue can be seen in Frost's early and late poems alike, the most concentrated collection of them are found in his last book, In the Clearing, published in 1962. Representing Frost's "final statement," it is said to "reflect a conscious review, with significant reaffirmations, of the younger poet." 37 During the time that Frost was preparing the collection, he was interviewed by John Ciardi, who asked him to comment upon his forthcoming volume. Frost's reply provides us an insight into his complex personal and poetic self:

I call it "The Great Misgiving." My theme is that the only event in all history is science plunging deeper into matter. We have plunged into the smallness of particles and we are plunging into the hugeness of space--but not without fears that the spirit shall be lost.

I am not against science. I always dislike it when people assume that because I am a poet I must be against science. But in taking us deeper and deeper into matter, science has left us with this
great misgiving, this fear that we won't be able to substantiate the spirit.38

The poems in this volume reveal Frost's concern that man's increasing acceptance of the theory of evolution, together with the growing trend toward scientific materialism, would cause him to rely less upon the instinctive side of his nature. Frost may even have felt his own dependence upon belief in a Divine purpose somewhat threatened by the growing numbers of those who asserted that the universe was an accident of nature, its course determined by natural, or random, selection.

"Accidentally on Purpose," notable for its lack of obscure irony, squarely confronts the scientists whose theories have so dramatically affected conventional beliefs:

They mean to tell us all was rolling blind
Til accidentally it hit on mind
In an albino monkey in a jungle,
And even then it had to grope and bungle.39

This time Frost does not attempt to hide behind vague implication, but with a kind of flat-footed sarcasm, he leads us closer to his point in the next stanza:

Till Darwin came to earth upon a year
To show the evolution how to steer.
They mean to tell us, though, the Omnibus
Had no real purpose til it got to us.40
With clarity and candor Frost advances his notion that acknowledging evolutionary development of life-forms does not necessarily eliminate the notion of a purposeful existence conceived of by a Divine Power:

Never believe it. At the very worst
It must have had the purpose from the first
To produce purpose as the fitter bread:
We were just purpose coming to a head. 41

In the next stanza Frost confronts a question that has baffled the human consciousness throughout the ages. Here again is revealed his apparent contentment with "not-knowing:"

Whose purpose was it? His or Hers or Its?
Let's leave that to the scientific wits.
Grant me intention, purpose, and design—
That's near enough for me to the Divine. 42

The last section states Frost's perception of the simple, but profound, truth that man must and will remain an instinctive being, and is happiest when permitted to do so:

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. 43

As we have seen before, Frost could never be completely serious for very long, without resorting to some kind of serio-comic barb. Though the message in "A Reflex" is essentially the same, its playful tone is quite different from the purism conveyed in "Accidentally on Purpose:"

Hear my rigmarole.
Science stuck a pole
Down a likely hole
And he got it bit.
Science gave a stab
And he got a grab.
That was what he got.
"Ah," he said, "Qui vive,
Who goes there, and what
ARE we to believe?
That there is an It?

Though this short poem is obviously more whimsical than some of Frost's others, it nevertheless shows that even the scientists do not always understand what they have discovered, nor the deeper implications of all their proofs.

As always Frost was best at making important statements combining lightness of tone with seriousness of theme. At the beginning of "Some Science Fiction," he offers himself as the object of satire:

The chance is the remotest
Of its going much longer unnoticed
That I'm not keeping pace
With the headlong human race.

And some of them may mind
My staying back behind
To take life at a walk
In philosophic talk.45

Midway through the poem, however, Frost begins to indicate
the real object of ridicule, namely, the scientists, with
whose views he is not "keeping pace:"

But I know them what they are:
As they get more nuclear
And more bigoted in reliance
On the gospel of modern science.46

Though softening slightly, he nevertheless maintains
his ironic thrust in a later stanza. Resuming the tone of
self-mockery, he alludes to the ambitious aim of space
scientists who, at the time this was written, were still
discussing the possibilities of landing a man on the moon:

They may end by banishing me
To the penal colony
They are thinking of pretty soon
Establishing on the moon.47

This poem is a good example of Frost's way of "sugar-coating"
a barb with subtle humor. It is easy to be misled by his
seemingly jocular mood, but he is not joking. His mastery
of ironic innuendo is illustrated in his description of the
"gospel of science," to point out that the dogmatism so
frequently ascribed to theologians may be applied to
materialists, as well.

The shorter poems in In the Clearing serve as a kind
of frame for the very long "Kitty Hawk." According to
Stephen Warner, the other poems "circle 'Kitty Hawk' like pieces broken from that sun." Frost himself considered it one of his most important works. He began writing it in 1953 after a visit with friends to the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Part One is primarily autobiographical. Returning to the site of the historical first flight of the Wright brothers Frost decided to make a figure of speech out of the story of the airplane. He later described the nature of his metaphor: "How I might have taken off from my experience of Kitty Hawk and written an immortal poem, but how, instead, the Wright brothers took off from there to commit an immortality." Part Two, as Frost himself explained,

... goes into the thought of the on-penetration into matter and our great misgiving.

Flight is just one more penetration, no more than that. And so one more cause of the misgiving we must all risk;

Part Two is the philosophical part.

In general, the second part of "Kitty Hawk" is another of Frost's discourses about man's search for knowledge and supremacy, despite his ultimate incapacity for total understanding of the universe:
We are not the kind
To stay too confined.
After having crawled
Round the place on foot
And done yeoman share
Of just staying put,
We arose there
And we scaled a plane.\textsuperscript{51}

Frost doesn't wait too long in this section to address the subject of man's "original sin" and inherently weak nature, manifested in modern-day materialism:

Pulpiteers will censure
Our instinctive venture
Into what they call
The material
When we took that fall
From the apple tree.\textsuperscript{52}

Asserting God's belief in man's spiritual potential he explains that

. . . God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.\textsuperscript{53}
But the Incarnation was "penetration" in the direction opposite that of science. He restates his concern that man might be plunging headlong into the materialistic/scientific realm, despite all indications that this might bring about a spiritual loss:

Westerners inherit
A design for living
Deeper into matter--
Not without due patter
Of a great misgiving. 54

Frost specifically characterizes Western man with this "science zest / To materialize / By on-penetration / Into earth and skies . . ." 55 Reflecting current events at the time he wrote this poem, he observes the far-reaching effects of American technological advances upon "the East:"

If it was not wise,
Tell me why the East
Seemingly has ceased
From its stagnation
In mere meditation. 56

In the next section Frost returns to the theme of human spirit. As in "West-Running Brook," he pursues the notion that the spiritual part of man is a "mighty charge" that counters the material aspect of his existence:

Spirit enters flesh
And for all it's worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh.
We may take the view
That its derring-do
Thought of in the large
Was one mighty charge
On our human part
Of the soul's ethereal
Into the material.\textsuperscript{57}

Later in the poem Frost's satirical tone sharpens considerably. Using the metaphor of a "radio voice" that is speaking to mankind as a whole, Frost sarcastically rebukes man's lack of reverence for the sanctity of Nature's secrets:

Have no hallowing fears
Anything's forbidden
Just because it's hidden
Trespass and encroach
On successful spheres
Without self-reproach.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite the irony in these lines, Frost betrays here a genuine concern for the direction that man seems to be taking.

He recovers his optimism several lines later, professing the belief that at last, the "so-long-kept / Purpose was expressed / In the leap we leapt."\textsuperscript{59} This "leap," of course, is a reference to the initial Wright brothers'
flight. It is this distinction, he says, that "belonged to US, / Not our friends the Russ." Alluding to the growing competition between the two countries in the race for space supremacy, he describes a hypothetical "crown,"

Or let's say the cup
On which with a date
Is the incscription, though,
'Nothing can go up
But it must come down.'
Earth is still our fate.

Relentlessly Frost insists that man is still governed by his own finitude, no matter how much scientific knowledge he may acquire. Describing our fascination with the world of space, he exults,

The uplifted sight
We enjoyed at night
When instead of sheep
We were counting stars,
Not to go to sleep,
But to stay awake.

Alluding gently to the possibility that we might be rewarded simply by "reaching out," rather than by any actual conquest of sorts, he immediately points out that man doesn't tolerate that notion very well:

Someone says the Lord
Says our reaching toward
Is its own reward.
One would like to know
Where God says it, though.

We don't like that much. 63
This bantering goes on throughout the poem. On one hand is
the obvious fact of man's limitations, the reality that his ventures into matter are still subject to a higher law. On the other hand is man's unwillingness to accept these bounds and his enormous pride in his own accomplishments:

Though our kiting ships
Prove but flying chips
From the science shop
And when motors stop
They may have to drop
Short of anywhere,
Though our leap in air
Prove as vain a hop
As the hop from grass
Of a grasshopper,
Don't discount our powers; 64

Here Frost is both ironic and sincere. Clearly he is noting that man's "leap" may "Prove as vain a hop / As the hop from grass / Of a grasshopper." Still he is able to acknowledge that we are in a spectacularly inventive age, and mustn't completely "discount our powers." With some reluctance, perhaps, Frost goes on to admit that
We have made a pass
At the infinite,
Made it, as it were,
Rationally ours,
To the most remote
Swirl of neon-lit
Particle afloat.
 . . .
That's how we became,
Though an earth so small,
Justly known to fame
As the Capital
Of the universe.

After all this rambling and bantering Frost begins to get to the point. With his peculiar, characteristic didacticism, he cites two antithetical points of view, and manages to convey the sincerity with which he supports them both. To the pilot he insists that he does not advocate the slowing of man's aeronautical progress. In fact, he urges us to "keep on elevating," and he appears to condone man's role of supremacy:

Keep on elevating.
But while meditating
What we can't or can
Let's keep starring man
In the royal role.

Yet Frost succinctly reminds us that there are still things
that man is not, nor ever will be, able to do:

It will not be his
Ever to create
One least germ or coal.
Those two things we can't.67

The next several lines illustrate Frost's method of "synthesizing" the argument, a resolution that relies upon the mutual validity of the two sides and requires a kind of compromise from each:

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.68

Frost's choice of the word "covenant" is significant, for he is implying a distinct relationship between our finite powers and the promise of God, as he sees it: Though we may be allowed to "get control . . . of at least some part" of the universe, we are bound, according to the covenant between God and man, to something greater than ourselves. Our role in the cosmos is to give the part that is ours "wholeness," but only "in a sense."
Comically reconciled to man's restless nature, Frost admits that:

Ours is to behave
Like a kitchen spoon
Of a size Titanic
To keep all things stirred
In a blend mechanic,
... .
Matter mustn't curd,
Separate and settle.
Action is the word. 69

In the final stanza Frost not only defends this un-daunted questing spirit in man, but lauds it, as well:

God of the machine,
Peregrine machine,
Some still think is Satan,
Unto you the thanks
For this token flight,
Thanks to you and thanks
To the brothers Wright,
Once considered cranks
Like Darius Green
In their hometown, Dayton. 70

Despite the numerous rambling digressions and the poem's rather monotonous three-beat cadence, Frost has managed to come forth with a statement of significance. He
has, in no uncertain terms, acknowledged the greatness of man's intellect and achievements. Yet he reminds us that this praise should be tempered with awareness of our ultimate limitations.

As early as 1954 Frost had talked of bringing out *In the Clearing* under the title, "The Great Misgiving." "Misgiving," was intended somewhat as a pun, for he had some doubts about the quality of a few of his later poems. By 1962, aware that his health was not good, he decided to go ahead. He was anxious to avoid its posthumous publication, a notion he abhorred. About this time he was hospitalized with near-fatal pneumonia, followed by a relapse, but he recovered and was able to continue working on the proofs.

In December of 1962 Frost was again admitted to the hospital for what would be his final illness. Prior to this Frost had written his Christmas poem for that year, entitled, "The Prophets Really Prophesy as Mystics The Commentators Merely by Statistics." It was to be his last completed poem, and appropriately so, for it represents a compendium of all the earnest poetic efforts of his brilliant and complicated career. Reiterating his now-familiar theme of man's relentless determination to uncover the secrets of the universe, Frost ironically assumes the role of prophet. In a wry, "I-told-you-so" tone, he reminds us that "in our defiance, we are still defied;"

With what unbroken spirit naive science
Keeps hurling our Promethean defiance
From this atomic ball of rotting rock
At the Divine Safe's combination lock.
In our defiance we are still defied.
But have not I, as prophet, prophesied:
Sick of our circling round and round the sun
Something about the trouble will be done.  

With continued mock-earnestness he describes the ongoing
conquest of space:

Now that we've found the secret out of weight,
So we can cancel it however great.
Ah, what avail our lofty engineers
If we can't take the planet by the ears,

Or by the poles or simply by the scruff,
And by saying simply we have had enough
Of routine and monotony on earth,
Where nothing's going on but death and birth.

And man's of such a limited longevity,
Now in the confidence of new-found levity
(Our gravity has been our major curse)
We'll cast off hawser for the universe

Taking along the whole race for a ride
(Have I not prophesied and prophesied?)

Once again Frost points out man's self-imposed dilemma of
having to choose between science and faith:
All voting viva voce where to go,
The noisier because they hardly know

Whether to seek a scientific sky
Or wait and go to Heaven when they die,
In other words to wager their reliance
On plain religion or religious science. 74

In the next-to-last stanza Frost appears to have the solution to the problem, advocating that man use any means required to "crash the puzzle:"

They need to crash the puzzle of their lot
As Alexander crashed the Gordian knot.
Or as we crashed the barrier of sound
To beat the very world's speed going round. 75

The Gordian knot passage alludes to the legend that Alexander cut the knot with a single stroke of his sword, thus becoming the ruler of Asia. This heroic action which has become proverbial for the decisive and bold completion of an "impossible" task is likened to the momentous event of man's breaking the sound barrier. Up to this point in the poem Frost has us believing that we must, metaphorically, at least, "crash the barrier" and cut through to the truth of this puzzle.

But that would be capitulation to the scientific extreme. The counter-theme in the last stanza, though casually stated, leaves us with the realization that Frost has not relinquished
his conviction that the world is turning rather nicely without our interference, and that perhaps we shouldn't risk steering "it off by force." Inherent in these lines is Frost's lifelong conviction that nature has provided us with a "charming earnest world," and he seems content to trust in the outcome:

Yet what a charming earnest world it is,
So modest we can hardly hear it whizz,
Spinning as well as running on a course
It seems too bad to steer it off by force. 76

Implicit in this last poem of Frost's, as in so many of his others, is his belief in the goodness and power of something greater than ourselves in nature. Regarding man's relentless efforts to defy cosmic constraints, Frost is both amused and concerned. He knows that this tendency is an ineradicable part of human nature, but he wants to tell us to keep things in perspective, and never to forget our finiteness in the vastness of the universe.

These poems dealing with the conflict between faith and science epitomize the most consistent element in Frost's poetry: his unique handling of various antitheses, or "contraries." Once again Frost has exhibited a position of sardonic detachment, satirizing both sides of the argument. Nevertheless, we see in these "faith vs. science" poems, as in those discussed in preceding sections, that Frost's overall tendency is toward the intuitive and the spiritual.
Frost's intention is not to deny the merits of scientific achievement, but we cannot forget his poetic reminder that "something must be left to God."77

In Frost's view, man's role in the universe requires a collaboration between our God-given powers and the forces of nature we seek to control. In an open letter to The Amherst Student on his sixtieth birthday, Frost described this "calling" of man:

There is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form. And not only admits of it, but calls for it. We people are thrust forward out of the suggestions of form in the rolling clouds of nature. In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself.78

Frost then speaks of man as a figure of order amidst the "... background of hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration."79

Among the loveliest of Frost's lyrical poems is "The Aim Was Song," in which he expresses his belief in man's purpose for existence. Full interpretation requires quotation of the poem in its entirety.
Before man came to blow it right
The wind once blew itself untaught,
And did its loudest day and night
In any rough place where it caught.

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

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

By measure. It was word and note,
The wind the wind had meant to be--
A little through the lips and throat.
The aim was song--the wind could see. 80

Frost's view of the changing world around him was
indeed a cautious one. Yet he believed that man, if he
would maintain a proper balance between faith and science,
could achieve great things and fulfill the purpose for
which he was created.
Conclusion

In this study of the spiritual paradox of Robert Frost, we saw first that Frost's poetry is deceptively complex and can be interpreted on many levels. We saw the "contraries" in his life and their contribution in the formation of his poetic purpose and style. We examined Frost's use of irony and his habit of "posing" in order to capture the attention and creative imagination of his readers. Frost was a manipulator of paradox because he was a truth-seeker. Impatient with simplistic and polarized thinking, he wanted to discomfort his readers, to force them to look within themselves to find their "truths," and to be unwilling to settle for anything less than a thoroughgoing confrontation with complexity.

Frost was a man of intelligence, but also of intuition. He felt the need to come to terms with life in a practical sense, and to do so he set up a balance of the opposing impulses that he saw in himself and in others. Thus the "contradictions." Behind his playfulness and posing lay an intensely sensitive person, with profound insight into his fellow man. Behind his taunts and assertions was the fear that he, "like every modern, would 'get beyond the sound of the still small voice within our hearts.'" ¹
As we have seen, Frost's poetry was a "momentary stay against confusion" and served as a means of reconciliation amid the contradictions in his life. He felt that though each poem "clarifies something," we can't simply stop with a single clarification. We've "got to do it again." We cannot stay "clarified," if we are to realize our potential. "If you mean to be a man," he once said, "you have to assess the Sphinx. You have to be riddled by it."

Frost remained consistently independent of political, social and theological trends. This tendency frustrated and confused those of his associates who attempted to categorize his "wisdom of the heart." Frost tried to see the external, real world as clearly as he could in an age of science, but would not capitulate to a narrow materialism. He knew that something "inscrutable and ordering likely remains . . ." and he denied neither God nor the world.

Frost was no spiritual drifter. The reason for his apparent lack of conviction was his refusal to do others' thinking for them, or to try to persuade them to adopt certain beliefs. He once explained, "I've never wanted to tell anyone what to believe, but just to start a thought going to see where it comes back."

It was not Robert Frost's intention to provide his readers with easy answers, but to "bother them." This motivated the paradoxical aspect of his work. Yet, despite the irreverent tone in some of his poems, or the "dark"
implications in others, we can see that Robert Frost was a man of deep if idiosyncratic religious faith. Though he chose to be enigmatic and often employed irony to achieve the desired effect, the "spiritual paradox" of Robert Frost is, in fact, simply a reflection of the universal paradox of perception in a world created by infinite God and inhabited by finite man.
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Introduction


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The Poetry

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142


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