FROST AND THOREAU: A STUDY IN AFFINITIES

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Lyle D. Domina

Dr. Roger K. Meiners Dissertation Supervisor

August 1968

FROST AND THOREAU: A STUDY IN AFFINITIES

Lyle D. Domina

Dr. Roger K. Meiners, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Although a few critics have posited Henry David Thoreau as a conscious influence on Robert Frost, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate a significant set of affinities in the thought and attitudes of the two men. For this reason the study goes beyond the Walden that Frost is known to have admired and examines Thoreau's thought wherever it may be found in his published works. The study is concerned with the literature of the two men; biographical parallels are noted only in passing.

The method of the study is to examine, first of all, the "New England mind" as it develops in the Puritans; this mind set is then traced into the twentieth century through such writers as Emerson, Dickinson, and Robinson. Because in recent years such emphasis has been placed on the pessimistic side of Frost, and because Thoreau is generally thought of as highly optimistic, the study examines Frost's optimism and Thoreau's pessimism.

In comparing their attitudes toward life, one finds that both Frost and Thoreau found it necessary to withdraw

to a position from which they could look in both directions. They withdrew to a position between man and nature, for example, and between spirit and matter because they were determined to see the proper relationship between the pairs. At the same time, their retreat provided them with a set of significant experiences as a basis for determining the nature of life. In this insistence on experience, and in the manner in which each becomes unequal to the task, the two men show their participation in the Romantic frame of mind.

The attitudes which Frost and Thoreau shared, moreover, found similar expression in their work. Both created a mythical country and a mythical hero seeking wisdom in that country. The mythical and Romantic quest, however, is domesticated to New England; hence the quest is "reduced" to the mundane activity of going for a walk.

In this trope of the walk, then, the artistic attitudes and techniques of each writer become fused. It allows them the careful examination of the thing-in-itself that is so important to them; at the same time it allows each writer to bring in the spiritual and religious overtones which they find equally important. Both Frost and Thoreau are committed to the view that life is a process, and the walk is perfectly adapted to expressing this attitude. Finally, the leisurely process of walking

demonstrates their common technique of proceeding slowly and indirectly to the moment of insight; hence it provides a structural unity for their works which has sometimes thought to be lacking.

The significance of this study lies in its picture of literary continuity, its truly three dimensional view of the thought of each man, and a fresh insight into what they were attempting in their work; and it resolves, or at least confronts, the dichotomies that critics have sometimes found in their writings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Professors Roger K. Meiners and Richard A. Hocks for the aid they have given me in preparing this study. Their cooperation has reduced the frustrations to a minimum, and their suggestions have been made with a spirit which guided, but did not control my work. I am also grateful to the Department of English and the Graduate School for the financial aid which allowed me to complete the study. I owe special thanks to my wife, Donetta, for cheerfully making more sacrifices than one could ask for in good conscience.

PREFACE

For a number of years various critics have recognized certain affinities in the works of Henry David Thoreau and Robert Frost; some have even postulated Thoreau as a conscious influence, but no one has made a detailed study of the possible intellectual and spiritual relationships of the two writers. The best of the general comments on this subject, moreover, is one of the earliest. In 1938 Bernard DeVoto recognized the spiritual kinship of Frost and Thoreau:

> It is not by chance that even so brief a summary as this has had to allude twice to Thoreau. There is such a thing as continuity in literature, and behind Frost are the generations of men in New England. In his perceptions, in his humor, in his accent, in the undeluded clarity of his vision, in his lifelong concentration on the individual and on the rights, dignities, and sanctities of the individual, he is a neighbor of Thoreau's--who had traveled much in Concord, as Frost in Derry, Franconia, and South Shaftsbury. Nearly a century apart, they would have known each other by the same genius of the place, the same instant assertion of human dignity, the same cadence of thought, a rhythm deeper than consciousness, of the bloodstream itself.[1]

It is my intention to demonstrate, insofar as it is possible, the assertions that DeVoto makes here. Even though some conscious influence may very well be involved, since Frost has indicated a strong interest in Walden, I do not intend to argue such influences in this study. I wish

---

[1]Bernard DeVoto, "The Critics and Robert Frost," Saturday Review of Literature, XVII (January 1, 1938), 15.

instead to go beyond the Walden that Frost is known to have admired to examine Thoreau's statements, wherever they may be found in his writings, which indicate the spiritual kinship which DeVoto noted. Nor do I intend this study to be biographically oriented; I will note certain biographical parallels in passing, but they are not at the center of this study. It is the artistic life that I am interested in: The fact that Frost and Thoreau share several fundamental approaches to life which cause them to choose remarkably similar ways of expressing themselves. Or, to put it another way, the similarity of their expression reveals their basic affinities.

Since the affinities which the two men share proceed largely from their common New England heritage, the first step in this study will be to examine the "New England mind" as shaped by the Puritans and carried down to the twentieth century by such writers as Emerson, Dickinson, and Robinson. The continuity of this tradition will be examined, for the most part, as it reveals itself in their art.

Many will argue that Frost is far too pessimistic to reveal much kinship with the Thoreau whom they know only as optimistic. To bring the two men closer together in temperament, therefore, I will examine the lesser known dark side of Thoreau and place it beside the optimistic side of Frost, which again has been largely overlooked in

recent years. This part of the study should also provide a more balanced view of each man. While I do not contend that Frost is as optimistic as Thoreau, I do contend that the dark side of Thoreau and the light side of Frost have been given comparatively little attention.

In detailing their approach to life it seems significant, as several critics have pointed out, that both men chose to withdraw into the rural world. The full implications of this withdrawal, what it reveals about their approach to the business of living has not been adequately discussed. When these implications are revealed, moreover, they demonstrate the extent to which both writers share in the romantic tradition.

Finally, and most importantly, I wish to point out that Frost and Thoreau used remarkably similar devices to bring these common attitudes into their art. Both men began, I believe, with the mythical and romantic quest. Both writers, moreover, domesticated this quest to New England in such a way that the mythical hero becomes a New England farmer and the quest itself is epitomized as the mundane activity of walking.

This study is not intended to bring about any great shift in the critical reputation of either man. Rather it is designed to illustrate a case of literary continuity, create a more nearly three dimensional view of each writer, and demonstrate that their basic view of life has been successfully transmitted in their art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

FROST AND NEW ENGLAND

The attempt to set a literary figure within a tradition that is three hundred years old is likely to be full of difficulties. Those who make the attempt are open to charges of selecting the proper details from a complex and often contradictory movement; they are likely to be charged with circular argument, and they may be accused of manipulating definitions. Nevertheless, the attempt needs to be made in order to understand literature as completely as possible. In this chapter I will try to show that Robert Frost is, in fact, in the "New England tradition." My method is to set up certain significant categories and trace them from colonial New England, through some writers commonly considered to be "New England" writers, to Robert Frost. The writers I have chosen to concentrate on, aside from the Puritans, are Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, E. A. Robinson, and, of course, Robert Frost.

Two major movements are involved in the tradition of the "New England mind"--puritanism and transcendentalism. Puritanism, once thought of as a static set of beliefs and habits, has been amply demonstrated to be protean instead, a fact that makes the term nearly undefinable; that is, "Puritanism" can depend on that aspect upon which one chooses to concentrate. For the purposes of this chapter,

however, I will construe Puritanism as a single movement, beginning in this country in 1630 and lasting to the death of Jonathan Edwards in 1758. Such a view seems justified inasmuch as it was surely the entire movement that provided influence for succeeding periods.

Among the legacies left by the Puritans is a highly developed sense of intellectual honesty, that is, a willingness to face up to the conclusions of their investigation of the nature of things; a considerable interest in nature as a sometimes dangerous, but nevertheless valid means of discovering and confirming the purpose of the universe; a highly ambivalent attitude toward work and the results of work; a great deal of emphasis on personal experience as a guide to knowledge; a profound need for introspection; and finally an unusual confrontation of provincialism and world thought. These legacies, in various degrees and combinations, continue to be a part of the makeup of the major New England writers.

The Puritan's willingness to face up to the consequences of his investigation can be demonstrated in a number of ways. It is shown by his willingness to face up to the manifest presence of evil in the world or by his acceptance of new scientific discoveries; it can best be shown, however, by one of his basic theological tenets, predestination. The most cursory investigation into the Bible reveals an omniscient and omnipotent God: given this

fact, the concept of predestination seems to be inescapable. Perry Miller has shown that the concept of predestination goes back as far as Augustine, but that no other people stressed it as much as the Puritans.[1] Miller, however, has shown another approach to the problem of predestination, and it, too, testifies to the intellectual honesty of the Puritan:

> The doctrine of predestination seems harsh and unreasonable when viewed simply as a doctrine. When we consider it as a description of experience, we see at once that just as the rewards of rank or wealth depend upon the apparent chance of birth or opportunity, and wisdom upon the accident of intellectual ability, so the achieving of spiritual illumination depends upon whether or not it is given.[2]

Thus that one aspect of Puritanism that is generally the hardest for the twentieth century mind to comprehend is one logical result of an investigation into the relation of an omnipotent God to the contingencies of human experience.

When the Puritan turned his attention to nature, he was checked by a number of fears. The first of these fears --untamed nature as a home of Satan and as an environment congenial to the breakdown of moral responsibility--became the subject matter of many of Hawthorne's fictional studies of the Puritans, and these tales adequately demonstrate this particular danger. To a society in which every single

---

[1]Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 10-25, et passim.

[2]Ibid., p. 17.

activity was to be subordinate to the attainment of supernatural grace, or the salvation of the soul, a second danger immediately suggests itself, namely that the observation of nature--its beauty or its utility--may become an end in itself. A third possible danger was that even when used for the proper end, for the revelation of God's will and purpose, too much reliance might be placed upon it. This third danger was constantly being pointed out to Puritan congregations: "Tho' there is never a leaf in this Book [i.e. nature] , but hath something of God written legibly upon it, and many Characters of his Divine power, wisdom, and goodness there engraven; yet all this will leave a man short of the saving knowledge of him."[3]

Despite such dangers, however, the Puritan nevertheless considered nature an important source of knowledge. "Even though natural faculties are sadly decayed by the fall, yet within the sphere of demonstration the evidence of the senses is sound."[4] John Cotton spoke of the world not as a machine but as "a mappe and shaddow of the spirituall estate of the soules of men," and stated that "to study the nature and course, and use of all God's works is a duty imposed by God upon all sorts of men. . . ."[5] And finally,

---

[3] Ibid., p. 208. Miller is quoting an unidentified preacher.

[4] Ibid., p. 209.

[5] Ibid., p. 212.

as Miller points out, "not only were the general conclusions of physics and chemistry looked upon as emblems of God's wisdom; every single fact was a symbol, not only of the law governing things, but of the laws of the spirit."[6] This emphasis upon nature reached its ultimate expression in two famous Puritans, Cotton Mather, who "indulged this penchant for allegorizing to the point of absurdity . . .,"[7] and Jonathan Edwards.

The importance of the role this highly symbolic nature played in Edward's religious life is documented in his "Personal Narrative":

> And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express. . . . The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon . . ., the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things . . . I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm. . . .[8]

Further evidence of the hold that nature maintained on the mind of Edwards is supplied in his Images or Shadows of

---

[6]Ibid., p. 213.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections, With Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes (New York: American Book Company, 1935), pp. 60-61.

Divine Things. Perry Miller notes in his "Introduction" that for Edwards nature had become equal with Scripture as a way of hearing God's voice.[9] Edwards himself here argues, as he often does, from both Scripture and experience: "That the things of the world are ordered [and] designed to shadow forth spiritual things appears by the Apostle's arguing spiritual things from them. . . ." Experience shows that "we see that even in the material world, God makes one part of it strangely to agree with another, and why is it not reasonable to suppose He makes the whole as a shadow of the spiritual world?"[10] Nature had indeed become coequal with the Bible, although saving grace was perhaps an even more essential prerequisite to a true reading of nature.

In examining nature, the Puritan was to observe "the nature and course, and use of all God's works," and not all the "uses" were directly connected to the revelation of God's will; in fact, one of its uses was man's enjoyment. Perhaps no aspect of Puritanism has become so widely known and so generally misunderstood by the popular mind as the attitude toward man's use of nature for temporal enjoyment. The Puritan began with three assumptions: Man is placed on earth to glorify God; anything God makes is inherently good

---

[9]Jonathan Edwards, Images or Shadows of Divine Things, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 29.

[10]Ibid., p. 44.

(man, by his fall, is now an exception); and any work is a glorification of God, if it is conducted in the proper spirit. These assumptions caused little difficulty as long as the Puritan remained in England; there he could work hard all his life for the greater glory of God and still have little worldly wealth to show for his efforts. When he came to Massachusetts, however, his hard work was quite likely to run into a conflict with another general tendency of Christianity, a tendency toward the exaltation of poverty: "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), and I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24).

The Puritan answer to this dilemma was that "men must love the world with 'weaned affections.' They must be completely in it, but not of it. You may use things, 'but not be wedded to them, but so weaned from them, that you may use them, as if you used them not.'"[11] The Puritan, then, when faced with the fact that labor for God's glory was going to bring in wealth, and, unlike the Roman Catholic, cut off from retreating from the world, drew on one of his basic assumptions--stewardship. This ability to deal with wealth in religious terms is often thought of as the overweening hypocrisy in a hypocrisy-filled religion. It

---

[11]Miller, The Seventeenth Century, p. 42.

did indeed tend to become hypocrisy as Miller demonstrates in his chapter on "The Protestant Ethic."[12] The reason for the growth of hypocrisy is simple: "Human psychology is unsuited to remaining long in such a delicate state of balance, and the almost unlimited opportunities for farming, trade, and commerce soon tipped the scales in favor of material things."[13] Nevertheless, at its best the Puritan practise of their concept of stewardship was not a hypocrisy; the Puritan "kept his shop so well that shortly it kept him . . .. But always, whether tradesman, merchant, or banker, he went in the fear of God."[14] Another point to consider is that wealth, in New England, was simply a by-product of work; work, if done for God's glory, was an end in itself. "That every man should have a calling and work hard in it was a first premise of Puritanism."[15] Miller also quotes John Cotton to show that no man, regardless of wealth, was excepted from work; otherwise he is "an uncleane beast."[16] This particular Puritan legacy has impressed

---

[12]Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 40-52.

[13]Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, Backgrounds of American Literary Thought (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952), p. 42.

[14]Miller, From Colony to Province, pp. 42-43.

[15]Ibid., p. 40.

[16]Ibid., p. 41.

itself strongly on the American character, and the problems it raises have never been satisfactorily and completely resolved.

To say that Puritanism placed a considerable emphasis on experience and individualism may seem rather strange in light of the fact that the moral and social codes were rigidly controlled externally by the church. In spite of the fact that "it is estimated that at the best of times only twenty percent of the early settlers were members of any church," they were able to assert such control that "no doubt many an immigrant to Rhode Island went there to be free of the necessity of conforming to any set religious pattern."[17] Still in his struggle with the frontier and in his religious life the Puritan was called upon to rely on himself and his experience. In extending the frontier he had to exercise "the greatest possible ingenuity, courage, and self-reliance. . . ."[18] In religious matters self-reliance to the extent of believing that one could save himself through his own efforts was, of course, the rankest heresy. Nevertheless, there was a sort of individualism inherent in the removal of all intermediaries between a man and his God:

---

[17]Horton and Edwards, op. cit., p. 42. It should be noted that the figure of twenty percent membership is a distortion stemming from oversimplification of the church structure. Still large numbers of people who were not in any sense part of the church were effectively controlled by it.

[18]Ibid., p. 43.

> They went as far as mortals could go in removing intermediaries between God and man: the church, the priest, the magical sacraments, the saints and the Virgin; they even minimized the role of the Savior in their glorification of the sovereignty of the Father. Puritanism allowed men no helps from tradition or legend; it took away the props of convention and the pillows of custom; it demanded that the individual confront existence directly on all sides at once, that he test all things by the touchstone of absolute truth, that no allowance be made for circumstances or for human frailty.[19]

Again Miller points out that in their arguments the theologians made "persistent appeals to experience" and that "the doctrine came not only from the book of Genesis but also from the lesson of mortality."[20]

The role of personal experience, and the need to examine that experience is inherent in the Puritan concept of regeneration. The problem of regeneration as the Puritan saw it was extremely complex, but put in its broadest terms "it was an inward experience in which the disorder of the universe was righted, when at least some men were brought into harmony with the divine plan."[21] It is true that emphasis on the personal experience was reduced in New England Puritanism by covenant theology, but it was brought back in all its force by Jonathan Edwards. He perhaps describes it best in his "A Divine and Supernatural Light," with his famous "taste of honey" analogy:

---

[19]Miller, The Seventeenth Century, p. 45.

[20]Ibid., p. 25.

[21]Ibid., p. 9.

> Thus there is a difference between having an opinion, that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man cannot have the latter unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind. . . . There is a wide difference between mere speculative rational judging any thing to be excellent, and having a sense of its sweetness and beauty.[22]

Thus Edwards sets up two ways of knowing, or two kinds of knowledge; that knowledge which is based on personal experience is clearly superior, and the true religious experience is totally personal. There is in the final analysis, then, a considerable dependence on individualism and personal experience among the New England Puritans.

This same concept of regeneration, along with the need for constant attention to the motives for doing things, makes it inevitable that the Puritans will be a highly introspective group. The inner experience (such as that which marked regeneration for the Puritan) is essentially a mystical experience, hence by definition no external objective criteria can be applied to it; it cannot be weighed or measured. This fact of itself is enough to enforce introspective habits. Added to this tendency, however, was another Puritan dilemma: one could never know for certain whether the experience was regeneration, or not, but he had the duty to attempt to know, which led the

---

[22]Faust and Johnson, Jonathan Edwards, p. 107.

Puritan ever more deeply into the labyrinth of introspection. So great was the need for some degree of certainty that it resulted in covenant theology. Covenant theology, of course, does not provide complete certainty, "but in practical life the dogmatic rigors of absolute predestination are materially softened."[23] The point is, however, that the need for introspection continued; covenant theology provided a greater comprehension of God's means of selecting his elect, but it did little to help determine if the experience were supernatural, the result of natural causes, or of the Devil. This need for introspection reached its peak in Jonathan Edwards's rejection of covenant theology. The terrible urgency of the problem can be seen in the time and space he spent in attempting to separate the supernatural experience from the natural or devilish experience. Almost the whole of A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections is given over to twelve instances "Showing What Are No Certain Signs that Religious Affections Are Truly Gracious, or that They Are Not" and twelve instances "Showing What Are Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections," all the while insisting: "I am far from undertaking to give such signs of gracious affections, as shall be sufficient to enable any certainly to distinguish true affections from false in others . . .,"

---

[23]Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," Errand Into the Wilderness (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), p. 73.

and "No such signs are to be expected that shall be sufficient to enable those saints certainly to discern their own good estate . . . ."[24] It is little wonder then that Joseph Hawley, a member of Edwards's own congregation and a kinsman by marriage was driven to suicide.[25] This was the extent to which one could be pushed by the need for introspection brought about by uncertainties on the state of one's soul.

The need for introspection was increased beyond the demands of supernatural grace, however, by the necessity to call motives constantly into question, a necessity implied in the earlier discussions of the Puritan attitude toward nature and toward work. As I have shown, the Puritan believed in the power of nature to convey God's purpose, and this fact required that nature be studied. At the same time, the Puritan recognized dangers inherent in the study of nature, and thus he found it necessary to examine his motives. Was he in fact being seduced by worldly beauty? Was he going beyond permissible bounds in seeing God's purpose set forth in nature? The same is true of the Puritan attitude toward work: he was to work hard, but not for the sake of profit. If profit followed, that, too, was

---

[24]Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections, ed. John E. Smith (Vol. II of The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Perry Miller, General Editor. In Progress; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 193.

[25]Perry Miller, Jonathan Edwards (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967), p. 129.

acceptable. Always, though, the Puritan had to ask himself if he was attached to his wealth with "weaned affections" only. Was he perhaps looking upon his wealth as the result of his own labors and not as God's gift? Was he perhaps forgetting that his possession of wealth was only a stewardship? Given all these imponderables the mass of private journals and diaries which the age produced becomes understandable. Understandable, too, become the effects of introspection: ". . . its effect on many simple, earnest people was to reduce them to a state of neuroticism."[26] Certainly, at any rate, the tendency to introspection seems to have left its mark on the New England writers who were to follow.

One last characteristic of the leaders of Puritanism, shared by later New England writers, is a provincialism contrasting with far ranging speculative thought. This fact, I believe, is a part of what puts the "New England" in the "New England mind." For the Puritans it was largely a matter of geography. The first generation Puritan leaders were university men well acquainted with European thought, yet separated from their contemporary European intellectuals by the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. The concern of the Puritan fathers for education is, of course, well known. Samuel Eliot Morison points out that "in no way is the high intellectual ambition of the New England

---

[26]Horton and Edwards, op. cit., p. 45.

puritans so clearly evident as in their founding a college for higher education in 1636 and maintaining it throughout the seventeenth century."[27] The result of this concern was that succeeding generations of ministers were likewise brought in touch with European thought while being held aloof from contact with Europe itself. Although he was educated at Yale, the most illustrious example of the provincial-cosmopolitan dichotomy is once again Jonathan Edwards. I do not wish to contend that the peculiar accidents of environment and training were the only forces that shaped his thought and career (or the thought and career of the other New England writers either), but surely they were powerful influences. Edwards came in contact with the physics of Newton and the psychology of Locke while at Yale, and both systems of thought had a profound effect on him.[28] At the same time Edwards was cut off from personal contact with his intellectual peers in Europe.

---

[27]Samuel Eliot Morison, The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 27.

[28]Miller, Jonathan Edwards, pp. 38, 52-53. Miller notes that "the boy of fourteen grasped in a flash what was to take the free and catholic students of Professor Wigglesworth thirty or forty years to comprehend, that Locke was the master-spirit of the age, and that the Essay made everything then being offered at Harvard or Yale as philosophy, psychology, and rhetoric so obsolete that it could no longer be taken seriously" (pp. 52-3). He also notes that Edwards "as an undergraduate put down a series of 'Notes on the Mind' which exhibit a phenomenal mastery of Newton . . ." (p. 46).

Of the succeeding New England writers Emerson perhaps was the least provincial. In his lifetime he was able to make three trips to Europe. The importance of the trips lie in the fact that he was able to meet the men--Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle--who were a direct stimulus to his own thought. The effects of his first voyage to England are summed up by Rusk:

> First-hand acquaintance with Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth was worth thanking God for. It warranted his resolve that hereafter he would "judge more justly, less timidly of wise men." . . . Though he had pretty definitely made up his mind to speak for himself and for his own country, he was now traveled and experienced, not ignorant of the Old World, and not so single-hearted in his patriotism. . . . He inevitably cared for what he judged the best that was thought and known anywhere in the world. It was therefore impossible for him to be a narrow-minded nationalist.[29]

It is impossible to point up precisely the effects of the European experience on Emerson. One may conjecture, however, that the influence is to be seen in "The American Scholar." Oliver Wendell Holmes considered it America's "literary Declaration of Independence," and posterity has agreed; yet in contrast to other essays on the subject, Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses" for example, it is remarkably free of narrow nationalism. Only a short last section is devoted to American literature, and even there

---

[29]Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 197.

it is more nearly a dispassionate examination of the evidence than it is a call to action.

The provincial quality of Emerson's thought is less evident in what he said than in what he took for granted. He inherits from the earliest Puritans the belief that the New World is in fact new, that man has been given a second chance by having been freed from the accumulated wrongs of the Old World. The life that he knew also allowed him to insist on the democracy and individualism which would have been nearly impossible in the highly stratified society of Europe. The concepts of democracy and individualism take on quasi-religious overtones, also, because of Emerson's insistence that every man is capable of attaining the grace which the Puritans restricted to the elect.

In the case of the other famous Concord resident, on the other hand, the facts of his life suggest that he was the most provincial of men. Thoreau is famous for having "travelled a good deal in Concord"; Minnesota was as far as he ever got from his birthplace. Still Thoreau is hardly the provincial that the narrow confines of his travels would suggest. Thoreau was educated at Harvard, where he did a good deal of reading: "He consumed a goodly portion of the twenty-one large volumes of Chalmers's anthology, The English Poets. He read Goldsmith, Southey, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Cowper, Johnson, Gray, Homer, the Greek poets, and the travel books of Hall McKenney, Barrow,

Brackenridge, and Back, among others."[30] Sanborn adds that "it is true that of all the Concord authors, Thoreau was best versed in Greek."[31] Other sources of Thoreau's cosmopolitanism are to be found, as John Aldrich Christie[32] demonstrates, in Thoreau's wide acquaintance with travel books, and in the fact that he was familiar with Oriental religious thought.

In Thoreau, moreover, the effects of cosmopolitan provincialism can easily be seen in his writings. The provincial quality in Thoreau makes him a determined localist, no matter where he happens to be. Moreover, it provides the concrete element in Thoreau's writing; the reader always knows where he is: fishing in Walden Pond, "--anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from shore . . .,"[33] or on the Penobscot River in a

---

[30]Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 38.

[31]F. B. Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau, Including Many Essays Hitherto Unpublished and Some Account of His Family and Friends. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 174.

[32]John Aldrich Christie, Thoreau as World Traveler (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 313-33.

[33]Henry David Thoreau, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (20 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), II, 194. Subsequent references to this edition will be noted in parentheses following each reference. The Journal, edited by Bradford Torrey and Frances H. Allen, makes up volumes VII-XX of the Writings. The Journal, however, is also numbered from I to XIV, and this numbering will be used with a J, while a W will precede the volume number of the first six volumes of the twenty volume set. Pagination of the Journal is the same in the 1906 edition, the 1949 reprint, and the 1962 republication by Dover Publications, Inc. (New York).

canoe "nineteen and a half feet long by two and a half at the widest part, and fourteen inches deep within, both ends alike, and painted green . . ." (W, III, 106). The cosmopolitan aspect of Thoreau, on the other hand, allows him to expand outward through time and space by way of history, myth, religious literature, and accounts of explorers. In the opening pages of Walden, for instance, he begins in the local: "I have travelled a good deal in Concord" (W, II, 4), but quickly takes the reader to India or mythical Greece by way of his comparisons of the townspeople of Concord to the Brahmins and to Hercules (W, II, 4-5). The same technique can be seen in the famous battle of the ants; first, Thoreau sets the precise locality--"out to my woodpile, or rather my pile of stumps." Quickly the ants become "Myrmidons," and cover "all the hills and vales of my wood-yard." Thoreau goes on to compare the ant battle with "Concord Fight," and other ant battles of recorded history (W, II, 253-7).[34] The basic structure of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is determined by this same alternation between specific locality and the far reaches of time and space.

Like Thoreau, Emily Dickinson also led a life easily described as provincial; indeed nothing has fascinated many

---

[34]Francis D. Ross, "Rhetorical Procedure in Thoreau's 'Battle of the Ants,'" College Composition and Communication, XVI (February, 1965), 14-18, contains an interesting analysis of this episode. I have borrowed somewhat from his ideas.

Dickinson students quite so much as her being a "recluse," especially when her seclusion is set beside the richness and complexity of her poetry.[35] Dickinson, too, was certainly aware of her provinciality; indeed she thought it necessary to be a provincial, and she was determined to make the most of it.

> The Robin's my Criterion for Tune--
> Because I grow--where Robins do--
> But, were I Cuckoo born--
> I'd swear by him
> . . . . . .
> The Seasons flit--I'm taught--
> Without the Snow's Tableau
> Winter, were lie--to me--
> Because I see--New Englandly--
> The Queen, discerns like me--
> Provincially--[36]

The cosmopolitan side of Emily Dickinson, however, is not so well known.[37] Jack L. Capps has now made evident the

---

[35]In "Emily Dickinson," Collected Essays (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959), p. 198, Allen Tate notes that one of the difficulties between Dickinson and her readers "is the failure of the scholars to feel more than biographical curiosity about her." He also suggests (p. 201) we are hindered by "a modern prejudice: we believe that no virgin can know enough to write poetry."

[36]Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1955), I, 204.

[37]George Frisbie Whicher, This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), concluding a chapter on "Books and Reading" says "Emily rarely borrowed either thought or phrase" (p. 222), and, although admitting some "food for reflection in books as in life," he flatly states that "Emily Dickinson's poetry is not derivable from her reading" (p. 224). Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), p. 204, agrees with Whicher; although Chase admits that she may be indebted for a few words and paraphrases, he too, flatly insists that

degree to which her reading provided Dickinson with an intellectual cosmopolitanism. Summing up her reading in the Renaissance and eighteenth century, he says:

> She had absorbed basic materials from the two great Renaissance works, The King James Bible and Shakespeare's plays; to these she added the subtle wit and concrete imagery of the metaphysical poets and the control characteristic of the neoclassical era. Although her reading was not the orderly process that this implies, she was well qualified as a potential disciple of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Romantic Movement.[38]

In a more general summation Capps wrote that "her reading and correspondence introduced her to much of the world's great literature, brought her into contact with the major events of nineteenth-century Europe and America, and kept her informed about everyday life in Amherst."[39] Through this reading "Emily Dickinson gained the vicarious experience and perspective that made possible the perceptive observations and penetrating analyses characteristic of her poetry."[40]

In spite of the fine work done by Capps, it is very difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy exactly what role the cosmopolitan quality plays in her verse. Still, she

---

"Neither in her thought nor in her style is Emily Dickinson influenced in any particularly demonstrable way by literary sources."

[38]Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836-1886 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 76.

[39]Ibid., p. vii.

[40]Ibid., p. 145.

fits the pattern of cosmopolitan provincialism; there can be little doubt but that her wide reading is a major influence on her character and helped offset the effects of her seclusion.

In the next poet to be considered, E. A. Robinson, the provincial and cosmopolitan aspects are somewhat difficult to trace, partially because by 1900 it was becoming somewhat easier to be cosmopolitan within the framework of American thought. Not only had there been a golden age of American literature but also Robinson was a student at Harvard during the golden age of American philosophy. During his studies at Harvard Robinson mentions in a letter that he was required to read Royce's The Spirit of Modern Philosophy.[41] The problem of isolating a cosmopolitan aspect of Robinson's thought is indicated by the disagreement concerning the influence of Royce on Robinson, and, by way of Royce, the influence of Schopenhauer.[42] Quite apart

---

[41]Estelle Kaplan, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 8.

[42]Ibid., pp. 25-34. In this chapter, "Royce and Schopenhauer," Miss Kaplan summarizes the argument. Her own conclusion is that "there may not be very much similarity between Schopenhauer and Robinson, but there certainly is between Robinson and the Roycean interpretation of Schopenhauer . . ." (p. 29). The controversy continues in Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1946), p. 4, where Winters states that "Robinson's transcendentalism appears to me fragmentary, occasional, and contrary to the main direction of his thought and achievement; furthermore, it is of so simple a nature that the influence of a professional philosopher such as Royce is hardly necessary to account for it "

from the possible influence of Royce, Robinson would be indirectly familiar with contemporary philosophical thought by way of Thomas Hardy and Matthew Arnold, and the French writers Alphonse Daudet, Emile Zola, and Paul Verlaine.

In his life Robinson, like the earlier writers, was a provincial. Born in Head Tide, Maine, he spent his life in Gardiner, Maine, Boston, Peterborough, New Hampshire, and New York City, and he was largely cut off from personal contact with the major figures of American thought by the lack of a reputation until his last years. He was unable to visit Europe until 1923, a time at which, most critics agree, his greatest work had been done. That Robinson himself felt a cosmopolitan-provincial tension is clear: he found England to be "a strangely foreign sort of place that was strangely like home." Still, he felt that he would be unable to work in England because "Old England and New England would be forever fighting for the upper hold."[43]

Robinson's thought, as expressed in his poetry, on the other hand is more difficult to deal with. The transcendental aspect almost certainly derives primarily from Emerson, though it may have been modified by Royce. His pessimistic side could be in the tradition of his New England Puritan forebearers, but again almost certainly modified by the contemporary naturalistic tendencies of

---

[43]Quoted in Emery Neff, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), p. 217.

literature. In the final analysis, then, the two forces can be seen at work in Robinson, even though they cannot be handily categorized.

Robert Frost, the last of the New England writers to be considered, gives the appearance in his biography of being the least provincial of all the New England writers. He alone of these writers lived abroad for several years, and this in the early stages of his career.[44] He spent many years as teacher or poet-in-residence at American colleges and universities, and he traveled widely throughout the United States on lecture tours. He lived long enough after becoming famous to have entree everywhere; he was poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, and he was sent to foreign countries by the United States Department of State. Finally, there is Frost's well known love of classical writings, especially Virgil's eclogues.

Nevertheless, the effects of these cosmopolitan influences are hard to find in his work. It was once thought that England provided him with the perspective with which to view his own New England; it is clear, however, that the poems which make up Frost's first book, A Boy's Will, which was published in England, had in fact been carried with him. They had been composed in New England, along with most of the poems that went into the second

---

[44]Frost's "career" as a published poet, like Robinson's began late. A Boy's Will was published in England in 1913, shortly after Frost's thirty-ninth birthday.

volume, North of Boston, also published first in England.[45] Nevertheless, Frost himself felt that Old England did provide some perspective on New England. He said that he "never saw New England as clearly as when he was in Old England."[46] This statement seems to suggest that cosmopolitan influences tended only to affirm the essentially provincial quality of Frost's mind. Perhaps the most that can be said for the influence of Frost's stay in England is that the publication of two volumes, contact with the major contemporary poets of the English speaking world (Pound and Yeats for example), and close friendship with a number of lesser poets such as Edward Thomas and Lascelles Abercrombie gave Frost the confidence he needed.

To extricate cosmopolitan elements in Frost's poetry itself is also difficult, and this for two reasons: first of all, the attitude that Frost takes toward life, as I will show in detail later, is that life is a continuing experience, an experiment. Secondly, the pose that Frost adopts, that of farmer-poet or of common man speaking to common man, almost necessarily means that he is going to choose situations largely from common rural life and that

---

[45]Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 105-07.

[46]Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 116.

he is going to present these situations in language that effectively keeps the reader's attention on locale, region, and on Frost's pose as poet-farmer. His pose requires him to appear, in other words, as the embodiment of sabiduria. Reginald Cook, who applied this Spanish term to Frost, points out that the word has no exact English equivalent but that basically "it is a profound distinctive folk trait--a kind of preternatural awareness of experience."[47] Given his pose, then, Frost's thought must give the appearance of simply welling up into the consciousness by way of the ordinary experience available to all men, but here, of course, largely restricted to the rural folk, the most traditional purveyors of folk wisdom. It is not my intention to prove that merely spontaneous wisdom constitutes the reality of Frost's poetry; it is, of course, a highly conscious, deliberate, controlled art, and the success of the appearance proves it. Nevertheless, the demands of the pose effectively cover whatever cosmopolitan influences that might be at work within Frost's poems.

One cosmopolitan influence that critics have recognized from very early, however, is that of the classic authors. Lascelles Abercrombie in reviewing North of Boston says that Frost's poetry "exhibits almost the identical desires and impulses we see in the 'bucolic'

---

[47]Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 34.

poems of Theocritus."[48] This influence is most overtly exhibited in "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral," a discussion of contemporary political tendencies.[49] This poem also illustrates another problem in dealing with the cosmopolitan-provincial qualities of Frost's poetry. Namely, when Frost appears most cosmopolitan, that is, when he is dealing with contemporary national and international events, he is in reality the most provincial. Conversely when he appears on the surface to be most provincial he is often the most cosmopolitan, which is simply to say that the more local poems transcend their localism, while the more broadly based poems fail to do so. Any number of poems, from "The Tuft of Flowers" in A Boy's Will (CP,31) to "Choose Something Like a Star" in Steeple Bush (CP, 575), could be offered in evidence for this contention.

Of the strictly provincial aspects of Frost's poetry little need be said: it is that for which he is famous--

---

[48]Richard Thornton (ed.). Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), p. 28. See also Edward Garnett: "One may contend that 'The Housekeeper' is cast in much the same gossiping style as Theocritus's idyll, 'The Ladies of Syracuse'. . ." (Ibid., p. 35), and Ezra Pound, "Modern Georgics," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, V (December, 1914), 127. The title indicates Pound's awareness of a classical influence.

[49]Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), pp. 421-30. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Frost's poetry are from this edition and will appear in parentheses after each reference. The page number will be preceded by CP.

whether it be his portrayal of the rural New England setting and character within his poetry, or his own widely known statements on trying to catch the idiom of the spoken voice, or his choice of a place to live, "north of Boston."

In an attempt to fix the "New England mind," I have traced at some length one Puritan legacy through the representative authors; the same can be done with the other categories. The Puritans were willing to face up to the results of their investigations, and the same is true of Emerson. The results of his primary investigation are found in the essay Nature: "Let us inquire, to what end is nature?"[50] And the result of that investigation is, at the least, that there is a Unifying Force behind the apparent diversity and flux of the world and that man can have an immediate perception of that Force. At the most, the result is that material is phenomenal only, "that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us. . . ."[51] The results of this investigation is the essay "Self-Reliance," in which Emerson reiterates as the basis for his self-reliance that "We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity."[52]

---

[50]Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Complete Works, ed. J. E. Cabot (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884), I, 10.

[51]Ibid., pp. 67-68.

[52]Ibid., II, 65.

His willingness to follow this notion to its logical extremes is demonstrated when in the same essay he tells of being warned that the inner voices may be of the devil; Emerson replies: "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will then live from the Devil."[53]

Emerson's interest in nature is so prevalent and obvious in his writings that nothing need be said on that score. In turning to his attitude toward work, however, one finds an ambiguity that is strongly reminiscent of the Puritans. Emerson makes it abundantly clear that he is opposed to nineteenth century commercialism. In Nature, for example, he admits that the first use of nature is "commodity" but closes by saying, "A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work."[54] This statement in itself sums up Emerson's attitude: Like the Puritans he does not conceive of the profit motive as justification for work; instead, like them, he finds it as a way of developing the soul and as something which can be enjoyed for its own sake as long as the enjoyment is carried out in the proper spirit.

---

[53] Ibid., p. 52.

[54] Ibid., I, 20. See also "The American Scholar," where he points to the division of labor as a curse on modern life (pp. 84-85); later (pp. 98-99) he points to labor as the source of language and as an indispensable link in the chain of the psychology of thought. His position is further set forth in "The Divinity School Address" when he says nature invites subduing: "How wide; how rich;

Emerson's concern with individualism and personal experience is also obvious in everything he writes. Self-reliance or self-trust is the final message or the underpinning of Nature, "The American Scholar," and "The Divinity School Address" as well as the essay so entitled. Although he does not totally dismiss the past experience of the human race, Emerson does have a basic distrust of vicarious experience, which leads him at times to sound as if he were totally rejecting the past. In "The American Scholar," for instance, he posits an apparently chaotic universe that can be brought to order only by personal experience: "So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion."[55] The major complaint of "The Divinity School Address," too, is that religion is no longer a personal experience. Again like the Puritans Emerson is inextricably led to a major emphasis on introspection by his attitudes toward other things. If all things serve higher and lower functions, the only way one can determine that he is using the higher is through introspection.

---

what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty of man! In its fruitful soils; in its navigable sea; in its mountains of metal and stone; in its forest of all woods; in its animals; in its chemical ingredients; in the powers and path of light, heat, attraction and life, it is well worth the pith and heart of great men to subdue and enjoy it" (Ibid., 120-21).

[55] Ibid., p. 96.

It is the concept of the immediate intuitive insight and the insistence on personal experience, however, that most demand self-searching. As I pointed out in regard to the Puritans, there are no objective criteria to apply to the inner voice. Emerson may not care if the voice is from God or the Devil, but he surely wants to settle the question in his own mind, which requires introspection. Furthermore, introspection seems necessary just to hear the voice and understand its import. Emerson also found a literary application for the process of introspection, however: when the scholar as poet has the proper confidence in himself, "he learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secret of all minds."[56] Such a statement not only justifies an author's concern for his own ego, but it also makes introspection a major literary tool or resource.

Thoreau's interest in these Puritan concerns is even more evident than Emerson's. Thoreau's willingness to face up to the results of his investigations is contained, for instance, in his famous statement that he went to Walden Pond in order to "reduce [life] to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, . . . or if it were sublime, to know it by experience . . ." (W, II, 101). For Thoreau,

---

[56] Ibid., p. 103.

however, life was a continual investigation, as is shown by the prevalence of exploration or journey metaphors in his writing.

In his attitude toward nature, Thoreau is capable of some startlingly contradictory statements. At one time he sees nature as contrary to man:

> I love Nature partly <u>because</u> she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this. None of the joys she supplies is subject to his rules and definitions. What he touches he taints. In thought he moralizes. One would think that no free, joyful labor was possible to him. How infinite and pure the least pleasure of which Nature is the basis, compared with the congratulations of man. . . . I have a room all to myself; it is nature. It is a place beyond the jurisdiction of human government (J, IV, 445-6).

He was, on the other hand, capable of seeing nature from an opposite point of view: "What is Nature unless there is an eventful human life passing within her? Many joys and many sorrows are the lights and shadows in which she shows most beautiful" (J, V, 472); again in 1856 he says that "man is all in all, Nature nothing, but as she draws him out and reflects him" (J, IX, 121). In contrast to her ability to make him "content with this world," Thoreau in a different mood can suggest that "we soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy" (J, VI, 293). Regardless of purpose or conclusion, however, nature was the major interest of Thoreau's life.

On the subject of work, Thoreau's attitudes in their broad outlines parallel the Puritans', although he was far more certain of the likelihood that the material gains of work interfere with spiritual progress than were the Puritans, even with their insistence on innate depravity. Thoreau was more aware of the enslaving quality of material possessions than were the Puritans. Given a door mat for his cabin at Walden Pond, he quickly discovered it had to be shaken. He threw the mat away, preferring to wipe his feet on the grass, with the comment that "it is best to avoid the beginnings of evil" (W, II, 74). Thoreau never condemns work in itself, however. The popular misconceptions about his attitude toward work arise largely from the extravagant statements he feels it necessary to use in "Economy" (Walden) in order "to wake his neighbors up." What he did condemn, in addition to the spiritually blunting material gains, was work which was master of the man rather than the servant, work which was antithetical to, or postponed the business of living life, work so stultifying to the imagination as to make the worker into a machine, work which was obviously the exploitation of one man by another, and, above all, work performed by those who worked because they had no other resources with which to fill up their time. "Some are 'industrious,' and appear to love labor for its own sake, or perhaps because it keeps them out of worse mischief; to such I have at present nothing to

say" (W, II, 78). Thoreau perceived his neighbors dichotomizing existence into "work" and "life"; he felt that the two could and should be synthesized instead. Work to Thoreau was a necessary ingredient synthesized into the entire makeup of the good life; his positive comments on the subject make this fact clear.

Thoreau is famous for keeping his spiritual accounts (W, II, 20), but he was just as careful with his material accounts. His independent spirit would naturally demand that he pay his own way in the world, and he did. He even returned quid pro quo to Emerson for the use of the land on which to place his cabin.[57] Thoreau expected the same ability to pay their own way in other poets: "--Scholars are apt to think themselves privileged to complain as if their lot was a peculiarly hard one. . . . There is no reason why the scholar who professes to be a little wiser than the mass of men, should not do his work in the ditch occasionally. . . ."[58] Thoreau finds more value in labor than just independence, however, especially for the writer. He gives manual labor a good deal of credit for the prose

---

[57]Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), p. 215: "It is probable that the bargain was, that Thoreau should clear the field, build his house in the clearing below, and, if and when he had enough, leave or sell his improvements to his landlord. He was, as always, paying his way."

[58]Henry David Thoreau, The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 224.

style which his critics now so much admire. "I find incessant labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, the best method to remove palaver out of one's style," he says in early 1842 (J, I, 312). In November, 1850, he says,

> Hard and steady and engrossing labor with the hands, especially out of doors, is invaluable to the literary man and serves him directly. Here I have been for six days surveying in the woods, and yet when I get home at evening, somewhat weary at last, and beginning to feel that I have nerves, I find myself more susceptible than usual to the finest influences, as music and poetry (J, III, 126).

Such comments resemble Emerson's, of course, except that Thoreau is explicit in pointing to manual labor, whereas Emerson may have something as broad as "experience" or "activity" in mind.

It is clear, finally, that Thoreau felt that his long walks in, and study of nature constituted his work. Asked to help build a wall, he records his reaction: "Now, if I do this, the community will commend me as an industrious and hard-working man; but, as I choose to devote myself to labors which yield more profit, though but little money, they regard me as a loafer" (J, IV, 253). Thoreau shows his descent from Puritans, it could be argued, by his devotion to his work. Perry Miller goes even farther by comparing him with other exploiters of nature: "For [Thoreau] these metaphors . . . were the rewards of an

exploitation of natural resources, as self-centered, as profit-seeking, as that of John Jacob Astor."[59]

In his insistence on personal experience, his distrust of vicarious experience, Thoreau is more emphatic than Emerson. Although his statements in Walden are extravagant to shock his readers, Thoreau seems quite serious when he says, "I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose" (W, II, 10). Since this approach to life is one of the closest ties between Thoreau and Frost, I will develop it in detail in a later chapter. Thoreau's individualism certainly needs no documentation.

On the matter of introspection, Thoreau, too, is led by his other views. Anyone who rejects external authority is required to find authority within himself, and Thoreau spent much of his life in doing just this. Large segments of the fourteen volume Journal are given over to sheer observation of natural phenomena, but Thoreau was always dissatisfied with this approach. What he really wants to know is what the natural phenomena mean to him in terms of his humanity; hence he is led back to introspection.

---

[59]Henry David Thoreau, Consciousness in Concord: Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal," (1840-1841), ed. Perry Miller (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 33.

Emily Dickinson, too, has the ability to face the results of her investigations, but life for her, more than for any of the other writers, is a continuing investigation, and her conclusions are always tentative. In one of her major areas of investigation, the existence of God and his relation to her, she can write:

> I never spoke with God
> Nor visited in Heaven--
> Yet certain am I of the spot
> As if the Checks were given--,[60]

reflecting an assurance equal to that of Jonathan Edwards. As the result of another investigation, however, she says:

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy Flower
> The Frost beheads it at it's [sic] play--
> In accidental power--
> The blonde Assassin passes on--
> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God.[61]

Investigation in some instances seems to lead not to clarity but to ambiguity:

> Prayer is the little implement
> Through which Men reach
> Where Presence--is denied them.
> They fling their Speech
>
> By means of it--in God's Ear--
> If then He hear--
> This sums the Apparatus
> Comprised in Prayer--[62]

---

[60] Dickinson, Poems, II, 742.

[61] Ibid., III, 1114.

[62] Ibid., I

Thus Emily Dickinson records the results of her investigations, with no attempt to evade the issues.

Although she maintains her usual skepticism in her dealings with nature, doubting whether or not it can finally reveal the Truth to man,[63] Dickinson does seem to see in nature "types" similar to those Jonathan Edwards records in Images or Shadows of Divine Things. This is shown in many poems which begin in nature and end in metaphysical speculation, such as "Apparently with no surprise," quoted above, or the "Narrow Fellow in the Grass" that leads to "Zero at the Bone--."[64] If, as Allen Tate suggests, "the general symbol of Nature, for her, is Death . . .,"[65] then her concern for nature becomes overwhelming; a good many of her most famous poems ("Because I could not stop for Death," "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--," "The last Night that She lived") are concerned with death, others' or her own.

Emily Dickinson is, of course, a most introspective poet. Her analysis of experience most often is either the experience of an emotion or the emotional quality of an external experience, hence introspective. More specifically the emotion is often pain in one or another of its

---

[63] Ibid., see #668, II, 515; #1170, II, 817; #1371, III, 946; and #1400, III, 970.

[64] Ibid., II, 711-12.

[65] Tate, "Emily Dickinson," p. 203.

forms. Thus the experience of despair is considered in "There's a certain Slant of light," and an unspecified pain in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain."

Another poetic subject matter which shows Dickinson's introspective tendencies most clearly is her concern with consciousness. In the very Thoreauvian metaphor of geographical exploration, for example, she advocates inner exploration:

> Soto! Explore thyself!
> Therein thyself shalt find
> The "Undiscovered Continent"--
> No Settler had the Mind.[66]

Dickinson's most characteristic approach to the fact of consciousness is one of terror; yet so great is her honesty that she is willing to face the possibility of madness to follow out her introspective investigations.

E. A. Robinson perhaps more than any other American writer, including the Puritans, looks at the universe and without falsification, reports what he sees. The controversy over how he is to be categorized--transcendentalist, (philosophical) naturalist, transcendental-naturalist, naturalistic-transcendentalist, pessimist, optimist, and every other possible combination--testifies to the width and depth of his investigations and the complexity of the resulting attitudes. There is no question but that he rejected the relatively easy optimism of Emerson; yet there

---

[66]Dickinson, op. cit., II, 631.

is a good deal of evidence that he also rejected the nearly total pessimism of philosophical naturalism. Although it is not Robinson's best poem, the clearest statement of his willingness to investigate is shown in "The Man Against the Sky"; this poem shows Robinson's tendency seemingly to give the last word to his opponents, a tendency which has so often caused his readers to misread him. He sums up the possibilities as follows:

> Whatever drove or lured or guided him,--
> A vision answering a faith unshaken,
> An easy trust assumed of easy trials,
> A sick negation born of weak denials,
> A crazed abhorrence of an old condition
> A blind attendance on a brief ambition,--
> Whatever stayed him or derided him,
> His way was even as ours.[67]

Robinson then goes on to suggest that the meaning and purpose of life are unknowable; this unknowable quality, in turn, leads many people to conclude that there is nothing. Such people, however, have failed to face up to the logical consequences of their thought, namely, "why live?" and have failed to take into account one fact, the fact that we do live. The final six lines, then, which appear to the careless reader as an advocation of voluntary genocide, are premised on the incomplete and mistaken conclusion that the unknowable equals the purposeless. In other words,

---

[67]Edwin Arlington Robinson, Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 65.

Robinson, without at all denying the pain, terror, and mysteriousness of life, sees in the fact that man keeps on living proof that life has meaning. This short-sighted view often taken by man is clearly expressed in the following from "Hillcrest":

> If, eager to confuse too soon,
> What he has known with what may be,
> He reads a planet out of tune
> For cause of his jarred harmony,--

he may then learn "A little more than what he knew. . . ."[68] To sum up, Robinson can gaze unflinchingly at two facts of life: the pain and terror that makes life apparently meaningless and the fact that life goes on.

On the subjects of nature and work Robinson shows somewhat less interest than the other writers that have been examined. When nature is present, however, it seems often to provide evidence for despair. In "Luke Havergal," for instance, "God slays Himself with every leaf that falls."[69] In "The Pity of the Leaves," too, the leaves seem to torture the old man by deliberately letting "him know/How dead they were. . . ."[70] The reader faces the same problem of point of view here that he does with "Luke

---

[68] Ibid., p. 16.

[69] Ibid., p. 74. There is no conclusive evidence, of course, that the speaker represents Robinson, or even the "poet." The voice speaking in the poem may be Luke Havergal himself. Regardless of whose voice is heard, for him nature invites despair and probably suicide.

[70] Ibid., p. 86.

Havergal"; even though "The Pity of the Leaves" is narrated in a very straightforward tone, the reader cannot be sure but that the leaves menace only because the old man, short sighted like the readers of "The Man Against the Sky," reads a menace into them. In several less well-known poems, on the other hand, nature is a source of comfort: "The Sheaves," for example, portrays a natural world which is beautiful though transitory. In "As It Looked Then" the speaker finds himself in a wasteland on what had once been a path that "ran/Blindly from nowhere and to nowhere led,"

> And then it was like a spoken word
> Where there was none to speak, insensibly
> A flash of blue that might have been a bird
> Grew soon to the calm wonder of the sea--
> Calm as a quiet sky that looked to be
> Arching over a world where nothing had occurred.[71]

There is also "Monadnock Through the Trees" in which the mountain calmly and quietly sat there "Before there were the first of us around," and will still be there after we are gone, with "calm . . . the same as when the first/ Assyrians went howling south to war."[72] Robinson also uses nature to reflect the state of affairs within the human community, as in Merlin where nature participates in the final collapse of Arthur's reign; whether such usage constitutes an acceptance of Emerson's metaphysics or

---

[71] Ibid., p. 872.

[72] Ibid., p. 581.

whether it is simply the continuation of an old literary tradition is difficult to assess.

It is easy to conclude, then, that Robinson is less interested in nature than the other New England writers. Insofar as he does take an interest he seems to imply that it is somewhat possible to discover truth in nature; at the same time he appears suspicious--more so even than Dickinson--that what we learn from nature is simply what we read into it.

In the few poems in which Robinson deals with the subject of work, he is concerned with the disruptive quality of its withdrawal, leaving open the question of whether it is work as such that concerns him or rather the sudden break with traditional patterns. The clearest statement is in "The Mill," where the miller, after commenting to his wife that "There are no millers anymore," apparently hangs himself.[73] To some extent "Miniver Cheevy" also is a serio-comic dramatization of a man who is unable to find a life's work. Although work, when it does appear in Robinson's poems, seems to have a steadying influence, it is not the final subject of any poem; Robinson simply shows little interest in it.

The categories of reliance on personal experience and individualism, and introspection, are also difficult to

---

[73] Ibid., pp. 460-61.

trace clearly in Robinson and for several reasons: First, as poet he so often hides himself behind the character in the poem; that is, if the poem is narrated in the first person, the speaker's identity is usually known enough to identify him as one of the inhabitants of Tillbury Town. Secondly, the poem's narrator is usually looking at or commenting on a second person rather than himself ("Rembrandt to Rembrandt" is a notable exception). Third, Robinson's favorite theme is failure of one kind or another, often where least expected.[74] It might not be stretching things too far, in fact, to suggest that the failures are due in part to a failure to introspect. Such a thesis has to be handled with caution, however, since the character is so often presented from an outside point of view and the narrator's reliability is sometimes open to question. Surely it is fruitless to speculate on the reasons for Richard Corey's suicide, for example, since the inability to know is a theme in the poem; yet one can hardly avoid noticing the attributes given him: he is a "gentleman"; "he glittered when he walked"; and he was "schooled in

---

[74]See Ellsworth Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), who quotes Robinson on "failures": "Well, isn't it the people who fail who are more interesting than the others? They are at least for the purpose of dramatic poetry. There is nothing poetic, and usually nothing dramatic about anyone who is a 'success,'" and "Somehow model citizens don't make good poems" (p. 199).

every grace."[75] Corey suggests, in other words, the kind of external virtue advocated by Benjamin Franklin, or the product of Newman's university education. On the positive side, too, Robinson seems to endorse introspection as a way of getting beyond the numbing despair of what the senses alone teach. In "Hillcrest," one of the few poems in which the speaker can clearly be identified as Robinson, he says:

> He may, if he but listen well,
> Through twilight and the silence here,
> Be told what there are none may tell
> To vanity's impatient ear.[76]

Aunt Imogen, too, in the poem by that name, achieves happiness by the self-awareness brought about by introspection, spurred in turn by the casual remark of her nephew. Finally, Robinson's greatest dramatic monologue, "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," reveals a highly introspective character.

Reliance on the self is to some extent forced on the characters in Robinson's poems by the fact of the inpenetrability of the experiences of others. Positively, the handful of relatively successful people that Robinson treats--Imogen, King Cole, Isaac, Archibald, and possibly Lancelot--achieve what measure of success they do achieve by holding to their personal vision. Again, it may not be too far amiss to suggest that the failures fail because

---

[75]Robinson, op. cit., p. 82.

[76]Ibid., p. 16.

they lack that vision or lose faith in it. One can only conclude, however, that Robinson fits less well into the various categories of the "New England mind" than any of the other writers, largely because he chooses an external point of view and characters who fail.

The most serious challenge to Robert Frost's popularly accepted position in the twentieth century American pantheon is based on the charge that he is unwilling to face up to the consequences of his investigations.[77] Yet what these challenges amount to, in large measure, is in fact an attack on Frost for lacking philosophical consistency. In this discussion, however, the term "investigation" has not implied a necessarily consistent stand. I have shown, for example, that for Thoreau, and even more for Emily Dickinson, life is a continuing experiment, or series of experiments. The final grand summation is lacking because when the experiment is over, life is over, and there is then no opportunity to make the grand conclusion. Thoreau expressed something of this notion when he wrote:

---

[77] Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: Or, The Spiritual Drifter as Poet," The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957), pp. 157-87, is the finest statement of this position; however see also Malcolm Cowley, "Frost: A Dissenting Opinion," The New Republic, CXI (September 11), 312-13 and (September 18, 1944), 345-47, and George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), pp. 184-188.

> My life has been the poem I would have writ
> But I could not both live and utter it (*W*, I, 365).

So it is for Dickinson and so it is for Frost. Each poem, whether it be "After Apple-Picking," "Birches," or "Directive," records the results of one step in the experiment of living and should be read as such. One function of the poet has traditionally been thought to be the clarification of life; Frost provides clarification in a series of "momentary stay[s] against confusion," and given his point of view of life as an ongoing experiment or experience, it is impossible for him to reach the final conclusion. In these terms, then, the poems mentioned above (as well as many more) show Frost facing up to the implications of his investigations into the facts of living.

It is Frost's interest in nature that links him most closely with the transcendentalists and with Thoreau, although he is certainly more skeptical. It links him to his Puritan forebearers also. Frost clearly believes that the study of nature is one way of finding out about the world, and like the Puritans he nevertheless finds dangers in it. Frost of course rejects Edwards's notion that only the elect can with complete safety study nature (or anything else, for that matter), but he feels that man can become so engrossed in particular aspects of nature that, like Robinson's failures, he refuses to go beyond it.

> Won't this whole instinct matter bear revision?
> Won't almost any theory bear revision?
> To err is human, not to, animal.

> Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,
> Only too liberal of our compliment
> That really takes away instead of gives. (CP, 361).

These lines derive their force from the fact that the white-tailed hornet has just attacked two nailheads and a huckleberry on the mistaken assumption that each was a fly. The naturalist, Frost suggests, by his concentration on a single fact has taken us back to that other position, Puritan determinism, which the naturalist has rejected. Frost the poet has beat the scientists at their own game; he has out-investigated the investigators, he has out-observed the observers.

Frost maintains the ambiguous attitude toward work which can be seen in the Puritans, Emerson, and especially Thoreau. His own life seems to resemble Emerson's man on the farm rather than the mere farmer. He spent a large portion of his adult life on a farm, yet he never allowed the farm (or any other of his work) to become his master. He is generally opposed, in a way reminiscent of Thoreau, to commercialism as a justification for work. He praises New Hampshire, for example, for having "One each of everything as in a showcase/Which naturally she doesn't care to sell" (CP, 201). He makes the point even more explicit in the first stanza:

> I met a lady from the South who said
> (You won't believe she said it, but she said it):
> 'None of my family ever worked, or had
> A thing to sell.' I don't suppose the work
> Much matters. You may work for all of me.
> I've seen the time I've had to work myself.

The having anything to sell is what
Is the disgrace of man or state or nation (CP, 199).

Although Frost is not unaware that work can be sheer drudgery, what he chooses to emphasize instead is the pride in craftsmanship that work can provide, the sense of human dignity and independence it can instill, and, in a manner again reminiscent of Thoreau, the insights it can bestow.[78] The pride in craftsmanship is shown in any number of poems such as "The Death of the Hired Man," in which Warren is forced to recognize Silas's ability to load hay. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time" the poet expresses his pride in his ability to handle the ax, then goes on to point out that a man is known by his work: "Except as a fellow handled an ax/They had no way of knowing a fool" (CP, 358). In "The Ax-Helve," too, Baptiste is proud of his ability to choose the best "hick'ry what's grow crooked./De second growt' I cut myself--tough, tough," and then to carve the handle so that the lines were "native to the grain" (CP, 229-30); the poet also admires Baptiste's skill and willingly grants his superiority in this area. "The Code" reflects the individual's pride in his craftsmanship and goes on to point

---

[78]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 97, has recognized the kinship of Thoreau and Frost on the matter of work. Though Emerson advocated physical labor, Matthiessen points out, it "did not serve to steady and release his skill in writing. . . ." In contrast to Emerson, however, "for Thoreau, as for Robert Frost, this gospel was a living act."

out the fierce independence that it can give to the craftsman. Frost therefore advocates the same kind of integration of work with the rest of life that Thoreau did:

> But yield who will to their separation,
> My object in living is to unite
> My avocation and my vocation
> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes (CP, 359).

Thoreau would accept this verse as stating his own goal in life as well as he ever managed to express it himself. In "Mowing," moreover, Frost makes the statement that "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" (CP, 25). Now this poem does not explicitly state the special value of work to the poet, but this seems to be implied. At any rate, Frost is famous for his attention to "fact," and like Thoreau he seems to find it in work.

In one poem, "The Ax-Helve," Frost complicates his attitude toward work even more. The commercially manufactured handle, he says, had lines "Like the two strokes across a dollar sign" (CP, 228), suggesting that the making of it provided no fulfillment except the fulfillment of the profit motive. The handle made by Baptiste, on the other hand, clearly fulfills his need for artistic expression; yet when he is finished the handle stood "Erect, but not without its waves, as when/The snake stood up for evil in the Garden--" (CP, 231). Suddenly the subject of work has been related to the knowledge which makes work possible

(and, according to Christian mythology, necessary). In these two lines Frost suggests a central dilemma of life: innocence is good, experience is evil; yet experience is what makes man human.[79] Frost does not solve the problem, nor does he attempt to. He merely brings the question to the reader's attention as a contrast to the craftsmanship and beauty of Baptiste's ax-helve.

Frost's view of life as an experiment requires him to place considerable reliance on personal experience and individualism. Biographically he has shown his self-reliance by the faith he has shown in his poetry. A less self-reliant poet may have given in to the suggestions that he follow Sidney Lanier, especially when his own highly individual poetry was not selling. Almost certainly a less self-reliant man could not have avoided being warped clean out of his own orbit (Emerson's phrase) by such overwhelming personalities as Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Amy Lowell. Frost's attitude toward work, as I have noted, leads him to approve of self-reliance in such poems as "The Code," in which the hired man is murderously self-reliant. Self-reliance is also implicit in "The White-Tailed Hornet," in which, on the basis of his personal observation, the poet wonders if almost every theory might

---

[79]See Charles R. Anderson, "Robert Frost," Saturday Review, XLVI (February 23, 1963), p. 20. Anderson's comments first brought this line of thought to my attention.

not bear revision. In his "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral" in which the conclusion of both speakers is that "We're too unseparate" (CP, 430), Frost again shows his faith in reliance on the self. Frost does admit, however, that it is possible to carry self-reliance to the point where it becomes arrogance. Meserve in the poem "Snow" tries to justify his going forth into a storm that any sensible New Englander would be afraid of by saying, "Our snow-storms as a rule/Aren't looked on as mankillers," and by pointing to the birds and animals who survive it. The true reason, however, is that he simply feels compelled to pit himself against the storm. He exhibits that kind of arrogance that a certain type of person justifies as faith, and he is apparently quite oblivious to the anguish he has caused his wife and neighbors (CP, 188-9). On the whole, however, Frost places a good deal of trust in the personal experience and individualism that leads to self-reliance.

Frost, too, is an introspective poet, but, as I suggested in the case of Robinson, the poem is more likely to describe the result of the introspection than it is to deal with its process. The massive set of journals left by both Emerson and Thoreau amply testify to their fascination with the introspective process. Robinson and Frost are, of course, in this tradition, but they are not completely of it. They are also in other words, "modern poets," and one of the manifestations of this modernity is the taking for

granted of the introspective process. Freed from the necessity of documenting its process, the poet can play both directly and indirectly with the results of the introspection. The most emphatic example of this tendency is found, not in Robinson or Frost, but in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which is in a sense not an "introspective poem," but which is based completely and entirely on an introspective process.

What all this means in terms of Frost is that his poetry has a dimension which is easily overlooked. Frost generally seems to be looking at nature and describing what he sees. In reality, however, his gaze is constantly shifting from natural phenomena to himself. In other words, he is always interested in what the phenomena means to him, and in this he resembles Thoreau. Where Thoreau sometimes only implies introspection, however, Frost ordinarily takes it for granted. Thus, "Acquainted with the Night" concludes with, "One luminary clock against the sky/Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right" (CP, 324). The relationship of the proclamation of the clock with the preceding facts of the poem and with the final restatement in the concluding line is only implied. The poem, in fact, does not contain a single word showing a causal relationship; "I have been one acquainted with the night" is related to the description of the walk only by juxtaposition. The process of introspection, the looking within to determine the meaning of the external phenomena, is not

actually stated within the poem, although it obviously took place. Other poems, such as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Come In" make use of the same technique. In "Tree at My Window," on the other hand, the poet does make explicit his concern for introspection: the tree is "so much concerned with outer weather," while the poet is just as concerned with "inner weather" (CP, 318). A number of poems fall in between these two extremes: in "Mending Wall," for example, the reader sees the introspective process revealed through conversation between the two farmers. In "The Wood-Pile" and "The Grindstone" the poet is speaking directly to the reader; the introspection itself remains assumed, but the results are the subject of the poet's talk. In "The Oven Bird" the introspective process is imaginatively projected into the bird, the poet only reporting the bird's process.

The preceding pages have been given over to an examination of the "New England mind." What the examination shows, in the first place, is that the New England mind, or the concerns of that mind, was originally determined by the Puritan settlers and to some extent the fact of relative geographic isolation. Of course, there has been no attempt to show that the concerns and methods have been identical or that each author was interested in any one point in exactly the same proportions as all the others; such a contention would seem to premise that time

has left New England untouched. In addition, of course, each writer was a unique personality, and he expressed that personality in his writings. What is remarkable is the quality of continuity that has extended from 1630 to 1963.

Having considered Frost within the New England tradition, two tasks remain to be completed: first, to place Frost in relation to the general movement known as Transcendentalism; second, to determine what is unique about Thoreau, that is to separate him as an individual from the generic transcendental.

It is perhaps just as well to suggest at the outset that Frost is not a transcendentalist, although the truth of this assertion depends on the definition of the term or on which attributes are emphasized. A satisfactory comprehensive definition is very difficult to arrive at, as is shown by the fact that the transcendentalists themselves were concerned that the movement not adopt a creed or a set of principles; in their own eyes nothing could have more clearly signaled the failure of the movement. Nevertheless, the major tenets are so widely known and so commonly accepted that I have chosen to work from a list of doctrines "which one or another of the American transcendentalists promulgated and which have somehow been accepted as 'transcendental,'"[80] rather than attempting an elaborate

---

[80]William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard. A Handbook to Literature, rev. and enlarged C. Hugh Holman (New

investigation of the subject. Whatever controversy that might arise would be concerned with how much emphasis should be placed on each point instead of whether or not the particular point was worthy of inclusion.

That Frost shares a number of doctrines with the transcendentalists has been made clear by the discussion of him as a New England writer. Thrall and Hibbard point out, for example, that the transcendentalists "believed in living close to nature (Thoreau) and taught the dignity of manual labor (Thoreau)." I have shown that Frost accepts both. "They held firmly that man was divine in his own right . . ., and they urged strongly the essential divinity of man and one great brotherhood." Frost is very suspicious of the divinity of man and perhaps even more so of "one great brotherhood." He shows this suspicion by having Tityrus say in "Build Soil":

> Thank God our practice holds the loves apart
> Beyond embarrassing self-consciousness
> Where natural friends are met, where dogs are kept,
> Where women pray with priests (CP, 423).

Later in the same poem Tityrus adds that

> My friends all know I'm interpersonal.
> But long before I'm interpersonal
> Away 'way down inside I'm personal (CP, 425).

Thrall and Hibbard continue: "Self-trust and self-reliance were to be practised at all times and on all occasions,

---

York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 492. The discussion of transcendentalism is found on pages 492-3; all citations are from these pages.

since to trust self was really to trust the voice of God speaking intuitively within us (Emerson)." Frost, as I have suggested, agrees with the first part of the statement, although he does not agree with the reason; he is self-reliant, but he has no notion that in so doing he is obeying God. Frost, then, does share several attributes with the transcendentalists. Thrall and Hibbard conclude, however, as follows:

> Ultimately . . . transcendentalism was an epistemology, a way of knowing, and the ultimate characteristics which tied together the frequently contradictory beliefs of the loosely formed group . . . was the belief that man can intuitively transcend the limits of the senses and of logic and receive directly higher truths and greater knowledge denied to these mundane methods of knowing.

Frost, of course, does not place such great emphasis on intuition, at least in the same way as the transcendentalists do, Emerson especially. Frost never becomes a living eyeball. If by "higher truths" Thrall and Hibbard mean ultimate truths, then this statement also leaves Frost out. In "The Black Cottage" the minister says

> For, dear me, why abandon a belief
> Merely because it ceases to be true
> Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
> It will turn true again, for so it goes (CP, 77).

Still Frost does seem to believe that man can transcend the evidence of the senses. Frost has made a number of not always consistent statements on the art of poetry, but in one of the most famous he says that a poem, though "it begins in delight . . . ends in wisdom"; it "ends in a

clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (CP, vi). It is clear that poems like "Acquainted with the Night" present truth, if not TRUTH.

Other ways of characterizing transcendentalism are in terms of Platonism, and cosmic optimism. There is no evidence in Frost's poetry that he is in any way a Platonist; moreover, he has specifically denied it: "Then again I am not the Platonist Robinson was."[81] Frost once remarked, however, that "observation covers both sight and insight." According to Reginald Cook Frost meant that

> the invisible world is as real as the phenomenal world of earth, flower, bird, cloud, tree, or grass. Our observation covers both sight, by which we perceive objects in the visible natural universe, and insight by which we detect a metaphysical fact beyond the material one.[82]

To this extent, then, Frost subscribes to the doctrine of correspondences, an important transcendental belief. "Sight and insight" illustrates Frost's most important connection to the movement, and especially to Thoreau.

Neither is Frost a cosmic optimist, although he is more optimistic than he has generally been given credit for

---

[81]Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1938), p. 146.

[82]Reginald L. Cook, Passage to Walden (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), p. 168.

since Lionel Trilling's birthday speech in 1959. One must be extremely careful in citing any Frost poem as evidence of his "settled opinion," but "Our Hold on the Planet" seems to balance his views:

> We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
> There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
> Take nature altogether since time began,
> Including human nature, in peace and war,
> And it must be a little more in favor of man,
> Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,
> Or our number living wouldn't have so increased (CP, 469).

This optimism, such as it is, would hardly satisfy the transcendentalists, and again one must conclude that Frost is not a transcendentalist. Still Frost shares enough of the attributes of transcendentalism that the movement must be taken into account in attempting to place Frost within a literary tradition.

The attempt to show the uniqueness of Thoreau is primarily a problem of bringing him out from under the shadow of Emerson. So much has been written on the subject in the last twenty-five years[83] that only the broad outlines need be suggested here. In view of this modern scholarship and in view of the comments of Thoreau's friends, it is difficult to see why the problem should have arisen. Two close friends of Thoreau, Channing and Emerson himself, certainly recognized Thoreau's uniqueness.

---

[83]Matthiessen, American Renaissance, pp. 153-75, is the basis or inspiration for most succeeding studies.

Although Channing refers only indirectly to Emerson, he puts his finger on one major difference:

> The hobbies [Thoreau] rode dealt with realities, not shadows, and he philosophized ab initio. Metaphysics was his aversion. He believed and lived in his senses loftily. Speculations on the special faculties of the mind, or whether the Not Me comes out of the "I" or the All out of the infinite Nothing, he could not entertain.[84]

Emerson, too, was very aware of the differences between the two, not only in general character but also in the basic ways in which their minds work:

> Thoreau gives me, in flesh and blood and pertinacious Saxon belief, my own ethics. He is far more real, and daily practically obeying them, than I; and fortifies my memory at all times with an affirmative experience which refuses to be set aside.[85]

Emerson recognized an even greater distinction in the prose style of Thoreau:

> In reading Henry Thoreau's journal, I am very sensible of the vigour of his constitution. That oaken strength which I noted whenever he walked, or worked, or surveyed wood-lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field labourer accosts a piece of work, which I should shun as a waste of strength, Henry shows in his literary task. He has muscle, and ventures on and performs feats which I am forced to decline. In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy

---

[84]William Ellery Channing, Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist, with Memorial Verses, new edition, enlarged and ed., F. B. Sanborn (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), pp. 50-51.

[85]Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910-14), VIII, 303.

> generality. 'T is as if I went into a gymnasium, and saw youths leap, climb, and swing with a force unapproachable, --though their feats are only continuations of my initial grapplings and jumps.[86]

Channing's "Reminiscences of Henry D. Thoreau" appeared in part in the Boston Commonwealth in 1863 and 1864. The manuscript was revised and published in 1873 as Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist.[87] Emerson's comments were penned in 1852 and 1863, but remained hidden away in his journal.

In the meantime other critics were commenting on Thoreau. One of two blanks in Lowell's "A Fable for Critics" is generally regarded as being provided for Thoreau's name:

> There comes_____, for instance; to see him's rare sport,
> Tread in Emerson's tracks with legs painfully short;
> How he jumps, how he strains, and gets red in the face,
> To keep step with the mystagogue's natural pace!
> He follows as close as a stick to a rocket,
> His fingers exploring the prophet's each pocket.
> Fie, for shame brother bard; with good fruit of your own,
> Can't you let Neighbor Emerson's orchard alone?
> Besides, 't is no use, you'll find not e'en a core,--
> _____ has picked up all the windfalls before.[88]

Lowell's comment here, apart from its humorous tone, is

---

[86]Ibid., IX, 522.

[87]Lewis Leary, "Thoreau," Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), p. 159.

[88]James Russell Lowell, The Complete Writings of James Russell Lowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), XII, 41. The volumes containing Lowell's poetry are also entitled The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell; this is vol. IV in that five volume set.

based only on a few minor essays that Thoreau had published; hence his opinion is probably excusable.

In 1865, however, he published his essay on Thoreau, "which most solidified public attitudes."[89] In a review which contains much that is just on Thoreau and considerable that is complimentary, Lowell managed to do a great deal of damage to Thoreau's reputation.[90] Not only did he repeat the charge that Thoreau was a pale shadow of Emerson (one of the "pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by Emersonian pollen"), though now "the most remarkable,"[91] but he also went on to charge Thoreau with obstinate egotism,[92] ignoring Thoreau's observations that all that distinguishes Walden from other books in the matter of egotism is that he (Thoreau) retains the "I, or first person" (W, II, 4), the fact that Thoreau knows no one else so well, and, above all, his "brag for humanity" rather than for himself (W, II, 55). Lowell continues his misreading by stating that Thoreau is a primitivist, again ignoring Thoreau's explicit comments to the contrary (W, II, 44). What really mystifies the reader who has any respect for Lowell's abilities as a critic (and as a fellow wit) is his statement that

---

[89]Leary, op. cit., p. 160.

[90]See Austin Warren, "Lowell on Thoreau," Studies in Philology, XXVII (July, 1930), 442-61, for the best analysis of Lowell's article.

[91]Lowell, op. cit., II, 139.

[92]Ibid., pp. 139-41.

"Thoreau had no humor. . . ."[93] The point here is that Lowell distinguished Thoreau from Emerson in only those areas where it worked to Thoreau's detriment, overlooking and ignoring the differences that reflect a distinct credit on Thoreau.

When Thoreau began to emerge from Emerson's shadow near the turn of the century, his uniqueness was thought to consist of the fact that while Emerson only talked about it Thoreau went out and did it. This concept of Thoreau is quite literally true, as Emerson himself at least partially recognized. The statement that Thoreau practised what Emerson only preached implies much more than the early critics meant by it, however. It suggests that while Emerson could rest serene in theory as theory, Thoreau could not. Thoreau undoubtedly felt that the conclusions that Emerson came to in Nature and "The American Scholar" were valid, but there was only one way to be sure; that was to try them out in actual practise. As I noted earlier, life for Thoreau was an experiment; he refused to accept the unsupported conclusions of Emerson's Reason. What Thoreau demanded was the conclusions of the Reason supported by, or growing from the actual experiment of living; hence he never achieved quite the same lofty serenity in the Universal Truth that is so prominent a part of Emerson's thought.

---

[93] Ibid., p. 146.

The concept of Thoreau practising Emerson's preachments can also account for the concreteness which even the most casual reader is able to remark as a feature distinguishing Thoreau from Emerson. The difference in concreteness is so great that it is reflected even in their titles: Emerson entitles his essays "Self-Reliance," "Circles," and "Fate," while Thoreau writes A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, and Cape Cod. To illustrate what this difference means, one can turn to any number of examples of where the two men are reaching the same conclusions. In "Self-Reliance," for example, Emerson says that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds . . .," and "I suppose no man can violate his nature." The most concrete he is able to become is a comparison to a sailing ship tacking to its destination.[94] Thoreau on the same general subject, on the other hand, begins his discussion with a detailed and intrinsically interesting description of his survey of Walden Pond. The conclusion of his survey is "that the line of greatest length intersected the line of greatest breadth exactly at the point of greatest depth . . ." (W, II, 319). To test his hypothesis Thoreau tries it out on White Pond and guesses "within a hundred feet" (W, II, 320); only then does he move on to the conclusion with which Emerson began:

---

[94]Emerson, Complete Works, II, 58-60.

"Draw lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character" (W, II, 321).

It is clear that two important attributes that separate Thoreau from Emerson are his much more experimental, inductive approach to life and the stylistic result of it, a concreteness that sometimes makes Thoreau the best available gloss on Emerson. One other difference between Emerson and Thoreau is that, Lowell notwithstanding,[95] Thoreau's pages are filled with humor, puns, satire, irony, and sheer verbal extravaganza. So pervasive are the wit and humor, especially in the "Economy" section of Walden that one hardly knows what example to choose, but the following will serve:

> One farmer says to me, "You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with;" and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw materials of bones, walking all the time he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plough along in spite of every obstacle (W, II, 10).

Throughout "Economy" Thoreau also makes use of the language

---

[95]It is interesting to note that Lowell in an untitled, unsigned review of Thoreau's Week in the Massachusetts Quarterly Review, III (December, 1849), 51, says that "there are passages of genial humor interspersed at fit intervals, and we close our article with one of them by way of grace. It is a sketch which would have delighted Lamb." He then quotes from (W, I, 22-3). What caused Lowell to change his mind on the matter of Thoreau's humor in 1865 is open to speculation.

of the Concord main street businessman for purpose of satire. He even indulges in the accounting that is so dear to the heart of the business community, and carries his accounts to the quarter penny (W, II, 66). This technique reaches its climax as Thoreau soberly comments on his food bill for an eight month period: "Yes, I did eat $8.74, all told; but I should not thus unblushingly publish my guilt, if I did not know that most of my readers were equally guilty with myself, and that their deeds would look no better in print" (W, II, 66). This is the man that Lowell said had no sense of humor.

It is quite obvious, therefore, that what Emerson and Channing recognized is in fact true; Thoreau is a unique personality, and his uniqueness shows up in every page of his work. He sees life as the testing of propositions; his metaphysical flights are concretely based in marvelous descriptions of particular natural phenomena; and his sense of humor is ubiquitous. Many would argue, in fact, that Emerson might have named Thoreau what T. S. Eliot named Ezra Pound: il miglior fabbro.

With Thoreau brought out from under Emerson's apple tree and established as an individual with an individual sensibility, it is possible to examine him and his views more closely in an attempt to set him in clearer focus. This attempt will consist of illustrating that Thoreau is somewhat more pessimistic than is generally thought, and

that in spite of his best intentions this sense of evil comes to the surface in his writings. When the affirmative quality of Frost's thought is juxtaposed, it will be seen that although they are not identical they are similar.

CHAPTER II

THE DARK SIDE OF THOREAU, THE LIGHT SIDE OF FROST

The Thoreau that comes into the mind of the general reader when he hears the name mentioned is probably the Thoreau of the "Conclusion" to Walden--the Thoreau who tells of the artist of Kouroo and of "the beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood"; the Thoreau, in other words, who

> learned this, at least, by [his] experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings (W, II, 356).

The general reader, then, probably calls to mind a Thoreau who is confident of the divinity inherent in mankind. This picture of Thoreau exists primarily for two reasons: In the first place, the only work of Thoreau's which the general reader is likely to be familiar with is Walden, and Walden represents the mature Thoreau determined to be optimistic; if the reader knows a second work, it will likely be A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, an even more optimistic book. In the second place (and this

applies to readers who are more widely read in his works), Thoreau was quite anxious to concentrate on the optimistic view of life.

This determination to present an optimistic view of life did not proceed from either ignorance of evil in the world or from an unwillingness to face up to it; Thoreau felt instead that there were too many others willing to present a tragic view of life and that progress could only be achieved by concentrating on the affirmative side of life. In Walden he says, for example, that "we should impart our courage, and not our despair, our health and ease, not our disease, and take care that this does not spread by contagion" (W, II, 85). Later in "Sounds" he says, "I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men" (W, II, 139). He is less indirect and more explicit when he says: "At least let us have healthy books, a stout horse rake, or a kitchen range which is not cracked. Let not the poet shed tears only for the public weal" (W, I, 101). Even in the Journal it is as Ethel Seybold notes: Expressions of pessimism and unhappiness are "minimized" and "often parenthetical."[1]

In spite of Thoreau's best efforts, however, his personal unhappiness, pessimism, and sense of evil did

---

[1]Ethel Seybold, Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 68.

creep into his writing. This factor in Thoreau has been recognized, of course, but those who have dealt with it have done so primarily in terms of Thoreau's loss of belief in, or inability to achieve the terms of, his personal vision. Sherman Paul, for example, sees Walden as "therapeutic": "By enacting his aspiration in words, he was trying to sustain himself against loss."[2] Ethel Seybold in the work noted above takes full cognizance of Thoreau's loss of vision, and she goes on to set up a cycle of alternating periods of happiness and unhappiness reflected in Thoreau's writings.[3] Another major study of this aspect of Thoreau is Leo Stoller's After Walden; Stoller, too, points out that Thoreau's early program was "ineffective." He returned from Walden Pond, Stoller says, "to a maturity radically different from the youth of which the life by the pond had been the climax."[4] What remains to be done, then, is to examine the pessimism and sense of evil in Thoreau's writings, to show that it embraces a number of areas, to demonstrate its presence in nearly all of his writings, and to point out the degree to which, in Perry Miller's phrase,

---

[2]Sherman Paul, The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 294.

[3]Seybold, op. cit., pp. 64-85, et passim.

[4]Leo Stoller, After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 4.

Thoreau's optimism is anticipatory.[5] Miller has reference here to the melioristic strain in Thoreau's thought. As I will show Thoreau was extremely sanguine about the possibilities of what man could achieve; at the same time, he was under no illusion about the present realities. In his Journal he records the following which is representative of his point of view: "The society for which I was made is not here. Shall I, then, substitute for the anticipation of that this poor reality? I would [rather] have the unmixed expectation of that than this reality. If life is waiting, so be it" (J, II, 317).

The attempt to categorize Thoreau's pessimism is in the final analysis arbitrary--there is overlapping, and categories could be merged or changed. Thoreau's pessimism concerning the institutions of mankind, for example, proceeds from his basically pessimistic view of mankind. It is premised on the concept that an institution can be no better (though it may be worse) than the group of men who band together to form and to support institutions. This belief, of course, is the basis for his insistence on self-reform as the only true kind of reform. Thoreau made this point explicit in a number of his most memorable passages. In "Slavery in Massachusetts" he says that "the fate of the

---

[5]Perry Miller, "Introduction," Consciousness in Concord: Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journals" (1840-1841) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), p. 104.

country does not depend on how you vote at the polls . . . but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning" (W, IV, 403). In Walden, self-reform is pointed up by the attack on those who wish to reform others: "If I were to preach at all in this strain," Thoreau says, "I should say rather, Set about being good" (W, II, 81). The reason for the actions of most reformers, as Thoreau sees it, is not flattering: "If anything ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in the bowels even, --for that is the seat of sympathy, --he forthwith sets about reforming--the world" (W, II, 85-6). In the Journal, too, he records his ideas on reforms and reformers: "The true reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring our doors" (J, I, 247). Thoreau records his encounter with three reformers, and his disgust with them nearly reaches physical nausea: "It was difficult to keep clear of his slimy benignity, with which he sought to cover you before he swallowed you and took you fairly into his bowels" (J, V, 264).

If the quality of man's formal institutions depends on the quality of the individual, what then of the individual? It is in this area that Thoreau is the most anticipatory. His optimism concerning the possibilities of mankind is nearly unlimited. A large part of Walden is given over to demonstrating what the possibilities are and that, in theory at least, they are achievable. Still,

Thoreau is far from optimistic about the chances of any sudden shift in the achievement of the masses:

> I sometimes despair of getting anything quite simple and honest done in this world by the help of men. They would have to be squeezed through a powerful press first, to squeeze their old notions out of them, so that they would not soon get upon their legs again, and then there would be some one in the company with a maggot in his head, hatched from an egg deposited there nobody knows when, for not even fire kills these things, and you would have lost your labor (W, II, 28).

The twist in the tail of Spanish oxen reminds him of "how almost hopeless and incurable are all constitutional vices." He continues: "I confess that, practically speaking, when I have learned a man's real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for better or worse in this state of existence" (W, II, 134). Even when one takes into account the extravagance of expression in "Economy," this is a statement very pessimistic and somewhat bitter about the chances for the improvement of man. Thoreau may very well believe, as he says, that he knows "of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of a man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (W, II, 100), but he is far from certain if or when such an endeavor is going to be made on a large scale.

Turning from whatever hope there may be for man in the future to his present state of existence, Thoreau certainly finds little that is encouraging. His general view in Walden is that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (W, II, 8), and his bill of particulars

supports this hypothesis. He sees his fellow townsman as commercially oriented, bound by tradition, completely unimaginative, and quite willing to exploit his fellow man. As one might expect, moreover, Thoreau's bitterest statements were left in the privacy of his Journal. The skeptical reader need only look at listings under such headings as "Man," and "Men" in the index to the Journal. He will find such entries as: "barren intellect of," "meanness of," "a mean and wretched creature," "association with, a degradation," "natural mummies," "old in crime," and "poor crack-brains."

Many readers, especially those who concentrate on the "anti-social" Thoreau, overlook his great indignation over the exploitation of one's fellow man and, more generally, man's cruelty and indifference to others. True, everyone is aware of Thoreau's concern for the evil of Negro slavery, but he was also able to see examples closer to home. If "it is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one . . ." (W, II, 8). Generally when Thoreau is commenting on the evil of the northern overseer, his attitude is a combination of indignation at the exploitation and contempt for the worker for allowing himself to be exploited; as he notes, worse than either a northern or a southern overseer is "when you are the slave-driver of yourself" (W, II, 8). Thus he continues by challenging a basic assumption of transcendentalism: "Look

at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him?" (W, II, 8). His concern for the exploited becomes more explicit when he raises the question of "how do the poor minority fare?" (W, II, 37). To answer his question, he points out that even highly civilized countries allow "a very large body of the inhabitants" to live as degraded as savages, and for proof he says he need "look no farther than to the shanties which everywhere border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization," where he sees "human beings living in sties" (W, II, 38).

Nor is it in Walden alone that Thoreau records man's inhumanity. The shipwreck scene in Cape Cod is presented with a surface reportorial detachment that strongly resembles what Hemingway was to do in the twentieth century, and the resulting increase of the sense of horror is the same. Among the crowd at the scene were those

> with carts busily collecting the seaweed which the storm had cast up, and conveying it beyond the reach of the tide, though they were often obliged to separate fragments of clothing from it, and they might at any moment have found a human body under it. Drown who might, they did not forget that this weed was a valuable manure. This shipwreck had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society (W, IV, 8).

Others among the crowd were mere onlookers, and one reacted "as if he had a bet depending on it, but had no humane interest in the matter"; a second stolidly stood "gazing into the sea, and chewing large quids of tobacco," while a

third says to his companion, "Let's be off. We've seen the whole of it. It's no use staying to the funeral" (W, IV, 9-10).

Later Thoreau and his companion have the opportunity to examine a "charity-house" or "Humane-house"[6] of which they had read so much. The passage leading up to the report of what they saw suggests cosmic implications. Instead of opening the door and walking in, they put their eye to a knothole, since "to him that knocketh it may not always be opened." Thoreau continues with puns on "looking inward" and on "insight." As their eyes adjust to the light, it becomes obvious to them that the house is not properly kept; "indeed, it was the wreck of all cosmical beauty there within":

> Turning our backs on the outward world, we thus looked through the knot-hole into the Humane house, into the very bowels of mercy; and for bread we found a stone. It was literally a great cry (of seamews outside), and a little wool. However, we were glad to sit outside, under the lee of the Humane house, to escape the piercing wind; and there we thought how cold is charity! how inhumane humanity! This, then, is what charity hides! Virtues antique and far away with ever a rusty nail over the latch; and very difficult to keep in repair, withal, it is so uncertain whether any will ever gain the beach near you. So we shivered round about, not being able to get into it, ever and anon looking through the knot-hole into that night without a star, until we concluded that it was not a humane house at all, but a sea-side box, now shut up, belonging to some of the family of Night or Chaos. . . (W, IV, 77-8).

---

[6]That is, temporary shelters for shipwrecked sailors.

These statements do not suggest a man who is very optimistic about the present state of the brotherhood of man.

The journal entry for December 4, 1856, (J, IX, 151) records at least the tenth death on the "murderous Lincoln [railroad] Bridge" in the preceding ten years. In his reflections on this event Thoreau does not even attempt to keep his emotion under control: "The Vermont mother commits her son to their [the railroad's] charge, and when she asks for him, again the Directors say: 'I am not your son's keeper. Go look beneath the ribs of the Lincoln Bridge'" (J, IX, 175). Bitterly Thoreau compares the bridge to the gallows, points out its advantages over the gallows, and concludes that unlike the gallows, which "bears an ill name," "this Lincoln Bridge, long as it has been in our midst and busy as it has been, no legislature, nobody, indeed, has ever seriously complained of . . .," and he predicts that the bridge will replace the gallows. So overwhelmed by the common indifference is Thoreau that he is required to resort to outright sarcasm to summarize his reaction: "Does it not make life more serious? I feel as if these were stirring times, as good as the days of the Crusaders, the Northmen, or the Boucaniers" (J, IX, 175-6). Man's exploitation of, cruelty to, and indifference toward his fellow man was sometimes more than even Thoreau's detachment was capable of easily bearing.[7]

---

[7]See also Thoreau's account of a powder mill explosion (J, IV, 455). Stoller, op. cit., p. 126, notes that "echoes of this trauma appear as late as 1859."

If this is the quality of the individuals that form and support the formal institutions of man and if the institutions can be no better than the individuals, what is the condition of the institutions? The two institutions which received the brunt of his attack were the government and organized religion (Christianity). Thoreau's attacks on the government are generally well known, but there are some misunderstandings. He believed, of course, that the government which is best governs least (W, IV, 356), but this does not mean that he was an anarchist. His knowledge of the state of mankind rules out the possibility of a governmentless society, and Thoreau asks for "not at once no government, but at once a better government" (W, IV, 357). The kind of government that Thoreau demanded was one which he could ignore and which in turn would ignore him. Since he wanted little or nothing from the State, the State should demand little or nothing from him. Thoreau perhaps felt that he and the government had achieved this modus vivendi after he had signed off from church membership and had tried to "sign off in detail from all the societies which [he] never signed on to" (W, IV, 375), but such was finally not the case. In 1840 he discovered that he could no longer ignore a government which actively supported evil, so he stopped paying his poll tax. The matter came to a head during the summer of 1846, when the government chose to ignore Thoreau no longer; the result was the night

in jail made famous in "Civil Disobedience" (W, IV, 375-80). From then on Thoreau was largely unable to ignore his government. There was not only the matter of slavery but also the imperialistic war with Mexico, which compounded the theft of another people's land with the covert motive of acquiring slave territory. The practice of the government in actively aiding and abetting evil, then, forced Thoreau to come to terms with it: "I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases" (W, IV, 381).

On April 12, 1851, the slave Thomas Sims was returned into slavery by the State of Massachusetts. In his Journal Thoreau was able to point up the affair by comparing this event with the April 19 celebration of the anniversary of the fight at Concord Bridge (J, II, 175). In 1854 the State of Massachusetts sent Anthony Burns back into slavery. Out of this incident came Thoreau's "Slavery in Massachusetts," and several pages in his Journal over a three week period. "Why, the United States Government," Thoreau says in his first outburst, "never performed an act of justice in its life time!" (J, VI, 313). "Rather than thus consent to establish hell on earth,--to be a party to this establishment,--I would touch a match to blow up earth and hell together" (J, VI, 315). Ten days later he asks: "What is any political organization worth, when it is in

the service of the devil?" (J, VI, 339). The full extent of Thoreau's reaction is recorded yet a week later: "My thoughts are murder to the State; I endeavor in vain to observe nature; my thoughts involuntarily go plotting against the State" (J, VI, 360). Thoreau's confrontation with the State had now become a full-time affair.

In October, 1859, occurred what was perhaps the most traumatic experience of Thoreau's life. Thoreau delivered three talks on John Brown, and he did so at a time when it was not a popular cause to espouse. His first Journal entry mentioning the raid on Harper's Ferry begins not with John Brown but with the government:

> When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours (especially to-day) to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, what a merely brute, or worse than brute, force it is seen to be! A demoniacal force! It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules (J, XII, 400).

Obviously, then, Thoreau was pessimistic about the institution of government in its present state just as (and because) he was pessimistic about the people who made it up.

Thoreau also kept up a lifelong running battle with the one institution that he was able to "sign off" from formally. That Thoreau should have little use for the institutional church is evident in his conception of divinity and religion. "Surely," Thoreau remarks to his Journal, "original thinking is the divinest thing" (J, III, 119); religion he defines as "that which is never spoken"

(J, XI, 113). In nearly everything that Thoreau wrote he managed to include some type of attack on formal religion, but the most extended discussion of the subject appears in the "Sunday" section of A Week. Even here, however, the attack is somewhat softened from comparable passages in the Journal.

To some extent the church as Thoreau saw it was a passive evil like the government, passive in that it merely prohibited the free play of the mind and the full growth of the individual. In this way it had an enslaving quality:

> What great interval is there between him who is caught in Africa and made a plantation slave of in the South, and him who is caught in New England and made a Unitarian minister of? In course of time they will abolish the one form of servitude, and, not long after, the other. I do not see the necessity for a man's getting into a hogshead and so narrowing his sphere, nor for putting his head into a halter. (J, IX, 284).

The church's intellectual and spiritual constriction was more than Thoreau could tolerate, and it caused him to break out at times in angry denunciation. His most common words at such times are "disease," "hospital," and "prison." The clergy, Thoreau says, is "as diseased, and as much possessed with a devil as the reformers" (J, I, 240). In A Week he says that the church is a "hospital for men's souls and as full of quackery as the hospital for their bodies" (W, I, 77-8). The Journal passage from which this is taken adds that "these men are sick and of diseased imaginations who would toll the world's knell so soon.

Cannot these sedentary sects do better than prepare the shrouds and write the epitaphs of those other busy living men? . . . This is the creed of the hypochondriac" (J, I, 309). In 1858 he says that "if they would let their sores alone they might heal . . ." (J, XI, 325). The freedom of the church is the "freedom of the prison yard" (J, XI, 324). This passive evil of the church, moreover, becomes an active evil. Speaking of the good Christian people of Concord, Thoreau says that the parents stultify original thinking (the divinest thing) because "they don't want to have any prophets born into their families--damn them!" (J, III, 119). The depth of Thoreau's emotion is testified to by the presence of one of the few recorded uses of even this mild curse.

Thoreau condemned the church for social and political timidity also. The three events connected with slavery--the return of Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns to slavery, and the capture and execution of John Brown--called forth attacks on the church as well as the government (J, II, 178-80; VI, 357; XII, 403-39). The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Thoreau points out, had not even the courage to protest the overseas slave-trade, a policy condemned by many slave-traders.

It would seem, however, that Thoreau would still have his own experience to fall back on, to provide him with an optimistic point of view. To a large extent this

is true, yet Thoreau perhaps separated himself from the mass of men more by way of the attempt than the achievement. As I noted earlier, this fact tends to get lost because Thoreau tended to concentrate on success just as E. A. Robinson tended to concentrate on failure. Still, it is surely more than just a rhetorical device when Thoreau so often uses the first person plural "we" in discussing the shortcomings of the human race. That it is more than just a rhetorical device is shown by Thoreau's need for purification,[8] and by his comments in the first person singular. As I noted earlier, Thoreau says he brags for humanity, not for himself: "And my short-comings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement. Notwithstanding much cant and hypocrisy--chaff which I find it difficult to separate from my wheat, but which I am as sorry for as any man--I will breathe freely . . ." (W, II, 55). Surely, Thoreau is to be taken at his word, his sincerity not to be questioned, when he states: "I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and shall never know a worse man than myself" (W, II, 86). Still later he admits that he has "grown more coarse and indifferent" (W, II, 240). Thoreau undoubtedly often felt that he was far out in front of his neighbors; he at least

---

[8]This is Sherman Paul's thesis. See The Shores of America, Chapter VI; "Introduction" to Walden (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), vii-xxxix, and "Resolution at Walden," Accent, XIII (Spring, 1953), 101-13.

had raised his eyes to the horizon and was aware of the possibilities. He was less sure that he would ever achieve his goal.

It is important to emphasize once again that Thoreau left his most drastic statements in the privacy of the Journal. His brother's death on January 11, 1842, may be the cause of the following entry of March 11: "My life, my life! why will you linger? Are the years short and the months of no account? How often has long delay quenched my aspirations" (J, I, 327). At other times Thoreau resembles nothing so much as his puritan forebearers as he berates himself for lapses and inadequacies. In 1851 he is surprised at the kindness of the universe in spite of his "sense of unworthiness, not without reason" but he fears there is "some settlement to come" (J, II, 101). In 1857 he records the following observation:

> I ordinarily plod along a sort of whitewashed prison entry, subject to some indifferent or even grovelling mood. I do not distinctly realize my destiny. . . . I take incredibly narrow views, live on the limits, and have no recollection of absolute truth. Mushroom institutions hedge me in (J, IX, 364-5).

Although he is immediately recalled from the vision by the song of the nuthatch, Thoreau records an imaginative view of the wasteland, culminating in "starvation stares me in the face" (J, XI, 298). The examples of Thoreau's pessimistic outlook on even his own possibilities counterbalance at least in part the radiance of his more characteristic optimism.

When one turns from instances in the lives of men, Thoreau's or the mass's, to his statements on the quality of life itself, it is again quite easy to find a dark side to set against the more commonly recognized light side. In A Week Thoreau states that "if it is not a tragical life we live, then [he knows] not what to call it" (W, I, 67). Two pages later he asks the reader to consider "what a mean and wretched place this world is; that half the time we have to light a lamp that we may see to live in it" (W, I, 69). With an almost Melvillian insight into the intermixture of good and evil, Thoreau notes that "every time we whet our virtue the return stroke strops our vice" (W, I, 236). Thoreau's very optimism can be based on a rather ugly view of life: "What risks we run! famine and fire and pestilence, and the thousand forms of cruel fate,--and yet every man lives till he--dies" (W, I, 312). Evil is abroad in the land, Thoreau recognizes, and he points out that we do not avoid it by fleeing it "but by rising above or diving below its plane" (W, I, 323). Thoreau, of course, never did attempt to flee from evil, but so desperate did he become near the end of his life that he counseled others to do what he could not:

> As for my prospective reader, I hope that he ignores Fort Sumpter, & Old Abe, & all that, for that is just the most fatal and indeed the only fatal weapon you can direct against evil ever; for as long as you know of it, you are particeps criminis. What business have you, if you are "an angel of

> light" to be poring over the deeds of darkness, reading the New York Herald, & the like?[9]

The Journal, too, is studded with entries of a nature similar to those in A Week. In September, 1852, Thoreau comments on the tragic view of life as it applies to the writer: "Some tragedy, at least some dwelling on, or even exaggeration of, the tragic side of life is necessary for contrast or relief to the picture" (J, V, 335). Occasionally Thoreau passes beyond a merely tragic view of life to a sense of its complete hopelessness. "What have we to boast of?" he asks in 1850, "We are made the very sewers, the cloacae, of nature" (J, II, 9). The next year he records the results of lightning striking a tree. Obviously awed by the force of the thunderbolt, he asks "Is this of the character of a wild beast, or is it guided by intelligence and mercy?" Left to his natural impressions Thoreau says man feels it to be "of brutish force or vengence," but adds that it is his sense of sin that makes man answer so (J, IV, 156-7). Thus at the very least Thoreau has posited the fallen world, and, although he draws back even more than Frost, he clearly raises the same question that Frost will raise in "Design." Just as Thoreau could record the harmony and ecstasy that it was

---

[9]Henry David Thoreau, The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 611. This letter to Parker Pillsbury is dated April 10, 1861.

possible to achieve, so could he include the other side of the picture: "Whatever your sex or position, life is a battle, . . . and woe be to the coward." Hence he concludes that despair is defeat and cowardice (J, V, 36). Yet Thoreau himself displays not a little of that despair when he records that "the prospect of the heavens is taken away, and we are presented only with a few small berries"(J, VI, 363-4).

In 1856 Thoreau considers "what a pitiful kind of life ours is, eating our kindred animals! and in some places one another" (J, IX, 192). Almost a year to the day later he records an even more bitter observation: "One while [sic] we do not wonder that so many commit suicide, life is so barren and worthless; we only live on by an effort of the will." Thoreau goes on to make it clear that this is only a passing mood with him, but it is clear that he, too, has looked into the abyss (J, X, 227-8). Finally, again about a year later, Thoreau pictures forth the "barren evening whose fruitless end we clearly see," and says that but for the faculty of the imagination it would be so (J, XI, 445). "Men were born to succeed, not fail" (J, V, 36) Thoreau says, and he spent most of his time recording success, but he was not unaware of the possibility of failure.

When everything else--his own experience and his view of life as well as the mass of men and their insti-

tutions--turned to ashes, Thoreau could always turn to nature for comfort. Surely it would encourage and succor him. It was not to be so, however. Again it is necessary to point out that nature provided Thoreau with such remarkable successes that he can say, "Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they . . ." (W, II, 145-6); however, it was not always so.

Thoreau's first published book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, is free of any suggestion that nature gives less than one demands of it. The tone of the book is set in the opening description of Concord River, "remarkable for the gentleness of its current, which is barely perceptible" (W, I, 7). Thoreau proceeds, with digressions on many subjects, as leisurely as Concord River flows. The qualities of nature that he stresses are also suggested here; he is concerned with the gentle aspects of nature. The reason that so very little of the dark side of Thoreau enters this book is probably because he wrote it during his stay at Walden Pond. In this way the book reflects the actual occasion of the voyage, idealized in his imagination by the distance of time, while it yet "preserved the actual ecstasy" that Thoreau was experiencing at Walden Pond.[10] In other words, Thoreau is

---

[10]Paul, Shores of America, p. 193.

dealing in A Week with an experience from which he had achieved the proper distance, a technique which, as Paul notes, is characteristic of Thoreau as a writer.[11] Given Thoreau's reaction to the death of John, it is very likely that this death intervening between the actual voyage and the writing of the book about it helped to idealize the voyage. In the second place, Paul is undoubtedly correct in saying that the environment in which Thoreau wrote A Week goes far in explaining its idyllic quality.

The optimistic quality of Walden is usually explained as being derived from the quality of the experience which it records, and there is no question but that this fact has much to do with it. Such a view, however, does not take into account the effects of Thoreau's trips to Maine and Cape Cod, nor the tone of much of Thoreau's Journal for the years after he left the pond and during which he made Walden the book we know.[12] Although Thoreau to some extent had limited the range of his observations to those experiences at Walden Pond and hence was not required to bring in either the excursions or the journal entries, his speculations do in fact range far abroad. It is true

---

[11] Ibid. Thoreau's writings are full of instances where sights, sounds, events, and even friends become much more attractive through the distance of either space or time.

[12] Ibid., p. 256.

also that while he admits of "for convenience, putting the experience of two years into one" (W, II, 93-4), he actually did much more than that. The first passage in the Journal which is incorporated into Walden is an entry for April 8, 1839 (J, I, 76); the last such entry noted by the editors of the Journal occurs on April 28, 1854 (J, VI, 227), which is almost two months after he had started reading proof.[13]

Aside from the locality of Walden Pond, it would seem that one of the major controlling factors of the book is the generally ignored passage from "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" that served as a motto or epigraph for the first edition and which should remain an epigraph for all future editions: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (W, II, 94). Not only does this epigraph explain the extravagance of the language in "Economy," but it also explains Thoreau's insistence on the potential of mankind, in spite of his present state, and the exalted note of the "Conclusion." Finally, it explains why only a few critics such as Sherman Paul have recognized that Thoreau "himself knew the abyss beneath unity and the horrors of spiritual

---

[13]Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp. 331-32.

emptiness, and confessed during the years he was writing Walden that 'a ticket to Heaven must include tickets to Limbo, Purgatory, and Hell.'"[14]

Thoreau was unable to keep his more disturbing insights into nature completely out of Walden, but for the most part he masked them by understatement and tone. Whenever possible, moreover, he finds the fault within himself, rather than in nature. Thus, for example, in the opening paragraph of "The Pond in Winter" Thoreau says, "After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what--how--when--where?" (W, II, 312). This passage suggests the uneasiness that Thoreau was capable of feeling in the face of nature, but in this instance it is some flaw within him, since nature looked in his window "with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips" (W, II, 312).

The first of the examples that suggests an estrangement between man and nature for which Thoreau cannot take the blame on himself occurred shortly before he began to live at Walden Pond; Thoreau records it without comment or elaboration: "On the 1st of April it rained and melted the ice, and in the early part of the day, which was very foggy, I heard a stray goose groping about over the pond

---

[14]Paul, "Introduction," p. x.

and cackling as if lost, or like the spirit of the fog" (W, II, 46). The real significance of this passage is that it is a wild animal (not man, though symbolic of man) that is lost in the fog. Later, in "Sounds" he takes up the sounds of owls. First the screech owls which "are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did their deeds of darkness. . ." (W, II, 138). He then turns to the hooting owls. They, Thoreau says, make

> the most melancholy sound in Nature, as if she meant by this to make permanent in her choir the dying moans of a human being,--some poor weak relic of mortality who has left hope behind, and howls like an animal, yet with human sobs, on entering the dark valley, made more awful by a certain gurgling melodiousness . . .--expressive of a mind which has reached the gelatinous mildewy stage in the mortification of all healthy and courageous thought. It reminded me of ghouls and idiots and insane howlings (W, II, 138-9).

This picture of a corrupt and decaying state of nature Thoreau is forced to recognize, though in line with his "brag" he does not dwell long on it. Always looking for correspondences in nature, Thoreau finds a correspondence for the hooting of the owls also. The hooting is "admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized." The hooting represents "the stark twilight and unsatisfied thoughts which all have" (W, II, 139).

In another example, this time masked in the guise of a game and given a semihumorous tone, Thoreau illustrates that "we are not wholly involved in Nature" (W, II, 149). He is talking about chasing a loon around the pond:

> He dived again, but I miscalculated the direction he would take, and we were fifty rods apart when he came to the surface this time, for I had helped to widen the interval; and again he laughed long and loud and with more reason than before. He manoeuvred so cunningly that I could not get within a half dozen rods of him. . . . He led me at once to the wildest part of the pond, and could not be driven from it. While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine (W, II, 259-60).

This game continues until Thoreau is exhausted, at which point the loon "uttered a long-drawn unearthly howl." The howl causes Thoreau to conclude "that he laughed in derision of my efforts." After one final howl from the loon, "immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface" (W, II, 261-2). Although Thoreau presents this experience as a game, it shows the lack of complete identification between man and nature; it shows that nature can baffle and mislead our most serious efforts.

There is finally the "problem chapter" of Walden, "Higher Laws." Thoreau opens the chapter by telling of his desire to seize a woodchuck and devour it raw. He

continues by saying that he finds within himself "an instinct toward a higher, or . . . spiritual life . . . and another toward a primitive rank and savage one," and that he "reverence[s] them both" (W, II, 232). It is probably true, as Thoreau says, that he reverences both instincts, but as the rest of the chapter makes plain he cannot reconcile the two. "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled . . ." (W, II, 242). It is not completely clear that this "animal in us" is to be equated with the instinct toward a "rank primitive and savage" life, but if the savage life is denoted by the impulse to seize a woodchuck and devour him raw it would seem that the two terms are coequal. The bulk of the chapter, moreover, is a call to purification, given over to the ugliness of sensuality, all of which is "one, though it takes many forms. . . . It is the same whether a man eat, drink, or cohabit, or sleep sensually" (W, II, 243). At the same time he praises the opposites of sensuality, purity and chastity, by pointing with approval to the butterfly which eats but a "drop or two of honey" in contrast to its gluttonous larval stage. "Chastity is the flowering of man . . .," Thoreau says, and "he is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established." He goes on to suggest that this brutish nature is mainly what

man has to be ashamed of (W, II, 243). These statements are difficult to reconcile with Thoreau's "reverence" for both instincts.

On the basis of The Huntington Library Manuscript 924 Sherman Paul notes the following, later "wisely omitted," which appeared after Thoreau's sentence on reverencing both instincts: "Some would say that the one impulse was directly from God, the other from nature." As Paul notes, it was wisely omitted because it reveals a split between God and nature.[15] Even this deletion, however, cannot hide entirely from the reader the fact that nature, if it supports the purity of the mature butterfly, also supports the sensuality of the pig: "The other day I picked up the lower jaw of a hog, with white and sound teeth and tusks, which suggested that there was an animal vigor distinct from the spiritual. This animal succeeded by other means than temperance and purity" (W, II, 242). That nature was not always interested in chastity and purity came home to Thoreau again when he recorded finding the Phallus impudicus: "It may be divided into three parts, pileus, stem, and base,--or scrotum, for it is a perfect phallus. . . . In all respects a most disgusting object, yet very suggestive" (J, IX, 116). Thoreau goes on to describe the fungus in minute detail, noting its odor "like a dead rat

---

[15]Paul, Shores of America, p. 339.

in the ceiling, in all the ceilings of the house." Finally, he breaks out with a note of anguish: "Pray, what was Nature thinking of when she made this? She almost puts herself on a level with those who draw in privies" (J, IX, 117).

Thoreau, then, was determined that Walden would not be an ode to dejection, and he succeeded in his intention. If such passages as I have noted did find a place in the book, they are fairly well masked. In addition they are more than counterweighted by the passages of ecstasy and communion with nature, culminating in the promise of the "Conclusion."

Two other books by Thoreau, The Maine Woods and Cape Cod, both published posthumously, are somewhat more difficult to deal with. The Maine Woods consists of three separate essays based on three separate excursions (1846, 1853, and 1857). In addition, the first two essays were published in magazines in Thoreau's lifetime. One can only conjecture what Thoreau's attitude toward their publication in book form under a single title might have been. Cape Cod, on the other hand, is a single unified book, the observations of three visits (1849, 1850, and 1855) all woven together apparently for its publication in Putnam's Magazine, which carried chapters one through four in 1855. Thus the experiences involved and the periods of composition (both important as Paul demonstrates above of A Week) are

spread over a number of years. Since I am not interested in showing the growth of Thoreau's sense of separation from nature, however, I am taking his work in the order of final publication.

Both books are often taken as straight travel or guide books, although others have seen more in them.[16] It seems strange, moreover, that Thoreau should be willing to place into these works, obviously intended to gain him contemporary recognition, some of his most explicit statements of his sense of evil in nature and his separation from her. Even though Thoreau himself did not supply the titles to these two books, it comes as a surprise, moreover, to learn how misleading the titles in a sense are. Maine Woods especially might much better be named "Maine Rivers and Lakes," since Thoreau seems more interested in these features than in the forest itself. Although the sea is omnipresent in Cape Cod, it is a surprise how little time he spends discussing and describing it. He is here more concerned with the land: there are good reasons for these attitudes.

---

[16] Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), pp. 370-73, and Harding, op. cit., pp. 395, 361; both take the "pleasant guidebook" view. Paul, Shores of America, pp. 356-69, 379-88, of course, sees much more in both books as, for example, John G. Blair and Augustus Trowbridge, "Thoreau on Katahdin," American Quarterly, XII (Winter, 1960), 508-17, do in The Maine Woods, and as Martin Leonard Pops, "An Analysis of Thoreau's Cape Cod," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXVII (September, 1963), 419-28, does in Cape Cod.

All through The Maine Woods Thoreau points up the grim, dark, and savage aspects of the forest itself, setting it off effectively against man's clearing and civilizing efforts and especially against the lakes and rivers. In "Ktaadn" he strikes this note early in the essay when he contrasts the beauty of the road along which he is traveling, with its "delicate and beautiful specimens of the larch, arbor-vitae, ball-spruce, and fir-balsam" and its "smooth grass plots," with what lay behind this beauty: "It was but a step on either hand to the grim untrodden wilderness, whose tangled labyrinth of living, fallen, and decaying trees only the deer and moose, the bear and wolf can easily penetrate" (W, III, 11-12). Near the end of the essay Thoreau summarizes his impression of the forest in the same manner:

> It is even more grim and wild than you anticipated, a damp and intricate wilderness, in the spring everywhere wet and miry. The aspect of the country, indeed, is universally stern and savage, excepting the distant views of the forest from hills, and the lake prospects, which are mild and civilizing to a degree (W, III, 88).

In addition to the grimness of the forest, the reader notes that the scene becomes pleasant for Thoreau, as it so often does, through distance. It is distance, too, that is involved in Thoreau's first view of Ktaadn, a 5,268 foot mountain and the highest point in Maine. At this distance the mountain, with "its summit veiled in clouds," looked "like a dark isthmus in that quarter connecting the heavens

with the earth" (W, III, 36). It was to look remarkably different at closer quarters, and Thoreau burned his bridges by declaring that "this was what you might call bran-new [sic] country; the only roads were of Nature's making, and the few houses were camps. Here, then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil" (W, III, 18). Such is exactly what happened when Thoreau climbed Ktaadn.

When Thoreau and his party ascended Ktaadn, therefore, his view changed radically. While he retains his usual fidelity to actual detail, there is no sustained passage in Thoreau's writing that presents such a surrealistic, nightmarish picture. That he intended it so is obvious from the way in which the passage so carefully builds to a climax. The party stopped for the night part way up the slope beside a "torrent" which came "rushing and roaring down . . . as though a waterspout had just burst over the mountain." While the others made camp, Thoreau went on alone through "impenetrable thickets," through "certainly the most treacherous and porous country [he] ever travelled" (W, III, 66-7). The rocks, moreover, looked at him "with hard gray eyes," and "it was a savage and dreary scenery enough. . . ." The party spent the night as if in "the very nest of a young whirlwind," and one of the party, no doubt affected by the scenery,

"sprang up, with a cry, from his bed, thinking the world on fire" (W, III, 68).

The next morning the entire party continued the ascent through "the raw materials of a planet," "an undone extremity of the globe" (W, III, 70). In A Week Thoreau had sung the praises of clouds that had shut him off from the "forlorn world" when he spent the night on Saddle-back Mountain (W, I, 197-9), but now on Ktaadn he is "deep within the hostile ranks of clouds." The landscape reminds him of "the rock where Prometheus was bound":

> It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. . . . His reason is dispersed and shadowy. . . . Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty (W, III, 70-1).

In describing the descent from the mountain, Thoreau breaks away from the chaotic quality of the landscape (though the stream remains a "torrent"), possibly suggesting the relief of the party at getting away. In keeping with his "dispersed and shadowy" reason on the peak, it is not until the party is well down the slope that Thoreau realizes the full significance of what he has experienced. It was then that he perhaps "most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable Nature, or whatever else men call it" (W, III, 77). This is probably the only time that he was unsure that it was nature. As he continues to contemplate his experience, he realizes that

"it is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man," but he also recognizes that "we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities": "It was Matter, vast, terrific,--not his Mother Earth" but "the home, this, of Necessity and Fate." Here Thoreau saw "that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night" (W, III, 77-8). The sheer materiality of the scene nearly overwhelmed Thoreau, and his thoughts rise to a crescendo:

> I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, --<u>that</u> my body might,--but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!--Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the <u>solid</u> earth! the <u>actual</u> world! the <u>common sense</u>! <u>Contact</u>! <u>Contact</u>! <u>Who</u> are we? <u>where</u> are we? (W, III, 78-9).

This is a remarkable outburst for a man who otherwise always accepted the physical side of nature, who generally felt that only through a careful study of the particular physical phenomenon could the universal spiritual significance be determined.

Both "Chesuncook" and "Allegash and East Branch" contain many illustrations of an alien nature, but only in one instance does Thoreau approach the intensity of the Ktaadn incident. In an attempt to convey the desolation of the "savage-looking shore" of Apmoojenegamook Lake, he asks the reader to

> imagine the wharves of the largest city in the world, decayed, and the earth and planking washed

> away, leaving the spiles standing in loose order, but often of twice the ordinary height, and mingled with and beating against them the wreck of ten thousand navies, all their spars and timbers, while there rises from the water's edge the densest and grimmest wilderness, ready to supply more material when the former fails, and you may get a faint idea of that coast (W, III, 263-4).

Here in the Maine woods, then, Thoreau saw nature wearing a face that she never wore around Concord, and although he lamented its destruction (W, III, 170-1), he was never at home in this wilderness, except perhaps on its lakes and streams.

If in The Maine Woods Thoreau appears as a lake and river man, so in Cape Cod he appears as a landsman: "One notes his insistence on himself as a land animal. As Melville drew his strength and rejuvenation from water, so Thoreau drew them from contact with earth."[17] Thoreau states that he went to Cape Cod "to get a better view than [he] had yet had of the ocean," one part of nature with which he was largely unfamiliar, an obviously important part because "we are told [it] covers more than two thirds of the globe . . ." (W, IV, 3). Although Thoreau avoids the near hysterical tone of the Ktaadn experience, there is no doubt that he was made, at the very least, uneasy by this new portion of nature.

---

[17]Pops, "Analysis of Cape Cod," p. 424. Paul, Shores of America, pp. 200-01, makes a similar but not identical comparison of Thoreau and Melville. Paul sees Thoreau's river (but not the sea) in the same light as Melville's ocean.

Learning in Boston of the wreck of the St. John, Thoreau and his companion (William Ellery Channing) proceeded to the scene. The scene provided Thoreau with evidence of man's indifference, but it also demonstrated a "naked Nature, inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man" (W, IV, 187). Thoreau describes the results of such a nature on the shipwreck victims: "I saw many marble feet and matted heads . . ., and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl" with eyes "lusterless, deadlights" (W, IV, 6-7). Although Thoreau found consolation for the tragedy of the St. John in that its victims were "shipwrecked into life again" (W, IV, 13), he was unable to give up thinking of the ocean as hostile to man:

> The annals of this voracious beach! who could write them, unless it were a shipwrecked sailor? How many who have seen it have seen it only in the midst of danger and distress, the last strip of earth which their mortal eyes beheld. Think of the amount of suffering which a single strand has witnessed. The ancients would have represented it as a sea-monster with open jaws, more terrible than Scylla and Charybdis (W, IV, 163).

Later, describing a lighthouse built in the water, Thoreau exclaims: "Think of making your bed thus in the crest of a breaker! To have the waves, like a pack of hungry wolves, eyeing you always, night and day, and from time to time making a spring at you, almost sure to have you at last" (W, IV, 263). Thoreau was learning, then, what every Cape Codsman knew--one must fight the sea for every inch, and often as not the sea will win. Thoreau, in other words,

"found that it would not do to speak of shipwrecks there, for almost every family has lost some of its members at sea" (W, IV, 160). Finally, Thoreau concludes that

> there must be something monsterous . . . in a vision of the sea bottom from over some bank a thousand miles from the shore, more awful than its imagined bottomlessness; a drowned continent, all livid and frothing at the nostrils, like the body of a drowned man, which is better sunk deep than near the surface (W, IV, 124).

Although the expression is calmer, Thoreau apparently felt an emotion similar to that experienced in the Maine woods.

The ocean was not only a threat to man, in Thoreau's eyes, but it was also a threat to the land (W, IV, 187, 246). The sea wind, too, is "rapacious," while the land wind is "honest":

> The sea thus plays with the land, holding a sandbar in its mouth awhile before it swallows it, as a cat plays with a mouse; but the fatal gripe is sure to come at last. The sea sends its rapacious east wind to rob the land, but before the former has got far with its prey, the land sends its honest west wind to recover some of its own (W, IV, 155).

The epithets applied to the winds adequately indicate Thoreau's sympathies. Looking into the ocean, finally, he noticed "the water growing darker and darker and deeper and deeper . . . till it was awful to consider, and it appeared to have no friendly relation to the land . . ." (W, IV, 123).

Perhaps what disturbed Thoreau the most about the ocean, as it has disturbed so many others, was the fact that it can be so placid and friendly appearing at one time

and so wild and savage at another time. Thoreau observes that "the ocean is but a larger lake" and goes on to describe it at its most placid. He checks himself, however, to portray its other face:

> Yet this same placid ocean, as civil now as a city's harbor, a place for ships and commerce, will erelong be lashed into sudden fury, and all its caves and cliffs will resound with tumult. It will ruthlessly heave these vessels to and fro, break them in pieces in its sandy or stony jaws, and deliver their crews to sea-monsters. It will play with them like seaweed, distend them like dead frogs, and carry them about, now high, now low, to show to the fishes, giving them a nibble. This gentle ocean will toss and tear the rag of a man's body like the father of mad bulls, and his relatives may be seen seeking the remnants for weeks along the strand (W, IV, 125).

Although I have deliberately presented a one-sided picture of Cape Cod, omitting the beauty and harmony that Thoreau finds, it is impossible to endorse Harding's view that "Cape Cod is Thoreau's sunniest, happiest book."[18] Harding seems especially wrong because at one point Thoreau makes an explicit connection between the physical and the spiritual:

> If the roadsteads of the spiritual ocean could be thus dragged, what rusty flukes of hope deceived and parted chain cables of faith might again be windlassed aboard! enough to sink the finder's craft, or stock new navies to the end of time. . . . So, if we had diving-bells adapted to the spiritual deeps, we should see anchors with their cables attached, as thick as eels in vinegar, all wriggling vainly toward their holding-ground (W, IV, 162-3).

---

[18] Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau, p. 361.

To be sure Thoreau advises the reader against such an expedition, but this passage is a recognition of an aspect of life that is far from sunny or happy.[19]

It may not be amiss at this point, then, to see what kind of a view Robert Frost himself held of Thoreau. Frost poses the question of "what brought about our ability to 'do things'? All our adaptability to circumstances?" For an answer, he says,

> Go back to Walden and Robinson Crusoe. These experimenters found themselves, when trial came, able to, and did, pit themselves naked against an infinitely unfriendly nature, and they provided some part of, no inconsiderable part of, creature comforts sufficient.[20]

The point at issue here is not whether Frost's interpretation of Walden is correct; it is rather the fact that, rightly or wrongly, Frost sees Thoreau as pitted against nature rather than in harmony with her. Apparently, too, it is Thoreau's own presentation of nature in Walden (as well as Defoe's in Robinson Crusoe) that Frost is describing as "infinitely unfriendly." The remark implies affinities between the two that Frost himself recognized.

I have stated that the affirmative side of Frost approximates the dark side of Thoreau, but perhaps it is

---

[19]Pops, "Analysis of Cape Cod," p. 425, points out, moreover, that the indoor chapters contain an "unmistakeable atmosphere" of "warmth, humor, and geniality."

[20]Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 62.

possible to go beyond that statement. Among the poems most often pointed to as illustrating the "terrifying poet"[21] that Frost is often seen to be, the following are representative: "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," "Once by the Pacific," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "Acquainted with the Night," and "Design."

In "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" the crucial stanza is, of course, the final one:

> They cannot look out far.
> They cannot look in deep.
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep? (CP, 394)

The poem as a whole makes it clear that Frost is using the sea here as the traditional symbol of cosmic mystery, the infinite, or the unknown. The first two lines of the stanza seem to state flatly that this mystery will never be pierced. Such a statement hardly seems to be enough to classify Frost as a terrifying poet, however, inasmuch as this conclusion is very likely as old as mankind, and is certainly as old as the Judaeo-Christian tradition; the essential mystery of God, hence of the universe, was particularly stressed by Frost's Puritan forebearers, and the statement says no more than Thoreau does when he points out "the unexplained mystery of nature" (J, I, 441). The

---

[21]Lional Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," Partisan Review, XXVI (Summer, 1959), 451.

really crucial lines are, however, the last two, which pose the question. These lines contain an ambiguity of tone that was almost certainly deliberate on Frost's part. The lines can be read as indicating the foolishness in man for this exercise in futility, or they can be read as suggesting that man asserts his dignity by constantly probing the unknown. In these latter terms man does not fail because he is unable to pierce the mystery; instead he succeeds because he makes the attempt, the process being more important than the goal. Read in this way Frost's poem conveys the same message (with less emphasis on "confidence") that Thoreau does: "Notwithstanding the unexplained mystery of nature, man still pursues his studies with confidence, ever ready to grasp the secret, as if truth were only contained, not withheld" (J, I, 441).

R. W. Stallman has provided a third reading of the poem, moreover, which brings Frost even closer to Thoreau in sentiment. Stallman suggests that Frost is indicting man not for a futile attempt to probe the mystery but for looking in the wrong direction:

> In quest of the unanswerable, it [the human mind] stupidly channels its vision in one direction to "look one way." The people turn their back on the truth represented by the land, the truth of present realities and, though they cannot look out far nor look in deep, they seek in the infinite sea the unfathomable.[22]

---

[22] R. W. Stallman, "The Position of Poetry Today," The English Journal, XLVI (May, 1957), 248.

Not only does this reading suggest a rejection of the sea in favor of the land such as Thoreau expressed in Cape Cod, but it also brings Frost in line with the Thoreau of "Economy" who chastizes his townsmen because they "stupidly channel their vision." More importantly, however, if, as Stallman suggests, the people turn away from "present realities," the poet is finding a fault in them that Thoreau found in the Bible. The Bible, he felt, does not speak to the actual conditions of men here on earth, particularly in Northern areas. In A Week, for example, Thoreau points out that "the New Testament treats of man and man's so-called spiritual affairs too exclusively . . .," because here on earth we still "have a sort of living to get, and . . . there are various tough problems yet to solve . . ." (W, I, 74). In "A Winter Walk," too, he points out that Hebrew Revelation does not speak to the condition of the man who has spent a winter in Maine or Labrador (W, V, 183). Always Thoreau felt that the starting place for such metaphysical investigations was in present reality, and he felt that the Bible had too little of this. In Stallman's view the people looking to sea share the same fault, and, while Thoreau concentrated on those who were not speculative enough, he also decried those who failed to take into account the real situation. In spite of Trilling, then, it is difficult to think of "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" as a particularly terrifying poem.

Other Frost poems, however, pose more of a problem. In "Once by the Pacific" (CP, 314) Frost sets the scene in the first six lines. When he turns to the implications of the furious attack on the land by the sea, however, he immediately adopts a tentative tone, the subjunctive mood: "You could not tell, and yet it looked as if/The shore was lucky in being backed by continent." As I noted of Thoreau earlier, the flaw could sometimes be in the viewer, and that possibility is present in Frost's poem. More to the point, however, Thoreau records a very similar scene on the Atlantic coast in Cape Cod. He found the sea a menace to the land. Even when Thoreau saw nature at its most terrifying, however, he did not associate it with an approaching night or age of "dark intent." Moreover, Thoreau seems nowhere to have considered "God's last Put out the light." "Once by the Pacific" is more terrifying than any impression Thoreau ever received from nature; still the distance between the two men is diminished when one takes into account Thoreau's fear of the ocean which he saw at Cape Cod and Frost's very tentative tone in this poem.

A great deal has been made of the predominance of fall and winter in Frost's poetry.[23] The prevailing tone of these poems is seen as one of caution, stoicism, or downright fear. Representative of these poems of winter

---

[23]William T. Moynihan, "Fall and Winter in Frost," Modern Language Notes, LXXIII (May, 1958), 348, for example, notes that "almost one-third of Frost's total poetic output employs fall or winter imagery.

are "Desert Places," "Bereft," and perhaps the culmination, "An Old Man's Winter Night." In this poem Frost portrays an old man, beset by loneliness, isolation, and old age, attempting to hold a hostile winter nature at bay, and his actions seem inadequate to the task. He clomps across the floor in an attempt to frighten "the outer night" (CP, 135) and "consigns to the moon, such as she was" "his snow upon the roof" and "his icicles along the wall"; he then goes to sleep. In the final lines the poet comments:

> One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,
> A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
> It's thus he does it of a winter night.

The procedure of the old man, which is the usual procedure in Frost's poems on winter, is to withdraw within himself, or at least apart from nature. The same sort of procedure can be seen in Thoreau.

Thoreau, of course, was able to find beauty and comfort at any season of the year; yet it seems that he might have preferred omitting winter altogether. Beginning with November (which may have been the most brutal month to him), Thoreau begins to express his discontent and sense of alienation from nature. He describes November 13, 1851, for example, as "such a day as will almost oblige a man to eat his own heart. A day in which you must hold on to life by your teeth. You can hardly ruck up any skin on Nature's bones" (J, III, 112). Like the poet of "Storm Fear" Thoreau's

heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided (CP, 13).

In March of 1855 Thoreau asserts that "he must have a great deal of life to draw upon, who can pick up a subsistence in November or March" (J, VII, 276). In December, 1856, he observes with a note of bitterness that "withered leaves! this is our frugal winter diet, instead of the juicy salads of spring and summer" (J, IX, 191). Finally, Thoreau records his impression of November 14, 1858, on the relationship of man and nature at this time of year:

> Every resounding step on the frozen earth is a vain knocking at the door of what was lately genial Nature, his bountiful mother, now turned stepmother. He is left outside to starve. The rustling leaves sound like the fierce breathing of wolves,--an endless pack, half famished, from the north, impelled by hunger to seize him (J, XI, 320).

Like the leaves of "Bereft" Thoreau's leaves too seem to have "Something sinister in the tone" that indicated they knew the secret that he was alone (CP, 317). Frost's poem is hardly more terrifying than the picture Thoreau paints. If further evidence is needed that Thoreau felt nature withdraw in winter, one can point out that the three most desperate statements on the conditions of man, noted earlier, are winter observations: December (J, IX, 192; X, 227-8) and February (J, XI, 445).

In Walden, too, Thoreau indicates that winter is a time of withdrawal, a time of fighting to maintain the vital heat. It is in "Winter Animals" that Thoreau most

revealingly points up his attitude toward winter. At this time discord, not concord, becomes the controlling attribute. He tells of a cat owl hooting a goose from the neighborhood and says the sound "was one of the most thrilling discords" he had ever heard. A fox on the hunt is described as "barking raggedly and demoniacally . . . as if laboring with some anxiety." "Sometimes," Thoreau says, "one came near to my window, attracted by my lights, barked a vulpine curse at me, and then retreated" (W, II, 301). The jays arrive with "discordant screams" (W, II, 303); dogs from the village come to Walden woods to hunt, yelping "as if afflicted by a species of madness" (W, II, 306); and Thoreau at first pities the lean ragged looking hare, though he later understands the reason for the hare's leanness (W, II, 310). Not even the godlike Walden Pond is immune from restlessness:

> I also heard the whooping of the ice in the pond, my great bedfellow in that part of Concord, as if it were restless in its bed and would fain turn over, were troubled with flatulency and bad dreams . . . (W, II, 301).

Most of all, however, the exuberance of "Spring" points up the horror that winter could be to Thoreau. For Thoreau as for Frost, then, winter was a time to withdraw into oneself, to battle for existence, and to question whether the battle would be successful this time.

A fourth poem commonly used to illustrate the terrifying poetry of Frost is "Acquainted with the Night"

(CP, 324). In examining this poem, the first thing to take cognizance of is the relation of the speaker in time to the event that he is describing: "I have been [not "am"] one acquainted with the night." The grammar of the sentence must be taken for what it is--past perfective, an action or state of being completed in the past. The suggestion of the line is, then, that the speaker was at one time, but no longer is, acquainted with the night. This analysis suggests, in other words, that if "One luminary clock against the sky/Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right," it is because the speaker projected his own mood, read into the clock what something within himself felt. It should be noted, however, that such an analysis denies neither the introspective process which I claimed for it in Chapter I nor the fact that the poet has had a terrifying vision. The time relationship does suggest, however tentatively, that the poet now rejects the validity of the vision he has had, that he is now, in Thoreau's words, "conscious of a slight insanity" in the vision the poem presents. In this way the poem becomes neutral, if not affirmative, in the same way that Thoreau usually ends his most pessimistic observations on a neutral or affirmative note. Above all, it suggests that "Acquainted with the Night," even more than most other Frost poems, must be taken as the record of a single observation and not as binding the poet for life.

Even if the reader chooses to dismiss this analysis out of hand, however, he must still be aware of the fact that "Acquainted with the Night" is one of the very few city poems in Frost's canon. All of his city poems, moreover, indicate a distrust and dislike of the city. In "New Hampshire" he records his decision to escape the puerile choice between "prude or puke" (CP, 210); in "A Brook in the City" the poet wonders if some sinister force which keeps the "city from both work and sleep" has been generated by forcing the brook "Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone/In fetid darkness still to live and run--" (CP, 285); and insofar as "A Lone Striker" is a city poem the poet obviously approves of the factory worker's decision to spend the day in nature (CP, 355-6). This consistent attitude toward the city causes one to speculate on just how much emphasis should be given to the city locale of "Acquainted with the Night." If it is given considerable emphasis, it is a reaction to the city that Thoreau would understand.[24]

In his poem "Design" (CP, 396), however, Frost finds his source of terror out in nature. A white spider has caught a white moth on a white flower. Pondering over the quality of the fate that brought the three together, Frost asks

---

[24]For depth of Thoreau's reaction to the city see his Correspondence, pp. 111-12, and Paul, Shores of America, p. 142.

> What had that flower to do with being white,
> The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
> What brought the kindred spider to that height,
> Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
> What but design of darkness to appall?--
> If design govern in a thing so small.

The first thought that the incident suggests is purpose in the universe, but malignant purpose. The thought that follows is perhaps even more terrifying than malignant purpose, because there is no way to operate against sheer purposelessness. Such a state is indeed terrifying. Frost heightens the sense of terror, too, by the ironic use of the flower's name--heal-all, and by putting the poem in the form of the sonnet.

I have already noted, however, that Thoreau, on the occasion of lightning striking a tree, could pose exactly the same question that Frost does in "Design": "For what purpose?" Thoreau asks, then suggests either random chance or an intelligence (J, IV, 156). In another incident describing a mud turtle catching a pout, Thoreau strikes a similar note. The turtle came off the bottom of the pool

> in the direction of [the pout's] ventral fins, his tender white belly, where he kept no eye: and the minister squeaked his last. Oh, what an eye was there, my countrymen! buried in mud up to the lids, meditating on what? sleepless at the bottom of the pool, at the top of the bottom, directed heavenward, in no danger from motes. Pouts expect not their foes from below (J, II, 14-15).

That this incident represents more than just another description of a natural phenomenon is obvious from the fact that Thoreau breaks into the description to say

"--there are sermons in stones, aye and mud turtles at the bottoms of the pools,--" as well as in addressing his comments to his "countrymen."

Both Frost and Thoreau in these instances take what might be called a Melvillian view of the universe, and if Frost be more terrifying it is only because he has chosen more insignificant creatures to work with and because in "Design" he, like Melville, makes use of that most ambiguous of colors--white. Although Thoreau attempted for the most part to keep his darker visions out of his writing, it is obvious that he was nearly as "acquainted with the night" as Frost. I have not intended to show that Thoreau is as pessimistic as Frost--he is not, but I have demonstrated that the distance between the two men is less than most readers have supposed.

As any student of Thoreau knows, in various periods in the history of his critical reputation he has been seen as representing almost everything; he has been seen as a stoic, a skulker, a poet, a naturalist, a hermit, a political propagandist, an economist, and a writer of the first modern prose in America. The history of Frost's critical reputation is somewhat less complex, but he, too, has been seen as a classicist, a romantic, a poet of the people, and as both in and out of the mainstream of the twentieth century. The most important aspect of Frost's reputation, however, revolves around his dark side versus

his light side. In this regard Philip Gerber has pointed out an interesting pattern: Frost was first seen, he says, as nay-sayer: "By the beginning years of the 1920's, the portrait of Robert Frost suggested by Amy Lowell had spread widely. On many fronts he was accepted as another grim modern realist, verging on the morbid." Louis Untermeyer, Gerber continues, "felt it his duty to inject a corrective" and did so in his "Preface" to Modern American and British Poetry: "Frost is by no means the dark naturalist that many suspect. Behind the mask of 'grimness' . . .there is a continual elfin pucker. . . ." This "elfin pucker" became the standard view of Frost until Trilling called him a "terrifying poet" in 1959.[25] As a result the critics now tend to emphasize the nay-sayer to the detriment of Frost's affirmative side.

Before turning to the light side of Frost, however, two poems which represent a middle ground need to be examined. In "Afterflakes" (CP, 398) the speaker saw his shadow on the snow and

> turned and looked back up at the sky,
> Where we still look to ask the why
> Of everything below.

---

[25]Philip Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), pp. 84-86. Neither Gerber nor I, of course, wishes to convey the impression of critical unanimity at any point in Frost's career. Randall Jarrell, for example, spoke of "The Other Mr. Frost" as early as 1947, pointing out the dark side of Frost. Trilling probably better marks the start of the swing in critical opinion, however, because of the wide publicity his remarks received.

He goes on to say that if he sheds "such a darkness" "How swarthy [he] must be." Yet this is exactly the case, as the last stanza makes plain:

> I turned and looked back upward.
> The whole sky was blue;
> And the thick flakes floating at a pause
> Were but frost knots on an airy gauze,
> With the sun shining through.

I have suggested readings for some of Frost's darkest poems that place the fault in the point of view of the speaker rather than in anything inherent in the situation; in "Afterflakes" such a state of affairs becomes explicit. This poem reflects a particularly Thoreauvian situation in which the speaker begins to doubt, then finds the source of the doubt within himself. I have already mentioned the opening paragraph of "The Pond in Winter" as an example of this in Thoreau. In "Solitude" also he questioned the wisdom of living apart from men, but he "was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity" in his mood and predicted recovery, which came with a gentle rain (W, II, 146).

The second example of Frost's ability to find the source of the problem within himself is his short poem "Not All There."

> I turned to speak to God
> About the world's despair
> But to make matters worse
> I found God wasn't there.
>
> God turned to speak to me
> (Don't anybody laugh)
> God found I wasn't there--
> At least not over half (CP, 408).

The message of this poem is precisely the message of Walden, and especially of "Economy." Frost does not spell out the reason why the speaker is only half there, but it must be because of preoccupation with other matters. In spite of its title "Economy" is much less an economic treatise than it is, first, an attempt to spell out the reasons why the people of Concord are only (at best) half there, and, secondly, an attempt to show how one man managed to be able to devote nearly his entire attention to being there when God spoke.

In turning to Frost's more fully affirmative poems, the reader finds that they fall into two broad categories, man and nature. When Frost affirms the power of mankind, it is often an affirmation of man's ability to overcome the obstacles of life, and in some cases an actively hostile universe. At the same time, however, there are just as many poems in which nature herself gives reassuring signs. In these affirmative poems Frost sometimes tends to be as tentative as I have shown him to be in his pessimistic poems, and he sometimes goes beyond tentativeness to deliberate ambiguity. A perfect example of the ambiguity in what is often taken as a pessimistic poem is "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"; the perfect example in a possibly optimistic poem is "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" (CP, 296). The barriers which nature places in our path, the poet says, are "not to bar/Our passage to our journey's end

for good"; instead they are designed to force us to ask ourselves "who we think we are/Insisting always on our own way so." Nature knows that "obstruction is in vain"; she knows that "We will not be put off the final goal we have it hidden in us to attain. . . ." These lines suggest that nature is not in opposition to man except as an occasional check to keep him from becoming too arrogant. The poem, moreover, is presented in a straightforward manner, and there seems to be no irony in it. Then the reader notices the subtitle--"To Hear Us Talk." This phrase, of course, always implies a lack of validity in the speaker it is applied to; thus it casts a note of irony over the entire poem. The reader has the choice therefore of accepting the poem itself at face value since it contains no hint of irony, or of placing emphasis on the subtitle and accepting its ironic overtones.

In "Sand Dunes" (CP, 330), too, nature throws up barriers to man, seems to be actively hostile to him, in order to help him, albeit inadvertantly. Nature in the guise of the sea throws up sand dunes in order to "bury in solid sand/The men she could not drown." If she hopes to succeed in cutting off mind, "she doesn't know mankind" because man can

> leave her a hut as well;
> And be but more free to think
> For the one more cast-off shell.

The universe is pictured as even more unresponsive to man

in "Riders" (CP, 345), where it is imaged forth as a wild horse ridden by an infant. Still the poet expresses his faith that man will survive the ride because "We have ideas we haven't tried yet." That we have achieved some success already is suggested by the fact that we are both riders and, "though none too successful at it, guiders." In "Willful Homing" (CP, 456) man is again pictured as successful in overcoming the obstacles that nature places in his way: "Since he means to come to a door he will come to a door. . . ."

In some poems, however, Frost expresses a confidence in man unchecked by a countering set of obstacles in nature. In "A Steeple on the House" (CP, 540), for example, he says that "A spire and belfry coming on the roof/Means that a soul is coming on the flesh." In a poem that suggests the traditional Christian affirmation, "A Soldier," Frost asserts that the

> obstacle that checked
> And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
> Further than target ever showed or shone (CP, 332).

In other poems man and nature team up to give the poet signs of hope. Thus, "When we asked for rain," Frost tells us in "Our Hold on the Planet" (CP, 469), "It didn't flash and roar./It didn't lose its temper at our demand/And blow a gale." This encouraging sign from nature, combined with the facts of human history, suggests a very cautious optimism "in favor of man." Man and nature come together

in "A Tuft of Flowers," too, to demonstrate the brotherhood of man:

> "Men work together," I told him from the heart,
> "Whether they work together or apart" (CP, 32).

This is the kind of brotherhood that Thoreau advocated. "The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him" (W, II, 151).

It is in nature, however, that Frost, like Thoreau, finds the greatest reassurance, although with both it is not just there for the asking. Man must put forth a commensurate effort, or, as Thoreau puts it, "Nature does not cast pearls before swine" (W, V, 285-6). In "Choose Something Like a Star" (CP, 575), for example, Frost supposes in the first half of the poem that the star is of little value. When he calls on the star to "Say something to us we can learn," the star replies, "I burn." The poet points out that the star refuses to "Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade," refuses in these terms to "Use language we can comprehend." Then the poet realizes that the star "asks a little of us here."

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

Frost, of course, refuses to falsify the star to the point of making it speak specific rules, yet if we have the proper "height" it will give us the sense of permanence that we so desperately need. "On Looking Up by Chance at

the Constellations" (CP, 346) gives the speaker a sense of permanence similar to that of "Choose Something Like a Star," and in addition a sense of calmness made emphatic by understatement. The calm among the stars, Frost predicts, "seems certainly safe to last tonight." In "Come In" the poet recognizes two forces at work in nature. One force, in the form of the thrush's song, is "Almost like a call to come in/To the dark and lament." The other force is that of stars, and it is this force that the poet is seeking.

Other Frost poems, such as "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" and especially "I Will Sing You One-O," clearly suggest a cosmic optimism. Although Frost cannot see God's hand everywhere at work in "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" as Thoreau can in his most affirmative moments, Frost is capable of a faith that achieves the same results:

> 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 (CP, 342).

In "I Will Sing You One-O," Frost's most transcendental poem, he has a remarkable vision of the unity of the universe. Of the town clocks striking one o'clock in the morning, the poet says,

> Their solemn peals
> Were not their own:
> They spoke for the clock
> With whose vast wheels
> Theirs interlock.
> In that grave word

Uttered alone
The utmost star
Trembled and stirred
. . . (CP, 265).

Two poems which affirm man's relation with nature are "The Most of It" and "Two Look at Two." It is quite possible to suppose that "The Most of It" (CP, 451) represents the failure of nature to respond to man because when the character in the poem raises his voice, nothing returns "but the mocking echo." At this point the poet hedges: Something, apparently a buck, came swimming up, landed, "and stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,/ And forced the underbrush--and that was all." Many readers will suppose that this was not the desired response, yet the poet tells us that the man did not want his "own love back in copy speech/But counter-love, original response." There is certainly no evidence that the man receives counter-love from the buck-like creature that appears, but it could well be that it presented him with the original response he has asked for. The poet does not commit himself; he leaves the door open to either the affirmation or negation of nature's response. He says "--and that was all," but he does not indicate whether or not it was enough. The other poem has no such ambiguity, however. In "Two Look at Two" the two lovers achieve a nearly perfect communion with nature. When they see the buck as well as the doe, they realize

> "This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
> A great wave from it going over them,
> As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
> Had made them certain earth returned their love
> (CP, 283).

This experience is presented as a once in a lifetime event, but it does affirm the possibility of a real communion with nature in the twentieth century.

Finally, in "The Wood-Pile" Frost demonstrates the way in which nature can fulfill its own destiny at the same time that man fulfills his. Coming across a cord of firewood abandoned in the forest, the speaker first admires the "Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks" as one who "Could so forget his handiwork on which/He spent himself." Thus the woodcutter has received his benefit from the wood. The wood, on the other hand, fulfills its destiny by warming "the frozen swamps as best it could/With the slow smokeless burning of decay" (CP, 127). This poem is remarkably like Thoreau's narration of the ice that was harvested from Walden Pond during the winter of 1846-47. There is less suggestion that the laborers fulfilled their impulse by gathering the ice such as the woodchopper does in Frost's "The Wood-Pile," but it is obvious that like the cord of wood, the ice fulfills its destiny in spite of the interference of man. The stack of ice, "estimated to contain ten thousand tons," took until September, 1848 to melt, but "the pond recovered the greater part" (W, II, 327).

Other examples of Frost's optimism, particularly "Directive," could be cited here as further evidence of the light side of Frost. These poems, however, contain other even more pertinent affinities with Thoreau; therefore, I will discuss them in the following chapter. The examples of the dark side of Thoreau and of the light side of Frost are sufficient to reduce the distance between the two men to the point where I can begin to discuss more positive similarities of attitudes and approaches to life in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III

AN APPROACH TO LIFE

As its part in the worldwide recognition of the centenary anniversary of the publication of Walden, the journal of the British Broadcasting Company, The Listener, presented an interview with Robert Frost on the subject of Thoreau's masterpiece. Among his observations, Frost made the following comment:

> But in Thoreau's declaration of independence from the modern pace is where I find most of my justification for my own propensities. He said he went to the woods to live deliberately. Come to think of it, that is why I have gone to a number of places. Give me the speed of a perfectly geared automobile that I can slow down to half a mile an hour to tell one flower from another. My intolerance has been for the throng that complain of the modern pace yet strive to keep it.[1]

The determination to withdraw in order to live deliberately is an important area of affinity, and it is obvious from this observation that Frost feels that he has, at least at times, conducted the kind of strategic withdrawal for which Thoreau is famous. Moreover, it is clear that he has consciously felt a spiritual kinship with Thoreau in having done so.

This withdrawal from the most pressing aspects of everyday life has been construed as escapism, an unwilling-

---

[1]Robert Frost, "Thoreau's 'Walden,'" The Listener, LII (August 26, 1954), 320.

ness or inability to deal effectively with life. The careful reader of either Frost or Thoreau will quickly recognize that this withdrawal is not escapism, however, but an effort to back away from the petty, often preposterous details of everyday life. It is an attempt to reach a position from which to see what is essential and what is superfluous to life. Frost expresses the need for such withdrawal in "New Hampshire" when he is pressed into a choice between "prude or puke" by a "New York alec." Frost's response is "Me for the hills where I don't have to choose" (CP, 210). The point is not that Frost is afraid of or incapable of choice; it is simply that he wishes to preserve his efforts for significant and viable choices.

This comment by Frost points to another similarity with Thoreau that has a bearing on their decision to retreat: both men had a strong suspicion of conclusions that were not based in concrete situations. As I noted earlier, Channing, the man who knew Thoreau best, characterized him as one to whom metaphysics was an aversion. Channing also says that Thoreau's "habit of mind demanded complete accuracy, the utmost finish, and that nothing should be taken on hearsay."[2] Thoreau himself makes the same points when he says, for example, in the

---

[2]William Ellery Channing, Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist, with Memorial Verses, new edition, enlarged and ed. F. B. Sanborn (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), p. 67.

Journal under the heading of "Speculation" that we "are enveloped in an invisible network of speculations. Our progress is only from one such speculation to another, and only at rare intervals do we perceive that it is no progress" (J, I, 61). In Walden he again voices his suspicion of the abstract proposition:

> I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything, to the purpose. Here is life to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about (W, II, 10).

In a sense this quotation sets the tone for much of "Economy" in that it points to the willingness of the townsmen of Concord to accept the abstractions of their forefathers without checking these conclusions against the facts of their own lives. Thus it is that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (W, II, 8). Thoreau again shows his distrust of abstractions in his comments on philosophers. "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers," he says. The distinction between the two lies in the fact that "to be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live, according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust." Above all, to be a philosopher is to "solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but

practically" (W, II, 16). Among the observations in the Journal, moreover, is the notation that "a man has not seen a thing who has not felt it" (J, XIII, 160).

Frost has made similar comments about his own suspicion of abstraction. Just as Thoreau says "A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry, for common sense always takes a hasty and superficial view" (W, I, 347), so Frost says "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" (CP, 25). He also points out in "For Once, Then, Something" that his friends (or enemies) have been disturbed by his suspicion of abstractions:

> Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
> Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
> Deeper down in the well than where the water
> Gives me back in a shining surface picture
> Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
> Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs (CP, 276).

Just as these lines express his suspicion of abstractions, so the rest of the poem shows that he insists on an experiential approach to life. In this case Frost is unable to make up his mind what he has experienced ("Truth? A pebble of quartz?"). The doubt that Frost expresses here illustrates the doubt that is inherent in a commitment to the careful examination of experience. At the same time, however, it shows Frost's willingness to accept doubt in preference to untested abstractions. Again in "To a Thinker," this time in at least a semiteasing mood, Frost voices his opinion on the abstract thinker:

> You call this thinking, but it's walking.
> Not even that, it's only rocking,
> Or weaving like a stabled horse:
> From force to matter and back to force,
> From form to content and back to form,
> From norm to crazy and back to norm,
> From bound to free and back to bound,
> From sound to sense and back to sound.

After deciding that the thinker "must continue . . . to sway with reason more or less," he concludes with "At least don't use your mind too hard,/But trust my instinct--I'm a bard" (CP, 431-32). The reader can feel quite certain that "instinct" in Frost's case is firmly rooted in experience.

Their positive statements on the approach to life, moreover, make it even more clear that both men withdraw from life in order to gain the proper perspective. One might question whether or not it was "by accident" that Thoreau began to live at Walden Pond "on Independence Day, or the fourth of July, 1845" (W, II, 94), but it certainly was the beginning of his most famous experiment in the art of living. He has made a number of statements on the reason why he went to Walden Pond; on one occasion he states that he went there simply for business reasons: "My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles . . ." (W, II, 21). In his Journal entry for July 6, his third full day in residence, however, he says,

> I wish to meet the facts of life--the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us--face to face, and so I came down here.

> Life! who knows what it is, what it does? If I am not quite right here, I am less wrong than before; and now let us see what they will have (J, I, 362).

Although he is not speaking specifically of his withdrawal to Walden Pond in the following comment from A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Thoreau is speaking to the point at issue when he insists that "the frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man fronts a fact, though that be his neighbor. . . . Let him build himself a log house with the bark on where he is, fronting IT, and wage there an Old French war for seven or seventy years . . . and save his scalp if he can" (W, I, 323-4).

Thoreau's most famous statement of why he went to Walden Pond is, of course, the one that he gives in "Where I Lived, and What I lived For":

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever" (W, II, 100-01).

So dramatic is this statement of an approach to life that it completely dominates the economic essays in Walden; that is, they are obviously subordinate to this plan to find out what life is all about, not through abstraction and unreliable second hand reports, but through the actual experience of living. The conclusions of this statement are reinforced, moreover, by the often overlooked statement of why he left the pond: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves" (W, II, 355).

If one insists on the primacy of personal experience to the extent that Thoreau does, moreover, one runs the risk of being overwhelmed by its sheer bulk and variety, and, as I will show, this is exactly what happened to Thoreau as well as Frost. Thoreau for a time escaped being totally overwhelmed by the possibilities of experience through his retreat to Walden and the deliberate simplification he thus undertook. Perhaps the total number of experiences was not reduced, since the act of living is a continual experience in any case, but the number of unessential experiences was reduced by his simple life. Such, of course, is the point that Thoreau is making when he says, "Our life is frittered away by detail. . . .

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three and not as a hundred or a thousand . . ."(W, II, 101). With one eye perhaps on Benjamin Franklin, Thoreau says, "Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one . . ., and reduce other things in proportion" (W, II, 102).

John Lynen demonstrates that Frost, too, has chosen to withdraw into the rural scene in order to simplify. In his study of Frost as a pastoral poet, he points out that "though rural life is the subject of the pastoral, it is not seen in and for itself: the poet always tends to view it with reference to the more sophisticated plane of experience upon which both he and his audience lives." Lynen goes on to quote W. W. Greg: "What does appear to be a constant element in the pastoral as known to literature is the recognition of the contrast, implicit or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization. . . ."[3] While Frost is perhaps implicit in his comparison of rural with city life, Thoreau is generally explicit. He spends a major portion of the first two chapters, "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," in making detailed comparisons between his simple life

---

[3]John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 9.

at Walden Pond and the far more complex life of the village of Concord. These comparisons take many forms, but always at stake is the stultifying over-complexity of non-essentials that prevents the villagers from seeing what life is. They fail to see, for example, that "the cost of a thing is the amount of . . . life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (W, II, 34). From the undeniable necessities of food, clothing, and shelter the inhabitants of Concord proceed to spend their entire lives building up a surplus which eventually becomes an albatross hanging around the neck of their imaginative faculties; they "are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; as I implied before, they are cooked, of course a la mode" (W, II, 15).

The process of withdrawal for simplification was not for either man, however, an end in itself. As Lynen has noted, "Frost's method as pastoral poet is nicely illustrated by one of his most familiar lyrics, 'The Pasture.' This poem is of particular interest in that the poet has for many years used it as the epigraph for editions of his collected verse, a fact which suggests that he regards it as a symbol of the kind of poetry he writes."[4] Lynen goes on in the following pages to discuss "The Pasture" as illustrating the pastoral tradition, and he is quite right

---

[4]Ibid., p. 21.

to do so. The poem becomes even more significant, however, if it is seen not so much as an epigraph but more as an introduction or preface, and if it is seen as a comment by Frost on his purpose as a poet, a hint to the reader, rather than as "a symbol of the kind of poetry he writes." Lynen has come closer to the essential meaning of "The Pasture" in a comment directed not to it specifically but to Frost in general. In understanding Frost, he says, it is necessary to consider "a way of viewing the world which is more fundamental than any particular view he may have recorded, because of the condition of perceiving."[5] It is this way of viewing the world that links Frost most closely to Thoreau, as a comparison of their statements will show. "The Pasture" is Frost's statement of purpose; hence it performs the same function as Thoreau's famous statement of why he went to Walden.

> I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
> I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
> (And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
> I shan't be gone long. --You come too (CP, 1).

Lynen sees the rural stance as the major significance of "The Pasture." The rural stance is important, of course, because it prompts a comparison with the more complex life that the reader knows. It is even more important, however, as a means of getting at a set of experiences that permit

---

[5]Ibid., p. ix.

life to be examined in its essential details. Where Thoreau intends "to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms," Frost is going to "stop to rake the leaves away." Where Thoreau says,

> Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nileometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time (W, II, 108-9),

Frost, with less confidence in man's ability to find reality says again,

> I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
> (And wait to watch the water clear, I may).

Thoreau's statement is made in a tone of great excitement and urgency, while Frost maintains a tone of quiet calmness; yet surely both are expressing the same desire--the desire to find out what life is, and if it is mean publish its meanness, and if it sublime give an account of that also.

Interestingly enough, moreover, each writer on occasion uses the chimney to illustrate or symbolize what "hard bottom" means to them. Thoreau says that "the

chimney is to some extent an independent structure, standing on the ground and rising through the house to the heavens; even after the house is burned it still stands sometimes, and its importance and independence are apparent" (W, II, 267). Frost uses the chimney to provide a remarkably similar statement in his "The Kitchen Chimney":

> Builder, in building the little house,
> In every way you may please yourself;
> But please please me in the kitchen chimney:
> Don't build me a chimney upon a shelf.
>
> However far you must go for bricks,
> Whatever they cost a-piece or a pound,
> Buy me enough for a full length chimney,
> And build the chimney clear from the ground.
> . . . . . .
> A shelf's for a clock or vase or picture,
> But I don't see why it should have to bear
> A chimney that would only serve to remind me
> Of castles I used to build in air (CP, 286).

Thus, Frost, too, wants a "Realometer" that will measure the "shams and appearances [that] had gathered from time to time." Thoreau's "Be it life or death, we crave only reality" (W, II, 109) could just as well be taken as a description of one of Frost's most typical attitudes. For both the metaphor of the chimney becomes a way of stating that the romantic aspiration to which both subscribe must be founded in "reality."

In arguing that Frost is not a transcendentalist, and without mentioning Thoreau, Nina Baym has noticed this quality in Frost: "Man wants to know the laws of the world he lives in precisely because it is the world <u>he</u> lives in. He can act meaningfully in it only if he understands it.

If there are correspondences, he should know this; if there are not, he should know that, and he should not then act as if there were."[6] Lawrance Thompson, too, has noted that for Frost "a large part of his poetic pleasure would seem to be derived from his finding verse not only an end in itself but also a means to the end of making each poem some kind of 'clarification of life,' even a clarification of his own attitude toward life."[7] Thompson also says that "the matrix-pattern of A Boy's Will foreshadows his persistent pleasure in employing the lyric mode as an expression of self-discovery, even psychological self-education, concerning his own ties to his beloved, to strangers, to nature, to the universe, to God."[8] Clearly, then, Frost is determined not to be one who has "somewhat hastily concluded."

In returning to a consideration of "The Pasture," the reader finds in the poem an explicit invitation ("You come too") to accompany the poet. On the surface level, of course, this invitation is to accompany Frost to the pasture. On the metaphorical level, however, it is an invitation to observe the poet in the process of "fronting

---

[6]Nina Baym, "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," American Quarterly, XVII (Winter, 1965), 716.

[7]Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 14.

[8]Ibid., p. 13.

life." Thoreau extends no such explicit invitations, but he does indicate that he has written the book to answer questions, the questions that his townspeople have asked him about his sojourn at Walden Pond. He goes on to "ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book," and says also of his readers that "they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits" (W, II, 3-4). Surely in Thoreau's metaphorical way this constitutes his implicit invitation to the reader to watch the process of determining "whether we should live like baboons or like men" (W, II, 102).

Yvor Winters in his "Robert Frost; Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet" argues that "an habitual but unreasoned hesitancy or fear, which is the heritage of the earlier New England, keeps Frost looking two ways, unable to move decisively in either direction."[9] Winters is correct in his judgment, but he is wrong in what the judgment implies. An examination of the quality, extent, and position of Frost's withdrawal will show that Frost

---

[9]Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost; Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957), p. 181.

most certainly looks in two directions, that he is hesitant (though not fearful and certainly not unreasoned), and that he is unwilling (though not necessarily unable) to move decisively in either direction. Although Winters does not take up the matter of Frost's retreat at all (except that Winters sees a retreat from reason), it is his failure to see the quality or position of Frost's withdrawal that leads him to this particular mistaken judgment. Winters has failed to see the degree to which Frost, like Thoreau before him, retreated to a position between. Because Frost is in a position between, in other words, he is kept looking in both directions, or perhaps the converse is true: it may be that Frost is so aware of the necessity of looking in both directions that he found it essential to take up the position between.

At any rate, Frost has positioned himself between many pairs of opposites, the first of which is between man and nature. This quality of Frost's withdrawal is explicitly delineated in some of his earliest poems. In "A Dream Pang" (CP, 22), for example, the poet tells his lover: "I had withdrawn in forest and my song/Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away. . . ." In this dream vision the poet's lover came to the edge of the forest but refused to seek him farther. The poet, however, denies that his withdrawal was permanent: "But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof,/For the wood wakes, and you are here for

proof." Thus Frost sets up one of the very common patterns of his poetry--withdrawal and return--which characterizes the importance he attaches to looking in both directions. The same pattern is evident in "The Vantage Point" (CP, 24). In this extremely Thoreauvian poem Frost most explicitly reveals the position of his retreat:

> If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
> Well I know where to hie me--in the dawn
> To a slope where cattle keep the lawn.

From this vantage point he can see "in white defined/Far off the homes of men" and beyond that "The graves of men on an opposing hill." When he has had his fill of man, on the other hand, his position allows relief:

> I have but to turn on my arm, and lo,
> The sun-burned hillside sets my face aglow,
> My breathing shakes the bluet like a breeze,
> I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
> I look into the crater of the ant.

Perhaps more important than the pattern of withdrawal and return that these poems establish, however, is the fact that they represent or explain Frost's ambiguous views on the relationship of man, views which are made possible by the semidetached stance which he adopts. In some of his most famous lines, for example, Frost points out first that everyone "must be, as he had been,--alone" (CP, 31); he goes on, of course, to assert that "Men work together . . ./Whether they work together or apart" (CP, 32). Although in this poem there is an air of finality about the latter statement which makes it the "conclusion"

of the poem, Frost is clearly looking in both directions. That is to say, Frost can take into account both the sense of separateness and the sense of brotherhood that all men feel.

In "A Tuft of Flowers" Frost sees the contradictory terms--separateness and brotherhood--one after another, but in "Mending Wall" (CP, 47-8) he sees them simultaneously, and the simultaneity provides the tension of the poem. Because the narrator is the advocate of "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," most readers assume that this sentiment is the "conclusion" of "Mending Wall" as "men work together" is the "conclusion" of "A Tuft of Flowers." In reality however, as I indicated, Frost holds both terms of the contradiction simultaneously: he is not to be equated with the narrator; instead he stands apart from both characters, using them, not to conclude anything, but to contribute richly to the terms of the paradox. Frost is not, then, advocating the removal of all barriers, as a number of poems such as "Build Soil" and "Triple Bronze" make clear. What he objects to in the neighbor is his blind acceptance of his father's maxim that "Good fences make good neighbors." It is this refusal to look at things with his own eyes that makes him "like an old-stone savage armed," that makes him move "in darkness" (CP, 48). Rather than presenting a program for social action, then, Frost is simply describing the paradoxical fact that man feels a

terrible sense of loneness and simultaneously a powerful sense of brotherhood.

Thoreau likewise takes up a position between man and nature that is identical to Frost's: "In one direction from my house there was a colony of muskrats in the river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other was a village of busy men, as curious to me as if they had been prairie-dogs, each sitting at the mouth of its burrow, or running over to a neighbor's to gossip. I went there frequently to observe their habits" (W, II, 186). In speaking of love and friendship, on the other hand, Thoreau is much more idealistic than Frost; thus the terms of the paradox change. Still, in its general outlines his attitude seems similar, as is shown by his essay on friendship in A Week. He says there, for example, that "one goes forth prepared to say, 'Sweet Friends!' and the salutation is, 'Damn your eyes!'" (W, I, 281). Later he says to a hypothetical friend, "Between us, if necessary, let there be no acquaintance" (W, I, 286). He, too, can hold both terms of the paradox simultaneously: "Persons are only the vessels which contain the nectar, and the hydrostatic paradox is the symbol of love's law" (W, I, 287).

This detached position in regard to man also leads both men (and especially Frost) into statements that their admirers might wish stricken from the record. Not only does it lead them into rather irresponsible and seemingly

inhumane declarations on philanthropy, but it also causes them to have an exaggerated fear of being influenced by another mind. As Yvor Winters points out,[10] Frost verges on the ridiculous, if not the morally dangerous, when he says,

> Suppose someone comes near me who in rate
> Of speech and thinking is so much my better
> I am imposed on, silenced and discouraged.
> Do I submit to being supplied by him
> As the more economical producer?
> No, I unostentatiously move off
> Far enough for my thought-flow to resume.
> Thought product and food product are to me
> Nothing compared to the producing of them (CP, 429).

Insofar as these lines represent the poet's determination to maintain his own personality, this declaration is admirable enough. It is an embarrassing oversimplification, however, in that it sets up a false dilemma. Frost suggests that it is a matter of either complete rejection or complete surrender, apparently ignoring the possibility of learning from the acknowledgedly superior mind while still retaining his essential integrity.

Thoreau, of course, has no really comparable statement, but his constantly very touchy independence suggests that he, too, perhaps oversimplified the problem. When he writes on the subject, he restricts himself to the legitimate concern with maintaining the integrity of the self;

---

[10]Winters, op. cit., p. 170. Winters specifically includes Thoreau along with Frost in his condemnation of "amateur anarchists and village eccentrics."

it is only in the total posture that one suspects Thoreau of being too concerned about not being influenced by another mind. In spite of these occasional embarrassments, however, both Frost and Thoreau speak well and clearly of the human condition; to understand completely the extent to which they do so, one must first understand that "if you stand right fronting face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow . . ." (W, II, 109). You must, in other words, be able to look simultaneously in two directions.

Just as Frost and Thoreau share similar views on man's relation to man, so they share similar views on man's relation to nature. Lynen, however, disagrees; he asserts of Frost that "despite his indebtedness to Romanticism, he must be seen as essentially anti-Romantic. By insisting on the gulf separating man and nature, he directly opposes the Romantic attempt to bring the two together."[11] Lynen is less wrong about Frost in these statements than he is about the Romantics. The Romantic, Lynen says, attempted to heal the dichotomy between mind and matter "by asserting the unity of man and nature. Whether this involved seeing man as a part of nature, intuiting the common spirit infused in both, or seeing both as parts of a larger reality, the

---

[11]Lynen, Pastoral Art, p. 167.

result was a humanizing of nature and a stressing of the emotional values in the landscape."[12] This assertion is an oversimplification, I think, of any of the major Romantics, and particularly so of Thoreau. If "Romantic" is to be construed as a sense of the unification of man and nature and "anti-Romantic" as a sense of the separation of man and nature, what is one supposed to make of the following remark by Thoreau?

> Defeat is heaven's success. He cannot be said to succeed to whom the world shows any favor. In fact it is the hero's point d'appui, which by offering resistance to his action enables him to act at all. At each step he spurns the world. He vaults the higher in proportion as he employs the greater resistance of the earth.[13]

Lynen does not use Thoreau as his example of the Romantic, but he surely intended for him to be included. It is also difficult to know exactly what he means by "a humanizing of nature," but any sense of the term that would fit Frost would also fit Thoreau. Again Lynen does not refer to "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (CP, 300) in this connection, but it is often seen as illustrating that attitude toward nature which separates Frost from the Romantics. In the first four stanzas of this poem, Frost skirts sentimentality as he describes the foresaken and

---

[12] Ibid., p. 165.

[13] Henry David Thoreau, Consciousness in Concord: Text of the Hitherto "Lost Journal" (1840-1841), ed. Perry Miller (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1958), p. 162.

partially burned-out farmstead. He concludes this portion of the poem with

> The birds that came to it through the air
> At broken windows flew out and in,
> Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
> From too much dwelling on what has been.

In the fifth stanza Frost draws back, declaring that the birds were untouched by what appears to man as a tragedy. He concludes by saying that for the birds

> there was really nothing sad.
> But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
> One had to be versed in country things
> Not to believe that the phoebes wept.

Frost draws back, then, from the very strong temptation to "humanize" nature by reading his own emotions into the birds.

The reader may be appalled by the equanimity with which Thoreau can "love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,--tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road" (W, II, 350), but he will admit that Thoreau is neither sentimentalizing nor humanizing nature. In "Higher Laws," too, Thoreau tells of giving up hunting and nearly giving up fishing, but not because he was "less humane than the others" when he did fish: "I did not pity the fishes nor the worms" (W, II, 234). Thoreau found exhilaration in the thought of the railroad snowplow out

doing battle with the "veto of a New England northeast snow-storm" (W, II, 132). The fact that nature ignored the more trivial qualities of human life, moreover, was proof to him that nature was superior to man perhaps, but at any rate separate. There is finally the evidence which I have already pointed out from The Maine Woods and from Cape Cod. Thoreau undoubtedly had more confidence in nature than Frost, but their attitude toward it was generally quite similar.

Frost and Thoreau also take up a common position between the physical and the spiritual, and this stance, too, is characterized by a pattern of withdrawal and return. F. O. Matthiessen has noted this quality in Thoreau; he quotes Thoreau's "The other world is all my art; my pencil will draw no other; my jack-knife will cut nothing else; I do not use it as a means." Matthiessen then goes on to comment: "Yet even in that affirmation of faith Thoreau does not disappear into the usual transcendental vapor. He gives us the sense that he is a man whose grip remains firm on this world as well, whose hand can manage both his knife and his pencil."[14] Thoreau himself gives many examples of constant circulation between the physical and the spiritual. He tells, for example, of fishing at night on Walden Pond:

---

[14]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 92-3.

> --anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from shore . . . and communicating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below, or sometimes dragging sixty feet of line about the pond as I drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make up its mind. At length you slowly raise, pulling hand over hand, some horned pout squeaking and squirming to the upper air. It was very queer, especially on dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast cosmogonal themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook (W, II, 194-5).

The method of the prose illustrates the point of the passage. As he always does, Thoreau retains a tight grip on physical details, "forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from shore," while he takes his reader off on "cosmogonal themes." The rhetoric itself, in other words, illustrates Thoreau's simultaneous interest in both the physical and the spiritual.

"The outline which would bound my walks would be, not a circle, but a parabola, or rather like one of those cometary orbits which have been thought to be non-returning curves, in this case opening westward, in which my house occupies the place of the sun" (W, V, 217). Thus Thoreau describes his most constant activity and again reveals the pattern of withdrawal and return. Here, too, he is thinking of a position between the physical and the spiritual as he makes clear, first of all, in his etymology of <u>sauntering</u>--

"beautifully derived 'from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under the pretense of going a la Sainte Terre,' to the Holy Land," and so "a Saunterer" becomes ". . . a Holy Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed idlers and vagabonds . . ." (W, V, 205). Later in the same work Thoreau says, "We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world . . ." (W, V, 216-17). Finally he notes that "we hug the earth,--how rarely we mount. Methinks we might elevate a little more. We might climb a tree at least" (W, V, 244).

Thoreau's most pervasive symbol for this need to live between the physical and spiritual, however, is Walden Pond. The fact that the pond partakes of both the physical and the spiritual worlds is its chief attraction to Thoreau, and he mentions it often in Walden. He states explicitly, moreover, that he is "thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought bottomless" (W, II, 316). Earlier Thoreau indicates the way in which the pond functions as a symbol, "a lower heaven": "That way I looked between and over the near green hills to some distant and higher ones in the horizon, tinged with blue" (W, II, 96). Thus the pond serves to direct the gaze from

the green of physical nature to the blue of the spiritual life. "This is as important," Thoreau says in another connection, "as that it keeps butter cool" (W, II, 97). The pond itself, however, partakes of both the physical and spiritual as is indicated by the interplay of the colors of green and blue in its waters. Thoreau tells his reader, for example, that

> lying between the earth and heavens, [Walden] partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hill top it reflects the color of the sky, but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond (W, II, 196).

Walden Pond, Thoreau maintains, keeps its participation in both the physical and the spiritual even when frozen: "Like the water, the Walden ice, seen near at hand, has a green tint, but at a distance is beautifully blue, and you can easily tell it from the white ice of the river, or the merely greenish ice of some ponds, a quarter mile off" (W, II, 327). In some cases, on the other hand, "a portion of Walden which in the state of water was green will often, when frozen, appear from the same point of view blue" (W, II, 327). This combination of physical green and spiritual blue goes far in accounting for Thoreau's fascination with Walden Pond, and at the same time illustrates his commitment to both worlds.

Robert Frost has also expressed a position distinctly between the physical and the spiritual worlds,

embracing neither to the exclusion of the other, but insofar as possible participating in both. In "After Apple-Picking," for example, the poet opens his poem by telling the reader that his "long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree/Toward heaven still" (CP, 88). In "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" the poet suggests that God is the author of the spiritual man, while the sun is the author of the physical. "One impulse," the poet says, "persists as our breath;/The other persists as our faith" (CP, 342).

It is in "The Middleness of the Road" and "Birches," however, that Frost most clearly shows his interest in the two worlds. In "The Middleness of the Road" the very scene suggests the process of working through the physical to the spiritual:

> The road at the top of the rise
> Seems to come to an end
> And take off into the skies (CP, 547).

The poet is effectively barred from the attraction that the spiritual holds out for him, however:

> The mineral drops that explode
> To drive my ton of car
> Are limited to the road,
>
> But have almost nothing to do
> With absolute flight and rest
> The universal blue
> And local green suggest.

In spite of the fact that he cannot actively take part in the two worlds, Frost does express his interest in them. Moreover, he uses Thoreau's symbols of blue and green to

express the physical and spiritual worlds. The process that interests both Frost and Thoreau is most clearly stated in "Birches" (CP, 153), however. After contrasting the fancy of the boy bending the birches with the probable fact of the ice storm as the cause of the bent birch trees, the poet goes on to say,

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

In these moments the poet's earlier experiences at swinging birches come back to him and provide him with an image for his position:

> I'd like to get away from earth awhile
> And then come back to it and begin over.
> May no fate willfully misunderstand me
> And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
> Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
> I don't know where it's likely to go better.
> I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
> And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
> Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more
> But dipped its top and set me down again.
> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Thoreau, too, often used the image of climbing a tree to symbolize the effort toward the spiritual world, and as I have noted he, too, did not want to be willfully misunderstood and snatched away completely. It is the pond, however, that serves as Thoreau's major symbol; the two symbols--birch and pond--are remarkably similar, and they reveal a significant approach to life which the two men share.

The retreat which both Frost and Thoreau effected also takes on religious overtones, as perhaps the concern with the spiritual world suggests. One of Frost's finest poems, and certainly his best poem on the subject of withdrawal, "Directive" (CP, 520-21), illustrates nearly every aspect of what withdrawal meant to Frost; it also most clearly presents religious overtones. The need for simplification, for example, is evident in the first lines of the poem:

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

There is also a note of invitation reminiscent of "The Pasture" in the poet's offer to be a guide, but here he is even more obviously a spiritual guide since he is one "Who only has at heart your getting lost." The poet-guide goes on to advise his client:

> And if you're lost enough to find yourself
> By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
> And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
> Then make yourself at home.

I do not wish to argue that this poem, any more than the religious elements of Thoreau's Walden, is specifically Christian, but just as Thoreau quotes and paraphrases the Bible for his own purposes, Frost also echoes the Bible and Christian tradition. Thus his "if you're lost enough to find yourself" is clearly intended to call to mind Christ's warning that "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and

he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39).[15] When Frost advocates putting up a sign "CLOSED to all but me," he is not denying the social nature of Christianity that is so much a part of its tradition; instead he is affirming the essentially personal nature of the religious experience.

With line forty Frost introduces the motif of childhood:

> First there's the children's house of make believe,
> Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
> The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
> Weep for what little things could make them glad.

His point in emphasizing the children is to contrast the innocence and simplicity of childhood with the experience and complexity of adulthood. This contrast is made evident, first of all, by contrasting the playhouse with "the house that is no more a house," the building that is no more but which once was "a house in earnest." By lingering on the "play" aspect of childhood ("playhouse" and "playthings"), Frost emphasizes the innocence and simplicity of childhood,

---

[15]The "lost" motif figures in a number of other Frost poems. In "The Wood-Pile" (CP, 126-7), for instance, when the poet achieves his insight he is in the woods where

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

The notion of being lost is also suggested in such poems as "Into My Own," "Blueberries," "An Encounter," and "A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey's Ears, and Some Books."

and brings to the reader's mind a number of Biblical passages such as Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17 and especially the better known Matthew 18:3: "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The concept of a return to the innocence and simplicity of childhood is further reinforced by the fact that the grail-like drinking goblet was stolen "from the children's playhouse." Water, one of the two or three most important Christian symbols, is introduced when the poet announces that

> 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.

The spiritual implications of the water are quite obvious. Frost, in fact, may even be suggesting that the house has been deserted because its tenants failed to partake of the spiritual waters of the spring. There is a good deal in the description of the landscape--from the "certain coolness" of nature to the desolation of "two village cultures faded/Into each other. Both of them lost"--to suggest the spiritual emptiness of the inhabitants, and by extension the world at large.

Frost continues by drawing on the tradition of the search for the Holy Grail:

> 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 St. Mark says they mustn't.
> (I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)

The tradition of the Grail, of course, again takes the reader back to withdrawal from society, to the notion of innocence and purity, and toward the concept of sanctification. In this passage Frost also makes clear his method in "Directive." When the poet says that he has hidden the drinking goblet "so the wrong ones can't find it"[16] and get saved "as Saint Mark says they mustn't," the reader can turn to Mark 4:12 to find the following explanation from Jesus as to why he spoke in parables: "That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them." The final lines, too, make it evident that for the right people the poem is a program for salvation:

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

Frost is pointing up the religious quality of his retreat, then, in "Directive." It is only through withdrawal "Back out of all this now too much for us" that one can achieve the simplicity, innocence, and purity that are necessary for spiritual renewal. All of this is in complete agreement with Thoreau.

---

[16]Frost gives no indication of the criteria that divide the "right ones" from the "wrong ones"; in light of the Frost revealed in his letters one suspects the "wrong ones" may be his personal enemies. At any rate, this lack is a major flaw in an otherwise nearly flawless poem.

Although Thoreau quotes and paraphrases Christian sources much more than Frost does, it would be even more difficult to maintain that he is specifically Christian than it would Frost. For one thing, Thoreau denies being a Christian, considering himself an eclectic instead (W, I, 68). Nevertheless, there are constant religious overtones in Thoreau's writings, and most of them--probably for the benefit of the reader--are Christian in origin. Even while Thoreau was attacking what Christianity had become, moreover, he was willing to use the enemy's ammunition against the enemy. The townspeople of Concord, Thoreau says, "are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (W, II, 6). Not only does this passage reveal Thoreau's attitude toward his neighbors, but it also reveals his attitude toward the Bible: it is "an old book," obviously one from which the reader should get what good he can but by which he should not be dominated. In other words, when the injunctions of the Bible came in conflict with Thoreau's own experience, he chose to have faith in his experience, and so concludes, for instance, that "it is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than [Thoreau does] " (W, II, 79).

Like Frost, Thoreau also recognizes the fact that salvation, in whatever terms, is a project that one must

carry out alone: "You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all I know about it, and never paint 'No Admittance' on my gate" (W, II, 18).[17] Thoreau, too, knows that his program of spiritual regeneration is not for all men, but in contrast to Frost he is unworried about the wrong ones getting saved; their very spiritual deadness is an effective bar to their understanding, and Thoreau is required only by his subject matter to keep the grail hidden. There are many secrets to his trade, and Thoreau recognizes that "John or Jonathan" will not "realize all this" (W, II, 367). The personal quality of one's spiritual life also resolves what many have taken as a paradox--Thoreau's claim that he is "naturally no hermit" (W, II, 155) set beside the fact of his withdrawal to Walden Pond.

The nature of the spiritual life is presented somewhat differently in Thoreau, since his major term is purification. He announces this theme to the careful reader early in the book when he says that "the portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumberances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few

---

[17]S. P. C. Duval, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of Walden," American Literature, XXXI (January, 1960), 486-7, sees Frost's "put a sign up CLOSED to all but me" as one of many of his allusions to Walden.

cubic feet of flesh" (W, II, 5-6). He makes it even more evident when he records seeing the "torpid" snake and goes on to comment: "It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life" (W, II, 46). Walden Pond, of course, is the central symbol for all this, and Thoreau returns time after time to a consideration of its "purity": "Nevertheless, of all the characters I have known, perhaps Walden wears best, and best preserves its purity" (W, II, 214).

Just as one sees a ritualistic quality in "Directive," moreover, so one sees it even more clearly in Walden. "I got up early and bathed in the pond," Thoreau tells his readers; "that was a religious exercise and one of the best things which I did" (W, II, 98), and he goes on to make it clear that the ritual was one of renewal. He also makes known his approval of the meaningful ritual in his discussion of the "busk" ritual of the Mucclasse Indians:

> I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament, that is, as the dictionary defines it, "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," than this, and I have no doubt that they were originally inspired directly from heaven to do thus, though they have no Biblical record of the revelation (W, II, 76).

Thoreau, of course, was opposed to ritual which was meaningless to the person who performed it; hence he signed

off the organized church, and he felt his neighbors had somewhat hastily reached their conclusions on religious ritual.

In one of his late pieces, "Wild Apples," Thoreau provides fanciful names for various wild apples. One such apple he would name "the Saunterer's Apple," and promptly adds that "you must lose yourself before you can find your way to that" (W, V, 316). The same theme of losing the self in order to find the (spiritual) self runs through Thoreau's work as it does through Frost's. In Walden Thoreau speaks of the ease with which a man becomes lost "in this world," and then concludes: "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost this world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (W, II, 190).

The religious quality of Thoreau's retreat is again pointed up in "Solitude" where he tells of visits by "an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells [Thoreau] of old time and new eternity; . . . who keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and who though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried" (W, II, 152). Some controversy has developed around the precise identity of the old settler, but all agree that he represents the creator, regardless of what name he is known by. Given his

eclectic approach to the world's religions, "Creator" is probably all the identity that Thoreau intended. The important point is that Thoreau is in communion with him. "The Visitor who never comes" (W, II, 280) also maintains a secret identity, and again the specific name is unimportant. Like the "hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove" that Thoreau once lost (W, II, 18), the Visitor symbolizes some aspect of Thoreau's quest for spiritual regeneration.

The two men, Robert Frost and Henry David Thoreau, reveal a remarkable affinity in their approach to life. Both begin with the concept that personal experience is the best guide to reveal the nature of the universe and the way one ought to live in it. This concept, along with their common determination to avoid the final abstraction, to keep on examining the evidence of each new day, caused them to withdraw to a point where they could be assured that their experiences were essential. Both felt the need to get away from the overly complex life with its emphasis on trivialities and false dilemmas. Upon withdrawing, moreover, each man found himself in a position from which he could continue to look at each side of each fact; he found himself between man and nature, rejecting neither and totally embracing neither. Each man found himself between the physical and the spiritual and, if not reconciling the two, at least refusing to embrace one to the exclusion of the other. Both found, moreover, a religious or semi-religious aspect to their approach to life and used it to

sustain their greatest affirmations. Frost was able to back out of the confusion, fear, and sense of alienation of the twentieth century to declare that at least some men could "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." Thoreau, seeing quite clearly the nineteenth century beginning to rush toward the material and spiritual condition of the twentieth, could stand aside and declare that "the light which puts out our eye is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (W, II, 367).

The approach to life which Thoreau and Frost embraced in common had one result that neither man could have anticipated, however. In the "Conclusion" of Walden Thoreau advises that "it is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better, and you may perhaps find some 'Symmes Hole' by which to get at the inside at last" (W, II, 354). Counting cats in Zanzibar seems to have been the fate reserved for Thoreau after his period at Walden Pond. He was determined all his life, of course, "to know beans," but by the same token he was never interested in the fact for its own sake alone. In 1842, for example, Thoreau opposes the "collector of facts" to the philosopher, and then claims the best of both worlds for the poet (J, I, 450-51). In 1851 he says, "I, too, would fain set down something beside facts. Facts should only be as the frame

to my pictures; they should be material to the mythology which I am writing" (J, III, 99).

In the period after the experiment at Walden, however, Thoreau seems in large measure to have lost that power which he so confidently asserted in Walden: "And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us" (W, II, 107-8). As long as facts will behave in this manner, it is quite understandable why one might put so much faith in personal experience as Thoreau did. When facts refused to behave so, however, as they did in the latter part of his life, Thoreau, instead of changing his approach, redoubled his efforts. His Journal, as most readers have noticed, becomes a swamp of minute, semiscientific facts that remain just that--facts--and do not blossom into poetry or mythology. Thoreau, as one might expect, was aware of what was happening. As early as 1852 the problem comes up in the Journal: "Carlyle said that how to observe was to look, but I say that it is rather to see, and the more you look the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest, but suffer with constant strain" (J, IV, 351). In 1853 he says,

> Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at

> her is as fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone. I feel that I am dissipated by so many observations. I should be the magnet in the midst of all this dust and filings. I knock the back of my hand against a rock, and as I smooth back the skin, I find myself prepared to study lichens there. I look upon man but as a fungus. I have almost a slight, dry headache as the result of all this observing. How to observe is how to behave. O for a little Lethe! To crown all, lichens, which are so thin, are described in the dry state, as they are most commonly, not most truly, seen. Truly, they are dryly described (J, V, 45).

In spite of the sense of ennui and frustration that Thoreau expresses in this passage, however, he did not lose faith in his chosen approach to life. As late as 1860, he still says that "a fact stated barely is dry. It must be the vehicle of some humanity in order to interest us. . . . It must be warm, moist, incarnated,--have been breathed on at least. A man has not seen a thing who has not felt it" (J, XIII, 160). One has only to look at the material surrounding this very passage, however, to see that many of Thoreau's facts are not warm, moist, or incarnated. They lie inert on the pages of his Journal as they would in the driest of scientific field reports. Thoreau, then, paid the price for his particular approach to life: when his scientific tendency no longer merged with the poet in him he redoubled his collection of bare facts. Leo Marx points out that after Walden "particular facts and metaphysical ideas no longer cohere." Marx goes on to say that

Thoreau "could handle either facts or ideas, but he could no longer fuse them."[18]

In a number of poems Frost, too, feels oppressed and overburdened by the pressure of constantly having to weigh facts and experiences, and like Thoreau he cries out "for a little Lethe." In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (CP, 275), for instance, the pull towards unconsciousness is nearly overpowering:

> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep. . . .

Again like Thoreau, however, Frost resists the temptation. There is no evidence that Frost set off in a desperate pursuit of facts as Thoreau did; instead in this poem Frost seems to see his commitment to consciousness as his duty.

> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

He is therefore just as tenacious in his determination as is Thoreau.

Another poem, "After Apple-Picking" (CP, 88-9), illustrates both the commitment to the life of experience, and the cost that such a commitment can extract.

> For I have had too much
> Of apple-picking: I am overtired
> Of the great harvest I myself desired.
> There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,

---

[18]Leo Marx, "Introduction," Excursions (New York: Corinth Books Inc., 1962), p. XIII.

> Cherish in hand and not let fall.
> For all
> That struck the earth,
> No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
> Went surely to the cider-apple heap
> As of no worth.

This passage is first of all a metaphorical description of what is demanded by Frost's approach to life: each experience must be examined, cherished, and "not let fall." Any experience that fell without revealing its significance to the poet, "went surely to the cider-apple heap" since as a guide to living it was "of no worth." The burden of examining each fact and experience for its significance has, of course, proven to be almost more than the poet can bear. It has led him into a state of consciousness which is nearly surrealistic in its confusion of time: the pane of ice of the morning fell and broke, but the poet says, "I was well/Upon my way to sleep before it fell." At the same time, of course, Frost affirms that his approach to life has provided him with a fresh vision:

> I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
> I got from looking through a pane of glass
> I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
> And held against the world of hoary grass.

The poet does not stress in this poem the desire for lack of consciousness, but there is no question but that he welcomes it. The only thing that he fears (or is in any way uneasy about) is the possibility that lack of consciousness will not bring relief:

> One can see what will trouble
> This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.

It is not necessary with "After Apple-Picking" any more than with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" to determine conclusively what the nature of the sleep is; in "After Apple-Picking" it can be anything from a night's sleep to death. The point is that it is unconsciousness, at least temporary, which hopefully will provide surcease against the terrible burden of experience. And so Frost pays the same price for his approach to life as Thoreau. It takes slightly different forms in that Thoreau tries even more desperately to succeed, but it overpowers each man and at moments at least makes each of them call for a blotting out of the consciousness in order to find relief from what he has imposed upon himself.

The stance which Frost and Thoreau take up, and the consequences of that stance, work together to show the extent to which they are Romantics. In typical Romantic fashion these two writers throw the entire burden of determining the nature of life on the individual person. Thus they arrive at the central dilemma of Romanticism--what to do when the individual becomes (as he inevitably must become) inadequate to the task. There are several possible solutions to the problem: one can, like Wordsworth, modify one's views; another extreme is to maintain faith at all cost. Thoreau particularly chose the second alternative but at a terrible cost in both his life and writing. Frost, on the other hand, seems to let the problem simply fade

away by ignoring it. After his last grand affirmation in "Directive," he writes little on the subject, and, one might add, few poems of any great importance.

CHAPTER IV

CRAFT AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

More has been written on Robert Frost as a master of his craft than on any other aspect of his work. Even the very earliest reviews, those of A Boy's Will and North of Boston, concentrate on technique as much as, or more than, they do on theme and subject matter.[1] As Philip Gerber has pointed out, moreover, "While a fruitful debate might ensue from questioning whether Robert Frost has looked out far or in deep sufficiently to warrant his position as a major poet, praise for his craftsmanship has been almost universal. His range may be doubted, but his skill within it is generally granted."[2] Henry David Thoreau, on the other hand, was until recently largely ignored as a literary craftsman. To be sure, lip service has always been paid to his artistry, as Lewis Leary makes clear: "From Lowell's description of Thoreau's language as of 'an antique purity like wine grown colorless with age' . . . to E. B. White's description of it in the New Yorker (1949) as '100-proof anchovy,' phrases have been ingeniously

---

[1]See Richard Thornton (ed.), Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), pp. 17-53.

[2]Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 88.

manufactured to picture Thoreau's art."[3] But no really serious and sympathetic study of Thoreau's craft was attempted until F. O. Matthiessen did so in his American Renaissance. Since then a number of provocative and sensitive studies have been made, but much still remains to be brought to light on Thoreau as a literary craftsman.[4] It is not my intention to make the full scale study of Thoreau's craftsmanship which I feel is necessary; rather, my purpose is to compare his approach to his art with that of Frost's in an endeavor to illustrate an even broader set of affinities between the two than was pointed out in the preceding chapter.

Any artist's approach to his art is dictated by his essential mind set, or, conversely, his mind set is revealed by his art. Or, as Thoreau would have it, "It is not in man to determine what his style shall be. He might as well determine what his thoughts shall be" (W, IV, 330). Consequently, a good deal of the similarity of approach in the two writers has been suggested in the preceding discussion. What has been suggested, however, needs to be broadened and made more explicit. In the case of both Frost and Thoreau the basic mind set is the determination

---

[3]Lewis Leary, "Thoreau," Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1963), p. 199.

[4]Ibid., pp. 202-03 for later studies of Thoreau.

to participate as fully as possible in both the physical and the spiritual worlds. This approach manifests itself in their work by the way in which they each concentrate on the detail of whatever is under examination until it reveals its larger significance. I have already discussed their basic similarity in approach to life shown in their fundamental symbols of pond and birch tree. There is, however, an even larger affinity in their symbols.

Frost once remarked that a poem "is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness." Willard Thorpe has commented on this statement:

> What Frost stated as a generalization is borne out in his own poems. The reader's excitement is aroused by the slow unveiling, the inevitable approach of the moment of complete disclosure. He soon finds his comprehension advancing on more than one level as he recognizes that physical objects are changing into symbols, and that these are clues to the deeper meaning of the poem. Though Frost held with the romantics that a poem is an expression of an experience, his best poems are marvels of construction, the more exciting to the reader because their form seems to evolve before his eyes and ears.[5]

This reveals much about Frost's technique, and, at the same time, the special difficulty that one encounters in dealing with his poetry. "The inevitable approach of the moment of complete disclosure" results from Frost's commitment to the factual, as I have pointed out. This commitment to the

---

[5]Willard Thorpe, "The 'New' Poetry," Literary History of the United States, ed. Robert E. Spiller, and others (Third edition revised; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), pp. 1195-96.

factual, moreover, allows for a literal meaning of the poem --usually a completely accurate description of rural life, which is so satisfactory that it seems adequate in itself. Hence it discourages (or does not encourage) the reader to look for the change of objects into symbols. In other words, the depth of meaning in some of Frost's best poems is often overlooked because these poems are so satisfactory on the surface. Any number of poems from "The Pasture" to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" or "Directive" illustrates this quality in his poetry.

A second problem is the fact that because of this particular technique the underlying meaning of the poem sometimes becomes nearly impossible to formulate, and once formulated seems to be a good deal weightier than the poem itself can apparently sustain: "The Grindstone" (CP, 232-4) is a perfect illustration. Anyone who has had the experience of turning a grindstone against the friction of a blade in the hands of a "Father-Time-like man" will testify to the accuracy of Frost's presentation. It is all literally true, from changing "from hand to hand in desperation" to the inevitable wondering "what machine of ages gone/This represented any improvement on," to the sense that this is a process that "nothing could conclude." Thus, for many readers the poem satisfies as the superb description of a particularly unpleasant task. The alert reader, however, senses an undercurrent of meaning running

through the poem. John Lynen, for example, concludes that "the grindstone is an analogue for the world," that the two men represent "two aspects of human creativity," that they work together only "by working against each other," and that the final theme is the "ambiguous nature of man's creativity: what he creates could be an instrument of either good or evil, just as the act of creating itself involves both virtue and error."[6] Lynen makes a convincing case for his reading--convincing, that is, until the reader returns to the poem itself. On rereading the poem, one is reluctantly forced to admit that, no matter how accurate Lynen seems to be in the general drift of his remarks, the poem simply will not bear the weight of the formulation that he makes.

As long as Lynen concentrates on the speaker and "the Father-Time-like man" as two parts of the same creative man, he seems to be on fairly solid ground. The relationship of the creative man to the world (grindstone) can be developed, however, only by ignoring the opening section of the poem. The age and shape ("oblate/Spheroid") of the grindstone do suggest the world, but if this is the case the speaker denies that creativity had any importance:

> These hands have helped it go, and even race;
> Not all the motion, though, they ever lent,

---

[6]John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 91-93.

Not all the miles it may have thought it went,
Have got it one step from the starting place.

If creativity makes the world go round (a highly doubtful proposition), yet the world goes nowhere, then it would seem that human creativity is an exercise in futility. This in itself, of course, is a serious issue; at the same time, however, it dispells any seriousness attached to the creative process itself. If creativity is futile, why be concerned with the methods by which things are created? To some extent, perhaps, this only points up the truism that no paraphrase is adequate to the poem itself. Yet when this remark is made, it is generally to show how much less than the poem the paraphrase is. With Lynen's paraphrase, on the other hand, the problem is that it is curiously, somehow more than the poem is. What the reader is left with, then, is a poem brilliantly accurate on a realistic level, with an undercurrent of metaphysical speculation that defies formulation.[7]

Not all, not even a majority of Frost's poems operate in the manner which Willard Thorpe describes; Frost is too addicted to the "moral tag" in the manner of William Cullen Bryant to allow the "complete disclosure" to stand

---

[7]If one considers only the poem itself, my remarks are valid. Taking into account Frost's own comment on "The Grindstone," however, one may be forced to judge the poem a failure. Lynen quotes a letter from the poet to Norman Holmes Pearson in which he says that this is a favorite of his and "an image of a naughty world" (Ibid., p. 91).

for itself, even though Frost's moral tag is more closely integrated with the poem as a whole than is Bryant's. These moral tags are seen, for example, in such poems as "An Old Man's Winter Night," "The Gum-Gatherer," and "Our Singing Strength." Still, some of Frost's best poems do allow the complete disclosure, the objects becoming symbols, to stand for themselves. "The Wood-Pile," for example, makes use of this technique, and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "After Apple-Picking" show it at its very best. These poems are superior to "The Grindstone" because they will support the formulation of the deeper meaning and because they illustrate at its best the physical objects becoming symbols.

On first reading, "Stopping by Woods" (CP, 275) might seem to be a simple, though excellent, description of a man caught by the beauty of a snow storm over a woods:

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.
>
> He gives his harness bells a shake
> To ask if there is some mistake.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

The impression created by the surface description will last at least until the reader comes to the last two lines. The first of these, "And miles to go before I sleep" continues the impression of a realistic narration of a simple incident, and it seems to mean nothing more than the narrator's awareness that it is time to move on. With the exact repetition of that thought in the last line, however, the reader can hardly fail to suspect that the terms of the poem have been drastically broadened. The effect of the final line, then, is to throw the reader back into the poem. Looking back over the poem, the reader may wonder why such emphasis is placed on the absentee owner of the woods. In the second stanza he is almost certain to wonder why such a relatively large amount of space (that is, six of sixteen lines) should be given over to the horse. The attentive reader will clearly find his comprehension advancing on more than one level, however, when he comes to the description of the snow and the woods:

> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

These lines again force the reader back into the preceding lines. The juxtaposition of the narrator's observation of the scene with the reaction of the horse causes one to reflect on the differences between man and horse, and the difference, of course, is one of consciousness. The horse cannot react to the scene because he lacks consciousness. The physical objects of the landscape (snow and woods) now

begin to take on their traditional symbolic associations, and in conjunction with the last three lines it becomes clear that the poem is dealing with the eternal ambiguity of the fact of human consciousness: consciousness makes us human, yet it can be a burden. The particular terms of the description point up, moreover, that the poet is emphasizing the burden of consciousness and the temptation to lay down that burden.

An almost identical process can be seen at work in "After Apple-Picking" (CP, 88-9).

> My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
> Toward heaven still,
> And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
> Beside it, and there may be two or three
> Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
> But I am done with apple-picking now.
> Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
> The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
> I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
> I got from looking through a pane of glass
> I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
> And held against the world of hoary grass.
> It melted, and I let it fall and break.
> But I was well
> Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
> And I could tell
> What form my dreaming was about to take.
> Magnified apples appear and disappear,
> Stem end and blossom end,
> And every fleck of russet showing clear.
> My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
> It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
> I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
> And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
> The rumbling sound
> Of load on load of apples coming in.
>
> For I have had too much
> Of apple-picking: I am overtired
> Of the great harvest I myself desired.
> There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
> Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.

The poem operates satisfactorily on the surface level as a realistic description of a man wearied by a hard day of picking apples. This realistic meaning is almost certain to be the object of the reader's attention through the first thirteen lines of the poem. When the reader encounters the following lines concerning the "pane of glass" that the narrator skimmed "from the drinking trough," however, he becomes aware that physical objects are changing into symbols:

It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell.

On a realistic level these lines may represent that distortion of time and events that are common to the state of being half way between sleep and wakefulness; but at the same time they represent a surrealistic distortion of time that causes the reader to re-examine the preceding lines. On re-examination the word "heaven" rather than the more common "sky" takes on significance. The reader may also now notice the one word in these lines that does not quite fit the vocabulary of Frost's role as farmer-poet--"Essence." Frost is obviously playing with the double meaning of the word as "odor" and as "the ultimate nature of the thing." Both meanings of the word combine (when the odor

is thought of as an extract) to suggest the final meaning of the poem. As the reader continues through the poem, he sees the physical objects even more clearly become symbols, especially in the following lines:

> For I have had too much
> Of apple-picking: I am overtired
> Of the great harvest I myself desired.
> There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
> Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

Earlier I argued that the overall meaning of "After Apple-Picking" has to do, like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," with the burden of consciousness. Here my point is not to insist on any particular interpretation but, rather, simply to show the method that Frost uses. In discussing these two poems, moreover, I have been forced to look at key passages and to emphasize them perhaps too much. The reader of the poems finds the experience of discovering his comprehension advancing on more than one level to be a much more steady, cumulative process than any analysis can convey. The process is, nevertheless, essentially as I have described it here.

Willard Thorpe's description of Frost's poetry applies equally well, moreover, to Thoreau's Walden. A great deal has been written concerning the structure of this book, but I believe that the application of Thorpe's remarks clarifies both the structure and the theme of the book. Like Frost, Thoreau slowly develops physical objects into symbols so that the reader's comprehension advances on

several levels at once. This is true, in many cases, of the parts as well as of the whole of the book, and can be seen for example in Thoreau's remarks about his cabin, or in his central discussion of Walden Pond.

Thoreau's first mention of his cabin is in the first sentence of the book when he says he "lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house" which he had built himself.[8] A few pages later, adopting the pose of his ostensible opponent, the merchant, Thoreau says that "if your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough" (W, II, 22). The experienced reader of Thoreau will catch at once the double meaning of "the Celestial Empire," of course, but since Thoreau was writing during the peak of the China trade, it is doubtful that any of his contemporary readers would have noticed anything untoward in the phrase. Thoreau continues in "Economy" with a long discussion of each of the three basic necessities of life--food, shelter, and clothing. The reader inexperienced in the ways of Thoreau is again likely to pass over the section on shelter as a combination of

---

[8]Although the modern reader is likely to think of his living quarters as a cabin--it had but a single room--it is significant that Thoreau himself always calls it a house. He undoubtedly adopts this term for at least two reasons: it allows him to make a more emphatic comparison and contrast between his house and those of Concord, and the word "house" has connotations for the physical-spiritual dichotomy which a term such as "cabin" does not possess.

economic doctrine and the extravagance of language which Thoreau uses throughout the first section of Walden.

It is when Thoreau turns to the details of building his house, that the reader may first become aware of the physical object blossoming into symbol. Thoreau borrowed an ax, he tells us, partly from necessity, but also because "perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise" (W, II, 45). These days of working on the house, he adds, "were pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man's discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the life that had lain torpid began to stretch itself" (W, II, 45). As he continues the description of his work, it begins to take on a ritualistic note until he becomes more "the friend than the foe of the pine tree" that he destroys to build his own edifice (W, II, 47). Thoreau also notes that after he had dismantled James Collins's shanty and carted the lumber to Walden Pond he spread "the boards on the grass there to bleach and warp back again in the sun" (W, II, 48). Although the passage which follows is on the surface an argument against the division of labor, Thoreau reveals the extent to which the physical object, his house, is becoming a symbol:

> It would be worth while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even (W, II, 50).

Now that the physical object has become symbol, Thoreau allows the symbolic quality to rise nearer to the surface of his prose as he continues scattered references to his house. He tells the reader that his "house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weatherstained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night" (W, II, 94). He then goes on to observe that "this frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around [him], and reacted on the builder" (W, II, 95). Although it is a "crystallization," Thoreau emphasizes its expansiveness rather than its restrictiveness. The symbolic quality of the house is further revealed when Thoreau indicates the ease with which it can be cleansed:

> When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass . . . dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted (W, II, 125).

The symbolic nature of the house continues to unfold as Thoreau describes his house as having "instead of no path to the front-yard gate in the Great Snow,--no gate--no front-yard,--and no path to the civilized world" (W, II, 142). Through the slow accumulation of comments on the physical house, surely every reader has by this time seen it unfolding into the symbol of the growth of spiritual

life. It was in this house, too, that Thoreau communed with the "old settler," as well as the "ruddy and lusty old dame" (W, II, 152-3), again demonstrating his concern with both the physical and the spiritual. Here it is also that his house (his spiritual resources) enables him to maintain the "vital heat" over the winter (the dark night of the soul). Finally, Thoreau becomes as explicit as he ever does when he describes the "larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring materials, and without gingerbread work" which he sometimes dreams of (W, II, 268).

Just as certain lines in Frost's poems force the reader into a reconsideration of preceding lines, so does the realization of the symbolic function of Thoreau's house cause the reader to reconsider the essay on "Shelter" in "Economy" that he passed over lightly on first reading. It now becomes evident that this essay is neither economic doctrine nor extravagant language for its own sake. The true intent of a passage such as the following, ostensibly sheer extravaganza, becomes apparent:

> However, if one designs to construct a dwelling-house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead (W, II, 31).

Thoreau was not so far removed from his Puritan ancestors that he did not know that the matter of building a spiritual life is full of dangers. The main point here,

however, is still the point of comparison between Frost and Thoreau: the slow unfolding of the physical object until it reveals its inner symbolic significance.

The structural pattern of the entire Walden, moreover, can be seen as the slow unveiling of the symbolic qualities of the central physical object, Walden Pond. The moment of complete disclosure comes, of course, with the dramatic (but undramatically placed) "Walden was dead and is alive again" (W, II, 344). From that point on, the book is an open discussion of what has been revealed through the symbol, although Thoreau, of course, does not make the connection explicit; it is not a "moral tag." How this is so Thoreau makes explicit in his rather bitter comment in the "Conclusion":

> It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither men nor toadstools grow so. . . . As if there were safety in stupidity alone. I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced (W, II, 356-7).

Thoreau concludes by saying, "in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation" (W, II, 358).

In A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers Thoreau defines the poet as "he who can write some pure mythology to-day without the aid of posterity" (W, I, 60), and this mythopoeic approach, closely related to the techniques just

discussed, constitutes another large area of affinity between Frost and Thoreau. When "myth" is thought of in its traditional sense of "anonymous stories having their roots in the primitive folk-beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view,"[9] little myth can be seen in the works of either man, although Thoreau, of course, fits this definition better than Frost. Both writers for the most part simply reverse the process of this definition. That is, instead of presenting supernatural episodes to make the special perception concrete, they present natural episodes that take on supernatural (that is, metaphysical) overtones. Both men are most adept, however, at achieving the results that the definition states: they both "make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view."

When the more modern (or at least literary) approach to myth is considered, however, Frost and Thoreau can both be seen as mythopoeic writers. The modern literary approach is, in the words of Thrall and Hibbard, "to see myths as dramatic or narrative embodiments of a people's perception of the deepest truths"; or, as they quote Philip

---

[9]William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, rev. and enlarged C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 298.

Wheelwright, "the Archetypal Imagination, which sees the particular object as embodying and adumbrating suggestions of universality." Thrall and Hibbard sum up by saying that "myth in the sophisticated literary sense in which it is currently used is the intelligible and often self-conscious use of such primitive methods to express something deeply felt by the individual artist which will, he hopes, prove to have universal responses."[10]

When Frost and Thoreau chose to withdraw from the urban to the rural scene, and to concentrate on the individual and unique experience, they were faced with the problem of how to provide the "universal responses." The problem was compounded, moreover, by their determination to remain within their chosen locale. This determination effectively barred them from a too overt use of mythology, so they solved it, as I will show, by domesticating the myth to New England. This mythical approach is implied in most of the discussion in the preceding chapter: a spiritual quest is implied, as is the belief that the spiritual can be found in the mundane. By the same token, the mythical hero need no longer be a Galahad; he can appear in the role of New England farmer.

In both Frost and Thoreau the use of mythology, or the mythopoeic approach, can be seen in their attempts to

---

[10] Ibid., p. 299.

create a myth of the region and a myth of the man. The myth of the region is, as John Lynen has made clear, both closely related to, and yet quite distinct from, pure regionalism or "local color."[11] The myth of the man, by the same token, is closely related to, yet distinct from, the ordinary "persona" adopted by the writer. The one thing that binds the myth of the region with the myth of the man until they finally become inseparable is, of course, the rural stance which both writers adopt.

Robert Frost, of course, is famous for his portrayal of the country "north of Boston." Nevertheless, many critics have pointed out the very large segments of life in that area of the country that are missing from his poems. If there is a population center larger than the merest village, for instance, only a very few poems recognize this fact; the entire urban landscape is omitted. In spite of the number of times that this is pointed out to the reader, however, it still takes a conscious act of the will to remember that Frost is not giving a complete, as well as accurate, picture of New England. The reader tends to accept the time of most of the poems as contemporaneous with his reading of the poem, yet a careful examination (as well as the known dates of the poems) suggests that many of the poems take place in the early twentieth century--farm

---

[11]Lynen, Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, pp. 52-60.

mechanization is as conspicuously absent as urban life. There are a large number of poems, moreover, for which the reader simply assumes a New England setting, but for which there is no internal evidence for such a conclusion. Although such a contention cannot be proven, I believe that these poems would still be taken for New England poems even if Frost had not entitled his volumes North of Boston and New Hampshire. There is also in Frost's poems remarkably little reference to the outside world.

The result of all these considerations is to create a "people" and a "nation" for which the poet can speak, whose mythology he can present. It is in many respects a primitive world, one in which the people are still as close as possible to the traditional sources of wisdom (this itself is a traditional myth, one which Frost uses as an aid in creating his myth). Frost has obviously created a mythic land, a land that never existed. He has not created this country by sentimentalizing a real world into a distorted ideal world, however; Frost presents the reader with no Eden, although elements of the Eden myth-land are to be found in his poems.[12] What Frost has done instead is to take a country that never really existed (although of course it has many elements of historical New England) and to create from it a real world, a world so real that the

---

[12]See George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of the Poet's Convictions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), pp. 68-109, especially pp. 75-78.

reader's "suspension of disbelief" does not even have to be "willing."

Frost's attempt to create the mythical man, or mythical hero, is more difficult to delineate because this hero is so closely related to the myth of region and because he is so closely related to the more simple persona or mask. One would probably be accurate, as a matter of fact, in saying that within any individual poem Frost is using the mask. A wide variety of poems, however, reveal more than a wide variety of masks; they reveal the myth of the man. The myth that Frost creates is, of course, far more than the mere "cracker-barrel philosopher" that he is sometimes accused of being. The mythical man that Frost creates through the mass of his poems is first of all the purveyor of the folk wisdom; the cracker-barrel philosopher is a degeneration of this role, and the confusion of the two roles in Frost undoubtedly stems from his determination to be a man speaking to men, and to be, moreover, the farmer-poet. The essential difference between the cracker-barrel philosopher and the man that Frost has created lies on a deeper level than language, however. One requirement for "local color" literature is generally thought to be an inside point of view; it has generally been felt necessary that the artist have an intimate relationship with the area that he is portraying. Frost's decision to attempt to create myth requires a far greater intimacy with the area

that he himself has likewise created. In order to provide both the area and the man with the verisimilitude that is necessary, Frost finds it useful to be concerned with local detail to an extraordinary degree. Earlier I maintained that Frost's commitment to detail is a part of his basic mind set. What I say here does not contradict that. This attempt at creating a mythic spokesman is a technique by which his basic approach to life can be put to use in his art, and this technique blends into his other techniques.

What this points up can be illustrated by a number of poems such as "Mending Wall," "The Wood-Pile,""Birches," or "The Ax-Helve." Just as "After Apple-Picking" is one of Frost's very finest poems, both in technique and in its subject matter (to make a necessary false disjunction), so it best illustrates the myth of the man. The poem operates, as I have shown, on a realistic level and on a far deeper level. On the realistic level the reader recognizes the mask of farmer-poet that Frost has adopted. On the deeper level one gets a glimpse of the mythic man, in this case rather closer to the traditional mythical hero. In order for the poem to work as effectively as it does, it is necessary for the farmer-poet to realize only subconsciously, if at all, the deeper significance of what he is experiencing. On the deeper level is the mythic man (one hesitates to call him "hero") who, metaphorically speaking, has made his descent into the underworld; the

man, at any rate, who is perfectly conscious of the full significance of the experience. Because he is so perfectly blended with the farmer-poet, the poem contains no overt statement; there is no moral tag. In other poems, the farmer-poet is aware of the significance of the event, and he comments on it. In other cases Frost perhaps speaks in his own voice, and again there is often a much more explicit comment. A majority of Frost's best poems, however, are those in which the persona blends with the mythic man in such a way as to allow the symbolism of the physical objects to illuminate somewhat autonomously.

"Directive" is one poem, however, in which the relative position of the farmer-poet vis-a-vis the mythic man is reversed. Here the mythic man rises to the surface of the poem and reveals himself as the mythical hero who can show his people out of the wasteland. Here there is no groping and no hesitancy; there is no "as if" such as one finds in so many Frost poems. The very title of the poem--"Directive"--is an indication of the assurance with which the guide speaks, and in the closing lines he says flatly and with the assurance of one who knows, that

> Here are your waters and your watering place.
> Drink and be whole again beyond confusion (CP, 521).

This salvation is reserved for certain people; the mythic hero guards against the wrong ones getting saved, but there is no question of its efficacy for the right ones. This

conclusion is particularly significant because Frost does not hesitate here--as he so often does--to make the decisive conclusion towards which the poem as a whole tends.

Although I do not wish to consider the biography of Robert Frost at length, it should be noted that he apparently spent a great deal of time fitting himself into the myth of the man that he has created. Almost any report of his conversation or, indeed, his lectures, portrays him as creating for himself the surface role of the farmer-poet and, on a deeper level, the role of the keeper of the mythic hero's wisdom. His utterances on these occasions have the surface sound of the off-the-cuff rural philosopher; at the same time they are uttered with an underlying sense of prophetic wisdom. The success with which Frost was able to build up this public image has become apparent only since the publication of his letters, which reveal a Robert Frost bordering on paranoia in his fear of competition from his contemporary poets. To some extent, of course, his desire for the proper public image was a bid for fame; on the other hand, it was also very likely a conscious attempt to blend himself in with the myth of the man that his poetry attempted to create.

That Thoreau was also concerned with the technique of mythology is clear from his comments in the essay "Walking":

> The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Rhine, having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Plate, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past,--as it is to some extent a fiction of the present,--the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology (W, V, 233).

This remark indicates that Thoreau, like most of his contemporaries in literature, was anxious for this country to establish a mythology that could provide the basis for a truly national literature. Thoreau, moreover, was determined to do his part in establishing the myth of the country as well as the myth of the man. Since he was more consciously concerned with mythology, however, his attempt is always closer to the surface, and his techniques differ somewhat from those of Frost: whereas Frost draws on (at the same time that he creates) the myth of New England, Thoreau draws on the classical myths of Greece, Rome, and the Orient in order to create his own mythic country.

Thoreau undoubtedly attempted to create both the mythic hero and the mythic country in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; he was only partially successful in either attempt. The opening sentence illustrates both the technique for the creation of myth, and its relative failure: "The Musketaquid, or Grass-Ground River, though probably as old as the Nile or Euphrates, did not begin to have a place in civilized history until the fame of its grassy meadows and its fish attracted settlers out of

England in 1635, when it received the other but kindred name of CONCORD. . . ." The technique used to create the myth is, then, one that is common to Thoreau--the attempt to begin in the local and to expand out into time and space. I have already noted that in Walden this technique is successful in slowly creating the symbol out of the physical object. In A Week, on the other hand, there is no such slow unveiling; the physical can become symbolic only through machinery which is all too visible to the reader. The two, however, never become one; neither one grows out of, or submerges itself in, the other. The reader is always too aware of the conscious comparisons or analogies that are being made, and they remain only comparisons and analogies.

Insofar as the creation of the mythic hero involves the epic journey, Thoreau achieves some success. This success is achieved primarily through the use of sea (as opposed to river) terminology to give the effect of a voyage far grander in its proportions than the actual or real voyage up the rivers. Thus, for instance, Thoreau and his brother "weighed anchor in this river port" (W, I, 12). For the most part the mythic hero's journey is developed by more or less explicit analogy and comparison in the same manner as the mythic country. The results are the same: the comparisons and analogies remain comparisons and analogies.

One reason often cited for the relative failure of A Week is the lack of integration of the real and the mythic qualities of the journey; the other is that the book is "perilously like a library of the shorter works of Henry Thoreau,"[13] or perhaps more accurately a library of all that Thoreau had read. This criticism illustrates the failure of the mythic hero to take on the wisdom that is a part of Frost's mythic man, and is a part of what Thoreau was attempting to create. The attempt succeeds on occasion, of course, notably in his account of the night spent on Saddle-back Mountain (W, I, 197-9); the technique succeeds, in other words, when Thoreau manages to get away from his books. For the most part, however, the wisdom is too obviously gleaned from his reading. It may be supported by his own experience, but again experience and reading fail to coalesce; one often has the feeling, moreover, that the reading rather than the experience is primary.[14]

On the surface it is rather difficult to see why Walden should have succeeded when A Week was a relative failure, since in many cases the techniques seem the same. In the opening pages of Walden, for example, Thoreau refers

---

[13]Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), p. 272.

[14]For the best defense of A Week, however, see Sherman Paul, The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1958), pp. 202-18. Paul recognizes a structure determined by mythic intent (p. 204), but argues that it is successful.

to the myth of the creation of man by "Deucalion and Pyrrha" (W, II, 6). As he hoes his beans, he comments that "many a lusty crestwaving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust" (W, II, 178). The ant battle, too, becomes a Trojan War (W, II, 254), and the same technique is obvious in creating the myth of the region: "I lay down my book and go to my well [i.e. Walden Pond] for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug." Thus, "the pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred waters of the Ganges" (W, II, 328-9). On the surface, then, Thoreau seems to be doing the same thing here that he did in A Week.

There is a difference, however, and the difference is best shown in the incident of the removal of James Collins's shack to Walden. Thoreau closes his narration of the event by telling of "neighbor Seeley" who stole his nails: "He was there to represent spectatordom," Thoreau says, "and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with the removal of the gods of Troy" (W, II, 49). The difference between this passage and those of A Week is that the reference to mythological Troy grows naturally out of the literal event; in this sense the literal and the mythic merge in a way that they seldom do in A Week. The attempt

to build a myth, in other words, becomes one with the slow unveiling of the physical fact as symbol.

As in the case of Frost, the mythic hero in Walden becomes essentially one with the mythic country that is also created; neither could exist without the other. The mythic country that Thoreau creates is one in which heroic action is still possible; both the removal of Collins's shack and the war with the weeds illustrate this intention. The possibility for heroic action is, in large measure, what separates Thoreau from Frost. The possibilities for heroic action in Thoreauvian terms are not totally absent from Frost's world, but the possibilities are certainly muted. This very muted possibility for heroic action is certainly one of the qualities that, in spite of all his affinities to Thoreau, makes Frost a "modern poet."

Walden Pond is a country in which one can achieve that mythic wisdom that is the major element in Frost's myth. Here again, of course, Thoreau goes further than Frost, but as I have pointed out, the wisdom that is possible in Frost's "Directive" is very like the wisdom that the mythic Thoreau achieves at Walden. In both cases it is a wisdom involving simplicity and innocence that leads to salvation.

"It is a mistake," William Stein points out, "to read Walden as an historical work. It belongs to the nineteenth century only through accident of having been

written in time. Similarly it is not, except adventitiously, concerned with Thoreau the man in any contemporary sense. . . . To read it as autobiography, social criticism, or philosophy is to discount the transfiguration which the original materials of the journal undergo."[15] On the basis of Paul's Shores of America, for example, one perhaps feels that Stein's statement is too extreme, but it does point up the importance of recognizing the persona at work in Walden. Thoreau has provided the reader with a persona or mask, as well as with a mythic hero, just as Frost has done. Thoreau's persona is more complex, however, in that it constantly shifts from social critic, to hermit, to nature lover, to philosopher, and even to general all around village crank or eccentric. The process of revealing the mythic hero is also somewhat different from that used by Frost. In the early sections of the book the mythic hero remains generally hidden behind the persona, revealing himself in only occasional glimpses. As the book progresses, however, the mythic hero slowly emerges and, in a manner similar once again to "Directive," comes to dominate the book; conversely, of course, the persona slowly fades into the background. The extent to which this is the process of the book is indicated by the degree to which the

---

[15]William Bysshe Stein, "Walden: The Wisdom of the Centaur," ELH, XXV (September, 1958), 194.

first part of Walden is negative in tone, while the latter part takes on a positive tone, or by the oft-cited movement from wit to metaphor. The last facet of the persona to be dropped is the nature lover, and this allows the literal minded "John or Jonathan" to see no more in the book than surface description. Such a view, however, hardly permits the book to be seen as the unified work of art for which it can be recognized when one does see the emergence of the mythic hero. The recognition of this pattern, moreover, shows the mythic quality to be at one with, or another example of, the slow emergence of the physical object as symbol. To this extent Thoreau proves the better craftsman, although such a judgment is ultimately unfair because Frost is the author of a series of poems which he had no intention of bringing together as a cohesive whole. The important point is that in spite of surface differences the two men have a basic affinity in the mythological aspiration of their art.

Everything I have said in this chapter, indeed everything I have said in the entire paper coalesces in a central dramatic and metaphorical situation which the two men share. This metaphorical situation is the journey, or, as it is usually presented by both Frost and Thoreau, the homely incident of going for a walk. It is this situation which implies or reveals nearly the entire range of affinities which the two men share: it suggests their

peculiar New England provinciality, their commitment to process, the need that both men feel to test experience constantly, the circular pattern of withdrawal and return, the sense of losing oneself in order to find oneself, and the typical journey of the mythic (and romantic) hero to achieve wisdom, that is, the romantic quest. It is all here, from the rural stance and the persona of the farmer to the attempt to create the mythic hero behind the persona.

Above all perhaps, the walking trope is integral with the development of the mythic hero. The Romantic mind is led to the creation of such a hero by his need to explore the personality in its relation with the universe. Consequently the journey motif is a traditional vehicle for expressing the results of the exploration. It is the mythical journey "reduced" to a walk that distinguishes Frost and Thoreau; unlike Melville they find no need to pursue a whale around the world. Rather both writers travel "a good deal" in New England, and are consequently able to find the spiritual affirmation in everyday rural life and suggest that it is available to the common man.

The walking motif also suggests the difference between the two writers: Frost asserts his place in the twentieth century by asking in "The Oven Bird," "what to make of a diminished thing" (CP, 150). "When we walk," Thoreau says, "we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a

mall?" (W, V, 210-11). He goes on to note that "nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more tame and cheap" (W, V, 212). In many other places, in The Maine Woods (W, III, 170-1), for example, Thoreau stated his concern for the destruction of the wilderness. What he feared had come to pass by Frost's time, of course, and F. O. Matthiessen makes a connection between the two: ". . . but since the forests have now receded and the cities have encroached on the farms, Frost's scope as a poet of nature has inevitably contracted to the more purely personal. The heroic quality is absent from North of Boston, if by that quality you mean what Thoreau could sense in Whitman, that he was 'something a little more than human.'"[16] The diminished possibilities for the walk in untamed and uncheapened nature, then, symbolize the lesser possibilities for heroic action leading to heroic wisdom in Frost. Nevertheless, Frost makes the most of his possibilities, and, however lessened, they still exist. Heroic action (the quest for wisdom) is still a possibility in the twentieth century, even though what that wisdom reveals is sometimes disquieting.

---

[16]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 649.

On the surface it seems almost absurd to equate the walking motif in Frost and Thoreau with the mythic journey, but this surface impression arises only from the fact that the mythic journey or romantic quest has been domesticated to New England. I have already argued that both men create mythic countries, and it is to these countries that they journey in their quest for wisdom and spiritual salvation. Thoreau, for example, has "travelled a good deal in Concord" (W, II, 4), and in the "Conclusion" to Walden he asks, "What does Africa,--what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered" (W, II, 353). Frost, by the same token, announces that he is "going out to clean the pasture spring" (CP, 1), and on another of his journeys states that

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places (CP, 386).

These passages illustrate the extent to which the quest can be terrifying, but, of course, neither of them emphasizes the terrifying possibilities the way three American romantic novelists--Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner--do.

The extent to which the walking motif dominates Frost's poetry is easy to overlook, since he tends more to emphasize what the walk reveals. It comes as something of a shock, perhaps, to realize that the activity of walking is explicit in nearly half the poems of A Boy's Will and in

one third of those in North of Boston. These figures, moreover, do not reflect such poems as "A Tuft of Flowers," "The Trial by Existence," "After Apple-Picking," or other poems in which a journey is metaphorical and implied. With the notable exception of "Acquainted with the Night" nearly all such poems are, of course, walks into nature. This fact establishes the rural stance, and provides Frost with a provinciality that is somehow different from, even while it reinforces, the intellectual provincialism that I discussed in Chapter I. At the same time it aids in the development of the persona and the mythic man behind the persona, as I have already demonstrated. Poems such as "The Wood-Pile" and "Birches," moreover, illustrate the way in which the journey motif allows Frost to put to artistic use his commitment to process, the revelation of the symbolic quality of the physical object, and his determination always to be testing experience. All these elements including losing oneself and the journey toward salvation come together finally in "Directive."

The importance of walking or the journey is obvious in Thoreau, of course. A Week is a journey as are The Maine Woods and Cape Cod. Several of his shorter works were posthumously gathered into a volume entitled Excursions; three of the nine essays include a form of "walking" in the title, and the reader discovers, moreover, that the activity of walking or going on a journey is

prominent in four others. The landlord, for example, is an admirable man because he caters to travelers, even though he does not travel himself.

Thoreau's masterpiece, Walden, appears to have less of the journey motif than any of his other works; yet it, too, is filled with walks, literal and metaphorical (though both are finally metaphorical), from "I have travelled a good deal in Concord" in the opening pages to the culminating injunction to "obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself" (W, II, 354). Within the book Thoreau records walk after walk--out into nature to observe its phenomena and into the village to observe the species of animals peculiar to it. More important than these walks within his stay at the pond, however, is the fact that the sojourn itself is an extended metaphorical journey. This view of Walden is still another way of harmonizing or unifying the book, reconciling apparent paradoxes within it. It shows, from yet another point of view, why a man who was "naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the barroom . . ." (W, II, 155) would choose to live a mile from his nearest neighbor. The reader quickly notices that the walker in Frost's poems is generally alone, and Thoreau explains why:

> I know of but one or two persons with whom I can afford to walk. With most the walk degenerates into a mere vigorous use of your legs, ludicrously purposeless, while you are discussing some mighty argument, each one having his say, spoiling each

> other's day, worrying one another with conversation, hustling one another with our conversation. I know of no use in the walking part in this case, except that we may seem to be getting on together toward some goal. . . (J, XI, 296-7).

If one really wants to get to his goal--to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion," or to discover that "Walden was dead and is alive again"--one must make the journey alone. A guide may be helpful or even necessary, but at some point one must "put a sign up CLOSED to all but me."

In giving his reasons for leaving the pond, Thoreau again indicates his notion of the journey: "I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side. . . . The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels" (W, II, 355-6). Like Frost, then, Thoreau chose the road "less traveled by"; when he himself had made a well-traveled road, he chose another.

Not only does the walking motif pervade Thoreau's writing but it serves him the same purposes it does Frost: it allows him to bring his basic attitudes into his art. In the metaphorical use of the walk, all of the affinities that I have demonstrated come together in a trope that generates the art of each man.

The metaphor of the journey goes even further, however. It also leads to the distinctive tone of the speaking voice which both Thoreau and Frost possess. This assertion suggests, first of all, that both men share an

oral quality in their writings. Frost's attempts to catch the sounds of the spoken voice are so generally conceded to be successful that little needs to be said about it. It is worth reiterating once more, however, that Frost does not depend on dialect for his effects; neither is it "a matter of pure technique. [Critics] speak of craftsmanship and imply that the poet has discovered some trick way of contriving tonal and metrical effects."[17] Lynen goes on to show how oversimplified any account of Frost's technique is if it is assumed to be based on metrical and vocabulary tricks. Frost's technique is successful, on the other hand, on the sentence level; he puts sentences together the way people do in speech rather than in writing. This results in a colloquial and idiomatic tone which is at the same time purged of most localisms and practically all slang. Thus, as it must, the art conceals the art. Both connectives and modifiers tend to be used quite loosely, which gives the poem the rambling tone of casual narration.

The manner in which this oral tone blends with other such techniques can be seen at its best in "The Wood-Pile" or in "Birches"; one poem containing a "literal" walk, the other a metaphorical journey. In "The Wood-Pile" (CP, 126-7), the poet opens with his own hesitancy as to whether he should go on or return home: "I will turn back from here./No, I will go on farther--and we shall see." He then

---

[17]Lynen, Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, p. 81.

takes his time in describing the phenomena of "the hard snow" which held him up "save where now and then/One foot went through." He goes on to describe the bird, to guess at the bird's thoughts, and to feel chagrined at himself for being one "Who was so foolish as to think what he thought." The bird leads the poet's eye to the wood-pile, where he again indulges in leisurely description before going on to the insight of the poem. All of this, of course, gives the poem a leisurely tone, a conversational quality, that seemingly lengthens it beyond its mere forty lines. The poem has a surface discursiveness, in other words, that belies the economy with which the discursive quality was achieved. The discursive tone, moreover, is in complete harmony with the slow unveiling of the symbolic quality of the physical object, which in turn is obviously allied to the walk; this is the way things reveal themselves on a walk. At the same time, of course, Frost reveals his commitment to process; this poem shows the extent to which the trope of walking is adapted to his needs. The motif of withdrawal and return is present, as is the sense of lostness. Indeed, as I pointed our earlier, the attainment of wisdom, that is, the revelation of the symbolic center of the physical object, comes only with one's losing himself.

In "Birches" (CP, 152-3), on the other hand, the conversational tone manifests itself in the slow unfolding

of the picture of the boy "too far from town to learn base-ball" who conquers the birch tree. It is even more evident, however, in the way in which the poet seems to drift off his subject by casually introducing the fact of ice-storms, and in the way in which he has to forcibly return to his true subject: "But I was going to say when Truth broke in/With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm. . . ." The section of the poem dealing with ice-storms is not in fact a digression, of course--it is an integral part of the entire poem--but it has the surface appearance of a digression so common to conversation. Here too, then, the reader can see the value of the journey motif to Frost's art. The structure of the poem embraces its subject matter, and all the techniques, as well as the basic attitudes which Frost shares with Thoreau, come together to form a nearly perfect work of art. The artistic merits of "The Wood-Pile" and "Birches" are perhaps exceeded only by "After Apple-Picking" and "Directive," which I have discussed at length earlier.

Thoreau's Walden is by no means strictly conversational, as Marjorie Adix unintentionally demonstrates when she creates an imaginary conversation between D. H. Lawrence and Thoreau, using their written words as the basis for the conversation.[18] Still there is a very strong

---

[18]Marjorie Adix, "Phoenix at Walden: D. H. Lawrence Calls on Thoreau," Western Humanities Review, VIII (Autumn, 1954), 287-98.

oral quality to the book, found primarily in the easy way in which Thoreau moves from topic to topic, as well as in the sentences themselves. The intricate interweavings of the section on shelter in "Economy" is a case in point. Thoreau can move from the houses in Concord to the houses of primitive peoples, bring in birds' nests, go on to his own efforts at house building, and finish up with a discussion of furniture in such a way that suggests the artless monologue of Jim Blaine's story of his grandfather's old ram in Mark Twain's Roughing It. Thoreau, of course, is not being pointless by any means. The careful reader discovers the unity behind the apparently rambling quality; he sees, for example, that both the discussion of the houses and the discussion of furniture is tending toward a denunciation of the spiritual deadness of the people of Concord. Again art has concealed art. Still the passage resembles, on the surface, the aimlessness of an undirected walk.

Although Thoreau's sentences do not have the looseness of connection and modification that one observes in Frost, they do have an oral quality about them. Many readers are quite surprised at the length of many of Thoreau's sentences when this quality is pointed out to them. One example of such a sentence, extreme in length perhaps, yet showing the ease with which Thoreau can put an oral quality in his work is the one beginning

> I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring materials, and without gingerbread work . . . ,

and which continues for another three hundred words before he reveals that in this dream house

> you are sometimes requested to move from off the trap-door, when the cook would descend into the cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath you without stamping (W, II, 268-9).

The sentence carries the effect, moreover, not of a breathless rush to get everything in, but the leisurely quality of the spoken monologue. Thoreau's oral quality, too, is inseparably linked to the leisurely revelation of the symbolic center of the physical object.

The final effect of the walking trope in Frost and Thoreau, aside from revealing an affinity in their approach to life, is to provide the reader with a periplus. Instead of a map revealing all at a glance, the reader gets the step by step process of the journey. So closely interwoven are the techniques which go to make up the effect that one hesitates to say whether any one technique is cause or effect.

There is to be found in Frost and Thoreau, moreover, an affinity of tone which is more basic than the oral quality which, after all, they share with many poets. This tone proceeds directly from the walking trope which expresses their view of life as a process. Because each man presents his mythical hero in the guise of New England

farmer, moreover, there is a blending of the rural "common sense" tone with the prophetic tone of the seeker. There is in both Frost and Thoreau a sort of independent brusqueness in their tone which both reveals and undoubtedly stems from their common determination to see the world as it is to them, largely uninfluenced by the way that others have seen it, and to present that world to the reader just as they have seen it. One must agree with Lynen, I think, when he says of Frost that "there is much talk of his ability to choose just the right words and to catch the precise rhythm of a voice, but the secret of just how this is done is never divulged. One suspects it never will. . . ."[19] The question is not only how these two men captured the rhythm of the speaking voice, but how, in the general absence of localisms, their speaking voices always come to be identified with New England. To assign this general recognition to a knowledge of biography is to accuse the critics of cheating. I, too, believe that I cannot explain how it is done, but I believe that it is a part of their independent stance, and that certain elements can be isolated.

Here again the trope of the walk or journey is helpful, since this metaphor does so much to establish both the persona and the mythic hero. I believe that it is precisely in this combination of persona and mythic hero that the peculiar qualities of tone which the two men share

---

[19]Lynen, op. cit., p. 81.

are to be found. Certainly Frost, and to a lesser extent Thoreau, is drawing on the reader's expectations of New England speech; after all, the Yankee was the first character "type" to develop in this country. More important, however, is the fact that the yankee manner of speech is the native dialect of both men. The result as far as their art is concerned is a sort of testiness which is most often manifested in the aphoristic quality which they share. On the surface, the two men seem diametrically opposed in their usual handling of language: Frost tends toward the understatement, Thoreau toward the overstatement, or even extravagant language. Still the net result is language which sounds remarkably similar.

In turning to specific examples, one can hardly do better among Frost poems than "Mending Wall" (CP, 47-8). Here, as I noted earlier, the persona is very much in evidence, with the mythic man well hidden and at some distance. The narrator opens the poem with the aphoristic line, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." He proceeds to develop or explain the thought with both cosmic and human sources, though neither force rules out the other. All the way through the poem the speaker maintains a tension between the literal and the imaginative: "some [boulders] are loaves and some so nearly balls/We have to use a spell to make them balance." Later he is tempted to tell his neighbor that it is "elves" that do not love a

wall. He states with the typical New England testiness that

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

The total effect, then, is a tonal quality that the reader associates with New England, in spite of the complete absence of any dialect or localisms.

The same tone, pervasive in the writings of Thoreau, is perhaps most conspicuous in the "Economy" section of Walden. This independent tone is struck immediately when Thoreau explains that he is going to talk of himself, then adds, "I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book" (W, II, 3). It reaches its peak perhaps when he suggests that people live in the tool boxes of the railroad workers, and says, "I am far from jesting. Economy is a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of" (W, II, 32). The qualities that go to make up the tone that both men share and that are immediately recognizable as a "New England" tone have best been explained by Frost in his "Introduction" to E. A. Robinson's King Jasper:

> The style is the man. Rather say the style is the way the man takes himself; and to be at all charming or even bearable, the way is almost rigidly prescribed. If it is with outer seriousness, it must be with inner humor. If it is with

> outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness. Neither one alone without the other will do.[20]

It is the combination of complete seriousness with a constant undertone of dry humor, then, that goes beneath the superficial extravagance of Thoreau and the superficial understatement of Frost to link the two men together in tone.

The constant playing with humor, moreover, helps to create the indirection in the writings of both Frost and Thoreau which is the despair of the non-literary mind. The reader who ignores the humor (as it was ignored by early readers of Thoreau) is inevitably led astray--led to believe, for example, that Frost is a cracker-barrel philosopher and that Thoreau is a village crank. The humor is an added advantage in concealing the symbolic center of the work of art until the poet is ready to allow it to slowly emerge. In the case of Frost especially this very technique occasionally gets away from him, particularly in the later poetry, and leads to that attitude of coyness which Yvor Winters so justly condemns. The poem "New Hampshire" is both as good as it is and as bad as it is because the humorous element is handled so unevenly in it. In regard to A Masque of Reason also, one can hardly avoid endorsing Winters' judgment that "the carefully flippant

---

[20]Edwin Arlington Robinson, King Jasper: A Poem (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), p. xiii.

tone . . . is something else; it belongs to the tradition of Romantic irony . . . and is used to make the ideas seem trivial."[21] At its best, however, the tone that Winters objects to is not "flippant"; instead it is better described as a teasing tone that both heightens and alleviates the seriousness of poems like "Mending Wall."

If the reader of Thoreau restricts himself to Walden, he will find no such serious lapses as can be sometimes found in Frost. With his ability to exaggerate the trivial, to reduce the pretentious to nothing, and to place himself within the Franklinian protestant ethic in order to turn it inside out, Thoreau is in perfect control of himself and his technique. In Thoreau particularly this approach is harmonized with all his other artistic devices: it aids in the slow flowering of the symbolic out of the physical, and, above all, it shows once more the manner in which the mythical, romantic quest has been domesticated to New England.

As I have pointed out several times, it is a mistake to try to identify the "New England" elements of Frost and Thoreau in their vocabulary, but at the same time they reveal affinities at the level of diction. This, of course, is not a matter of dialect or even localisms.

---

[21]Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost; Or, The Spiritual Drifter as Poet," The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957), p. 175.

Rather it is a strong preference on the part of both men for the concrete Anglo-Saxon word. "It may be worth noting," Duval says in reference to "Directive," "that Frost's opening line [Back out of all this now too much for us] is a near perfect line poetically, expressing in its web of monosyllabic functional words the very complex clutter of ordinary day-to-day detail we must escape."[22] Again this observation points to the similarity of the two men that lies deeper than the surface dichotomy of Frost's understatement and Thoreau's overstatement. Thoreau was interested in removing the blinders of convention from his fellow men, and he was particularly aware of the conventional quality of words. Words must have conventional meanings, to be sure, in order that man may communicate. At the same time, the conventionality of words can easily become a substitute for, or a refuge from, creative thought. Thoreau, with his love of etymology, often resorted to etymological analysis to illustrate the degree to which people maintain the conventional through the use of language: "To cooperate, in the highest as well as the lowest sense, means <u>to get our living together</u>" (W, II, 79). Frost's as well as Thoreau's word choices, then, represent an attempt to "work and wedge . . . downward through the

---

[22]S. P. C. Duval, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of <u>Walden</u>," <u>American Literature</u>, XXXI (January, 1960), 485, n. 9.

mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion that covers the globe . . . till we come to hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call reality . . ." (W, II, 108).

At the same time, there is another aspect to the vocabulary of the two men. What Herbert Coursen has observed of Frost holds true also for Thoreau: "Again and again the pattern is repeated; the disarming sound of the mundane surrenders to the elevated voice of implication."[23] The careful handling of words, then, aids in the slow revelation of the symbolic center of the physical object. At the same time the common position of the two writers between the physical and the spiritual is revealed by the individual word choice, as well as in larger rhetorical units.

The approaches to their art which the two men share, therefore, bring together all their affinities. In the metaphor of the journey they are able to provide the reader with an affirmation which not only refuses to sentimentalize life, but in fact takes full cognizance of its dark side. Perhaps above all it allows them to make use of their commitment to process: the process of living which is a constant encounter with experience, and the process of

---

[23]Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., "A Dramatic Necessity: The Poetry of Robert Frost," Bucknell Review, X (December, 1961), 140.

participating simultaneously in both physical and spiritual reality and in Thoreau's words "reverenc[ing] them both."

CONCLUSION

Henry David Thoreau and Robert Frost, both coming out of the New England heritage, demonstrate a remarkable set of affinities that set them apart from other writers who shared the same tradition. Both men illustrate that independence of thought which is so often associated with the region that produced them. They, more than most, saw life as a process, and this, coupled with a distrust of vicarious experience and abstract thought not grounded in concrete situations, is the force that shaped their art.

Both men approached life inductively; their experiences caused them to reject both complete materialism and complete idealism. Their insistence on personal experience caused them to retreat into the rural world, where the significance of each experience can more easily be grasped and where choices become more viable. They were fully aware of the paradoxes of human existence, and they were determined to face up to both sides of each paradox. Their withdrawal to a position between man and nature, for example, or between spirit and matter provided them with a point of view from which they could look bilaterally, so to speak, at the human situation. While such a stance did not permit them to ignore the unpleasant aspects of life, it did allow the great affirmations that the reader finds in the "Conclusion" to Walden and, for example, in "Directive."

The position that Frost and Thoreau took up demonstrates, moreover, the degree to which they participated in the "Romantic" frame of mind, while still retaining significant individual characteristics. Both, as I have said, were determined to participate in the spiritual world, a determination that nearly defines the romantic mind. In addition, however, both writers felt that the symbolic, spiritual significance of the physical object was revealed only by a close and careful examination of that object. It is probably true that neither man lost faith in the romantic quest, but both of them came to recognize the price one pays for such a view of the world. Both finally became overwhelmed by the burden of consciousness, and each on occasion expressed a desire to escape that burden.

The affinities which I have summarized briefly here achieve their full significance, however, only when one observes the manner in which the two men transmuted their common attitudes into art. The rural stance allows them to delve into the spiritual world and yet to remain firmly rooted in the physical life. In order to achieve this result, Frost and Thoreau draw upon the mythical and romantic concept of the quest, reducing this quest to fit the New England rural landscape. Each writer, in other words, creates a mythical hero in the guise of the rural New Englander. The journey itself is likewise "reduced" to that of the everyday event of going for a walk.

It is in this trope of walking, moreover, that all aspects of their attitudes and art become fused. Walking is itself a process; hence it is able to convey the sense that life is a process. In the hands of these two writers it becomes an admirable tool for expressing the inductive approach to life because the walker constantly comes upon new scenes, new facts; he constantly has a new perspective or angle of vision. The walker cannot arrive at a final conclusion until he has concluded his walk. By defining themselves in this role, therefore, the two writers did not "conclude." In the activity of walking, too, it is common to become temporarily lost. Frost and Thoreau make the most of this possibility by remarking on it as a pre-condition for insight into the spiritual world. At the same time, the act of walking is leisurely enough to permit the close examination of physical objects. Since both writers felt that this examination was the proper path into the spiritual world, walking again becomes the nearly perfect trope for expressing that attitude. The process of the slow unveiling of the symbolic center of the physical object is also admirably expressed by the symbol of the walk. Thus both writers fill their work with vivid descriptions of physical phenomena, delightful in themselves, that often seem to exist for their own sake. These descriptions are included for their own sake, of course, but they generally carry a double burden because they

generally stem from the added motives of demonstrating that life is a process and that there is spiritual significance in mundane things.

The trope of walking permits the expression of the desire to participate in both the spiritual and physical worlds in still another way. Each man has created the persona of the New England farmer. This persona provides the reader with that constant contact with the physical world which is characteristic of each writer. Behind the persona, however, is the mythical hero who is on the traditional quest for wisdom. It is this mythical hero who sees the full spiritual significance within the physical object or experience. While the persona, in other words, describes the weariness that comes with apple-picking or details the cost of the house he builds, the mythical hero realizes spiritual qualities that lie within these activities. So perfectly merged are these various aspects of their art, however, that one inevitably feels a sense of distortion when one takes them apart to discuss them.

Seen in this light, Thoreau is not an economist, hermit, or village crank. He is rather the one man in Concord who is able to have the best of both worlds. His masterpiece, moreover, takes on a unity which has often been denied to it. Seen in this light, Frost is no longer the New England cracker-barrel philosopher, delighting in innocuous pictures of rural New England; neither is he

completely of the twentieth century tradition of despair and bewilderment. Above all, he is not the cautious crowd-pleaser, afraid of any total commitment, as his detractors would have it. Instead he is totally committed to one position--the position that life is a process, that the examination of experience is the best way to approach life, and that the best one should expect of a poet is a "momentary stay against confusion."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adix, Marjorie. "Phoenix at Walden: D. H. Lawrence Calls on Thoreau," Western Humanities Review, VIII (Autumn, 1954), 287-98.

Anderson, Charles R. "Robert Frost," Saturday Review, XLVI (February 23, 1963), 17-20.

Barnard, Ellsworth. Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952.

Baym, Nina. "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," American Quarterly, XVII (Winter, 1965), 713-23.

Blair, John G., and Augustus Trowbridge. "Thoreau on Katahdin," American Quarterly, XII (Winter, 1960), 508-17.

Canby, Henry Seidel. Thoreau. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939.

Capps, Jack L. Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836-1886. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

Channing, William Ellery. Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist, with Memorial Verses. New edition. Enlarged and edited by F. B. Sanborn. Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed 1902.

Chase, Richard. Emily Dickinson. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951.

Christie, John Aldrich. Thoreau as World Traveler. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

Coffin, Robert P. Tristram. New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938.

Cook, Reginald L. The Dimensions of Robert Frost. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958.

_____. Passage to Walden. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949.

Coursen, Herbert R., Jr. "A Dramatic Necessity: The Poetry of Robert Frost," Bucknell Review, X (December, 1961), 138-47.

Cowley, Malcolm. "Frost: A Dissenting Opinion," The New Republic, CXI (September 11), 312-13 and (September 18, 1944), 345-47.

DeVoto, Bernard. "The Critics and Robert Frost," Saturday Review of Literature, XVII (January 1, 1938), 3-4, 14-15.

Dickinson, Emily. The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1955.

Duval, S. P. C. "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of Walden," American Literature, XXXI (January, 1960), 482-88.

Edwards, Jonathan. Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes. Edited by Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson. New York: American Book Company, 1935.

_____. Religious Affections. Edited by John E. Smith. Vol. II of The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Perry Miller, General Editor. In Progress. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Emerson's Complete Works. Edited by J. E. Cabot. 10 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1884.

_____. Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with Annotations. Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. 10 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912.

Frost, Robert. Complete Poems of Robert Frost. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949.

_____. "Introduction," King Jasper: A Poem. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935.

_____. "Thoreau's 'Walden,'" The Listener, LII (August 26, 1954), 319-20.

Gerber, Philip L. Robert Frost. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Harding, Walter. The Days of Henry Thoreau. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.

Horton, Rod W., and Herbert W. Edwards. Backgrounds of American Literary Thought. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952.

Kaplan, Estelle. Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1940.

Lowell, James Russell. The Complete Writings of James Russell Lowell. 16 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904.

[_____]. Massachusetts Quarterly Review, III (December, 1849), 40-51.

Lynen, John F. The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.

Marx, Leo (ed.). Excursions. New York: Corinth Books, Inc., 1962.

Matthiessen, F. O. American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Mertins, Louis. Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965.

Miller, Perry. Errand Into the Wilderness. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964.

_____. Jonathan Edwards. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967.

_____. The New England Mind: From Colony to Province. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.

_____. The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960.

Moynihan, William T. "Fall and Winter in Frost," Modern Language Notes, LXXIII (May, 1958), 348-50.

Neff, Emery. Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948.

Nitchie, George W. Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of the Poet's Convictions. Durham: Duke University Press, 1960.

Paul, Sherman. "Resolution at Walden," Accent, XIII (Spring, 1953), 101-13.

_____. The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1958.

_____ (ed.). Walden. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957.

Pops, Martin Leonard. "An Analysis of Thoreau's Cape Cod," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LXVII (September, 1963), 419-28.

Pound, Ezra. "Modern Georgics," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, V (December, 1914), 127-30.

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934.

Ross, Francis D. "Rhetorical Procedure in Thoreau's 'Battle of the Ants,'" College Composition and Communication, XVI (February, 1965), 14-18.

Rusk, Ralph L. The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.

Sanborn, F. B. The Life of Henry David Thoreau, Including Many Essays Hitherto Unpublished and Some Account of His Family and Friends. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917.

Sergeant, Elizabeth Sheply. Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

Seybold, Ethel. Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics. Yale Studies in English, vol. 116. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.

Spiller, Robert E., and others (eds.). Literary History of the United States. Third edition, revised. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963.

Stallman, R. W. "The Position of Poetry Today," English Journal, XLVI (May, 1957), 241-51.

Stein, William Bysshe. "Walden: The Wisdom of the Centaur," ELH, XXV (September, 1958), 194-215.

Stoller, Leo. After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957.

Stovall, Floyd (ed.). Eight American Authors: A Review of Research and Criticism. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963.

Tate, Allen. Collected Essays. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959.

Thompson, Lawrance. Robert Frost. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959.

Thoreau, Henry David. Consciousness in Concord: Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal" (1840-1841). Edited by Perry Miller. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958.

_____. The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau. Edited by Walter Harding and Carl Bode. New York: New York University Press, 1958.

_____. The Writings of Henry David Thoreau. 20 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906.

Thornton, Richard (ed.). Recognition of Robert Frost: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937.

Thrall, William Flint, and Addison Hibbard. A Handbook to Literature. Revised and enlarged by C. Hugh Holman. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960.

Trilling, Lionel. "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," Partisan Review, XXVI (Summer, 1959), 445-52.

Warren, Austin. "Lowell on Thoreau," Studies in Philology, XXVII (July, 1930), 442-61.

Whicher, George Frisbie. This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.

Winters, Yvor. Edwin Arlington Robinson. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1946.

_____. The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lyle D. Domina was born in Cedar County, Nebraska, on [redacted], and he attended various public schools in that county. From 1951 to 1953 he taught in the K-8 rural school system, and from 1953 to 1957 he served in the United States Air Force. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Education from the University of Nebraska in 1960 and a Master of Arts from the same institution in 1961. The 1961-62 school year was spent as senior English teacher in the Ogallala, Nebraska High School. From 1962 to 1965 he was an instructor of English at Peru (Nebraska) State College, and from 1965 to 1968 he was an instructor at the University of Missouri. In the fall of 1968 he will begin an appointment as assistant professor of English at North Texas State University, Denton, Texas.

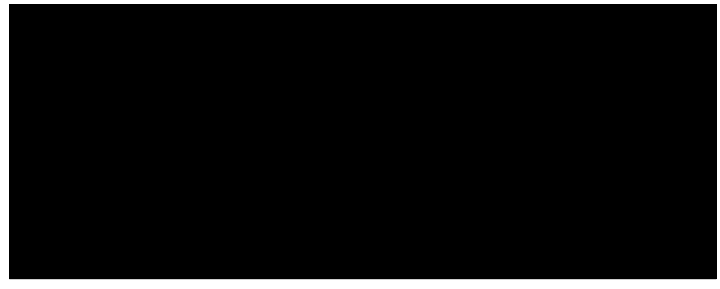
The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate Faculty, have examined a thesis entitled

FROST AND THOREAU: A STUDY IN AFFINITIES

presented by Lyle D. Domina

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.



University Libraries
University of Missouri

Digitization Information Page

Local identifier Domina1968

Source information

Format	Book
Content type	Text
Source ID	Gift copy from department; not added to MU collection.
Notes	

Capture information

Date captured	January 2024
Scanner manufacturer	Fujitsu
Scanner model	fi-7460
Scanning system software	ScandAll Pro v. 2.1.5 Premium
Optical resolution	600 dpi
Color settings	8 bit grayscale
File types	tiff
Notes	

Derivatives - Access copy

Compression	Tiff: LZW compression
Editing software	Adobe Photoshop
Resolution	600 dpi
Color	grayscale
File types	pdf created from tiffs
Notes	Images cropped, straightened, brightened