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Reading Nation and the Poetry of Robert Frost

A Dissertation Presented

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Robert Frost once said, “I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds¹.” Such an aim reflects, in part, Frost’s embrace of Emerson’s view of the poet, “... the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth².” The national overtones implicit in the term “commonwealth” resonate with Frost’s attempts to make poetry analogous to nation for each individual in what was and is a very diverse nation. One of Frost’s biggest challenges in getting both professors and farmers to read and identify with his poetry was to create euphonious space for contrary voices in his poems. Frost continued the project that Whitman began of attempting to create through poetry an accurate reflection of national ideology that each individual as well as the multitude can identify with. When

¹ Letter to John Bartlett 11/5/1913

² *The Poet*, Ralph Waldo Emerson pg 260

Whitman writes that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem³,” he goes further than any American poet previously had to make poetry itself the political space of nation building. My dissertation, “Reading Nation and the Poetry of Robert Frost,” examines how Robert Frost’s poetry embodies and extends both Emerson’s and Whitman’s idea. Following Emerson’s imperative Frost, like Whitman, wrestles with the conflict that arises from attempting to create in poetry a space where national communal identity can be formed while honoring the distinct individuality of particular readers. This very tension lies at the core of what is considered unique and precious in American national ideology. And while both poets have written poems that anticipate the acts of interpretation by future readers, Frost’s poems work to demonstrate how the labor of reading is nearly synonymous with the labor of writing. My dissertation shows how in the process of reading his poems we come to moments of crisis where interpretation and metaphor fail. I argue that these moments of crisis are designed to cause the reader to confront his/her own limitations and, by implication, mortality. In lieu of a structured faith, Frost offers salvation in the form of inducting the reader into a larger poetical conversation, which is also inherently an entry into the political realm. By instantiating the nation as imagined community of readers/writers, Frost’s poems can be considered political in the deepest sense.

³ Preface 1855- *Leaves of Grass* Walt Whitman

Dedication Page

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Peter W. Sluys and David LoPiccolo. They were both my good friends who left us all too soon.

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Preface

"The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state."

- John F. Kennedy October 26, 1963 Amherst College

The relationship between Frost and Kennedy demonstrates not only the ubiquitousness of the poet as American but also as deeply political. But, who affected whom in that relationship? And, to what extent? Does the exchange between a poet and a politician make the poet more political or the politician more poetical? In a subtle combination of contraries not unlike many made by Frost in his poetry, President Kennedy lauded Frost for his antisocial sociability. During a speech posthumously praising the poet Kennedy singled out the artist's ability to withdraw from society and thus critique it as a chief function of the artist *in* society. Frost's speakers were fond of this retreat and return, a turning away and returning to, which provided the poet the perspective necessary to become the conscience of the nation. Kennedy proclaimed the nation's spirit was made stronger by the reflections of the individual, whereas its might is a combination of the combined forces of those individuals united in will or spirit. National imagining then serves as an integral part of the activation of a nation's power

since without unified direction those powers lay inert. Kennedy saw Frost as the guide to that spirit not just because Frost embodied the spirit of the local, and the regional as he is often positioned the herald of, but also because Frost's poetry embodied both sides of the human spirit.

And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair. (Kennedy)

This midnight that Kennedy saw embodied by the poet must have resonated with the contemporary audience of cold war America. The power to split the atom came hand in hand with the power to exterminate all life on the planet, a terrifying prospect. A poetics of a nation with that power contains simultaneously the poetics of possibility and the poetics of terror. The inspiring potentiality of America was also the cause for the most frightening displays of cruelty if the conscience of the nation leads its tremendous power astray. Kennedy was not the first, nor the last, critic of Frost to note the presence of the contrary impulses or the noon and midnight as he called it.

Lionel Trilling, and Randall Jarrell though less infamously, claimed he saw that midnight in Frost's poems though he called it terror. "In short, I regard Robert Frost as a terrifying poet" Trilling famously stated in his speech at Frost's 85 birthday party. Jay Parini describes the spectacle and shock from the largely literary audience. But Trilling later admitted to Frost in a letter dated the 4th of July 1958 that he didn't believe he was saying anything shocking or new. At any rate Trilling believed that what the terror he saw in Frost's poems was open to all who approach them. "... what I see is there to be seen on

inspection by anyone who comes to your work with the open mind it took me too long to achieve⁴.” According to Trilling, the terror is there in Frost’s poems to be read alongside the regional. His statement at the birthday party ignited a library of criticism debating the merits of positioning Frost as regional or modern poet, neither categorization he wholly fit.

In outlining the genealogy of the attempts by critics in the 20th century to categorize Frost as American or Modern, Priscilla Paton, in her essay “Apologizing for Robert Frost”, not only highlights the problems intrinsic to regarding those categories as mutually exclusive but also illustrates the difficulty of categorizing the poet in general. Just as a critic attempting to shoehorn Frost into either category will be disappointed to see that much of the poems don’t fit so too are readers of Frost disappointed when they search for absolutes in those poems. The reader who expects the poems to provide such certainty doubtless finds it and loses it and finds it again throughout the subsequent readings of the same Frost verse, a process which is propelled by the simultaneous presence of contrary images and ideas.

Recent scholarship has been published on this particular aspect of Frost. Peter J. Stanlis in his Poet as Philosopher recently made the case for considering Frost a dualist. He reads the contrary impulses throughout Frost’s writings as emblematic of a broader philosophical viewpoint of the poet. Stanlis is very thorough in his cataloging of dualism throughout the life and poetry of Frost, perhaps overly so. He spends a lot of time attempting to convince the reader that the amount of work for a “proper” understanding

⁴ Letter to Robert Frost from Lionel Trilling July 4th 1958

of Frost's dualism is almost analogous to a complete study of the minutia of his life as well as an intimate knowledge of all of his writing. As well, one must have a professionally crafted understanding of the philosophy in general before applying it to the poet. For many readers of poetry, even some scholars whose primary interest lay outside of the poet, this amount of work is insurmountable. If Stanlis is right, such an understanding of the philosophical principles that guide the poet would then be accessible to only a select few, very dedicated scholars. Stanlis's repeated insistence that we must go beyond the poem to appreciate fully the effect of the philosophy on the poems and poet. "It would be a cardinal error for any scholar or literary critic to assume that Frost's philosophical dualism can be reconstructed or understood through a study of poetry" (Stanlis, 6). Furthermore, he also argues that readers who attempt to read his poetry without what he calls a "full comprehension of his dualism" will miss something integral. I do not wish to undervalue the work Stanlis does. I think the notion of Frost as a dualist is a clever and interesting explanation for the sustained use of contraries throughout his poems. However, I think Stanlis' work misses the mark for the majority of Frost readers. Even if he is right, it profits little to the community as a whole to give them such an exhausting pile of homework that they may one day be able to understand "completely" (whatever that means) the contrary images and ideas in the poems. Frost himself acknowledged that we understand poetry in stages

A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to

get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars
do. (Frost, Prerequisites)

And this incremental understanding of poetry and I'll add the presence of contraries within the poem is much more lucrative for a sustained inquiry of the effect of the poet and his works on a broader scale. It allows for misreading and reinterpretation. It expects it. The work of the reader is never done in this model. And it is with an understanding that our interpretation will fail that we proceed with the reading process.

The focus of my dissertation was to trace the development of the political in the poetical as it pertains to specifically to Frost through the lens of Emerson and Whitman. While I do spend some time on some of what might be considered his overtly political poems, I argue that the nature of the way contrary ideas and attitudes are presented in almost all of his poems inhibit acts of "complete" interpretation and create space for multiple perspectives each individually incomplete. This type of poetics is present throughout Frost's poetry even if later in his career Frost was reviewed harshly by contemporary critics for too often leaving the quaint farm of his earlier books and reprimanded for being overtly political most notably in one of his last books "A Further Range." The criticism, if true, only demonstrates a departure from Frost's early work in that his message was conveyed more overtly as I argue even the rustic portrayals of rural farms are political. I think the dismissiveness that that kind of review facilitates defensive posturing by Frost scholars and while not the case in the dissertation I think sustained examination of the entire book would demonstrate a wealth of the subtlety upon which Frost built most of his poetics. As it stands readers of this dissertation will have to make

due with the critical attention I focus on one particular poem from that volume. "Build Soil: A Political Pastoral."

Robert Frost's poems help us learn by metaphor. A process he refers to as "building soil." Each interpretation eventually folds under the weight of newly discovered significance and each successive reinterpretation builds upon the last. In such a way the failures of past and present interpretations enrich the yield of future ones. Readers of Frost's poems -like the white tailed hornet from the same titled poem- compare one thing to another often through a process of tenuous discovery. As the hornet compares nailhead with fly and fly with nailhead it does so because it assumed they were the same and was displeased to discover that the tasty treat it anticipated was instead cold metal. This suggests that when we make metaphors, or interpret them, we err. But in that error, in that failing, we lay the groundwork for new understanding. All metaphors fall apart after a certain point in the process of interpretation. To be semantic, that's what makes them metaphorical and not literal. What any close reader of Frost's poetry, perhaps all poetry, can tell you is that accepting that the metaphor and your interpretation will fail is liberating. The peculiar way those contraries operate, or what Stanlis calls Frost's dualism, within Frost's poetry necessitates that any critical student of his poetry not only accept but also expect the revision of his or her interpretative processes. In my view this is not just the cornerstone of understanding Frost's poems, but also of critical, intellectual thought. As such the study of metaphor is crucial to the process of building thoughts

I chose the title of my dissertation, “Reading Nation and the Poetry of Robert Frost” for two reasons. It is straightforward yet has duplicity of meaning. The word reading signifies that the dissertation will not only attempt to read nation but it also signifies that the people who consider themselves part of that nation read too. I chose Robert Frost’s poetry for various reasons, some of which are his general fame both inside and out of the academy in the United States, his presence in significant political events such as Kennedy’s inauguration, his poetry’s prominence in the educational system of the United States at various levels and I thoroughly enjoy reading his poetry. While this dissertation aims at making claims about how we make interpretations and how those interpretations effect national consciousness it also aims to make claims about the poetry of Robert Frost as an accessible vehicle of nation making through the ways it anticipates and accommodates readers of various abilities.

The first chapter of this dissertation, “Whitman, Frost and a Nation’s Poetics,” starts off tracing the evolution of Emerson’s claim for the poet as representative of the nation through Whitman. As well I compare and contrasts the ways that Whitman and Frost attempted to actualize that claims through their writings. Specific attention was paid to the ways each poet tried to create space in his work for the acts of interpretation by contemporary and future audiences. Both Whitman and Frost responded to the needs of their audiences at the time they wrote while imagining a futurity for their work and the types of readers who might come in the future to their work. Such imaginings naturally lend themselves to the framework of “imagined community” provided by Benedict Anderson and some time was spent in this chapter flushing out that framework.

Additionally, the ways in which Whitman and Frost positioned the poetical persona of the poet in relation to their readers and the poem itself differ greatly. While Frost's aim was to provide the modern individual with a "momentary stay against confusion" Whitman's project (especially in his later years) was to promote reconstruction. As such this chapter helps to locate the poet's persona and the effect of that positioning on the readers. This chapter explores how Whitman positioned his poetical persona next to the reader as a companion who helps guide the interpretation of the poem. Furthermore, an examination of Whitman's claims to legitimacy and authenticity is made through the claims he made about the notebooks he kept during the civil war and the subsequent memoranda he later published. Specifically, I investigate his claims about the proximity to the wounded bodies as authorizer of his texts to convey the "images and forms" of the wounded and dying American soldiers. In this vein Elaine Scarry's work has proven useful to provide the framework for his claims. Additionally, this chapter explores Whitman's agency as letter writer for actual soldiers and the comparison of personal letter writing with the act of preparing poems and writings for more public audiences.

In contrast, Frost's persona is often withdrawn entirely from the poem or if it is present is obscured. This withdrawal, I argue, empowers the reader of Frost's poetry as meaning maker by substantially increasing the range of interpretations the poem will accommodate and thereby the poetry instantiates itself as inclusive of an ever-changing and increasingly diverse readership of present and future Americans. Frost's theory of the sound of sense plays an important role in this regard. His attempts to get living tones, that

is the almost universal voice behind the words, into his poetry is an attempt at making the poetry more accessible. However, the nuance and subtlety which accompany these tones continue to keep the poetry engaging for more sophisticated readers. In such a way this chapter explores the availability of Frost's poetry. The case study for this aspect of Frost's poetry is found in an examination of "Mending Wall" in the last section of the chapter.

The second chapter of this dissertation, "Poetic Belief and Building Soil," traces the development and discuss the implications and significance of the didactic mode of thought and reading presented in Frost's poem "Build Soil: A Political Pastoral." The poem centers on a metaphor Frost constructs between the work of a farmer and that of a thinker. Just as a farmer would produce better crops in the long run by plowing under the fruit of the initial yield so too would thinkers produce better thoughts by constantly turning under the produce of their intellectual labor. Such a process, Frost argues, builds the soil and produces better intellectual thoughts in the long run.

In this chapter I compare that didactic of building soil to the interpretative process that one performs in the reading process. Frost's method of "building soil" runs counter to the mainstream collective practices of capital society, which is more invested in the continual production and distribution of thought and idea than it is in the retention and revision of each individual idea. The impetus for intellectual production moves from thought marketing to thought maturation. I argue that the structure of Frost's poems as described in the previous chapter with the emphasis on contrary impulses, subtlety and

living tone all promote this type of soil building. While the interpretative process happens individually (and here Frost's comparison to a marketplace is poignant) the sharing of interpretation is a social and in the case of Frost's poems I argue a political move as the reader positions him or herself in relation to the contraries.

This chapter also develops a line of discussion throughout Frost's works on the nature of belief and later metaphorical thinking. The many aspects of belief as they appear in Frost's writing are investigated and while Frost seemed initially in his talks to be discussing the writing process, I argue that these same elements are equally important in the interpretative process. Simply put the labor involved in writing a poem and reading a poem are synonymous. This conflation between reader and writer empowers authors and interpreters as collaborators in meaning making generally speaking. With the elusive poet persona of Frost and his emphasis on contrariety and subtlety however, his poems offer a space where there is little validation of interpretative acts as subsequent readings of the poem instead of reassuring one's interpretation actually reopen the interpretative, building soil process. This type of interpretation, what Frost called a "momentary stay against confusion" continually repositions the act of poetry making into the present when interpreter and text meet.

The final chapter of this dissertation explores the role of voices in dialogue and contraries as they function in the poetics of Frost as outlined in the previous two chapters. Bookending the discussion with a close reading of the Frost poem "West-Running Brook" this chapter argues that the interpretative acts are always done in the face of

disorientation. Sara Ahmed's discussion in the introduction of Queer Phenomenology helps frame the discussion of space and disorientation. I argue that Frost orients the reader towards the disorientating object and in so doing instigates interpretative acts from his readers to resist that disorientation. His poetics of contraries and the positioning of the poetical persona as withdrawn contribute to the necessity of reader involvement in the construction of meaning in the face of those disorientating object. The reading of several key moments of disorientation throughout his works coupled with the insistence of revision of interpretation through his didactic of building soil leave me to conclude that for Frost the reading of poetry provides moments of stability in what otherwise is an unstable existence.

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Without the many hours of help from my committee members this dissertation would not exist. In particular the efforts of my advisor Susan Scheckel can't be overstated. Without her constant review, encouragement and assistance this project would never have matured. As well, I'd like to acknowledge my parents whose emotional and financial support enabled me to continue on and finish my graduate studies. Finally, I would like to thank Emily Churilla for her consistent support and her unquestioning faith in my abilities without which I don't know where I'd be.

Chapter One: Whitman, Frost and a Nation's Poetics

Section One: Reading Nation

“The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”

– Walt Whitman Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

Whitman went further than any previous American poet to make the poem itself the political space of nation building. He attempted to create in poetry an imaginative space where national communal identity could be formed while honoring the distinct individuality of his readers. This tension is the core of American national ideology. The concept of a unified national identity conflicts with the ideal of self reliance that is the cornerstone of American celebrations of individualism. As such, Whitman's project was exceedingly difficult and he ultimately failed to achieve the harmony he sought between these two conflicting principles. However, in examining the nature of his failure we expose the groundwork which he laid for other poets to build upon. In particular, Robert Frost continues Whitman's project to reconcile the conflict between Americans' idealized independence and the necessary conformity that nation demands.

Frost regarded his role as a poet as necessarily a political role. “I don't want to run for office but I want to be a politician⁵,” he once said. He campaigned with his poetry but left it to his readers to dissect his policies. He was polemical but never favored one side to the exclusion of the other. His poems would be conservative or liberal depending

⁵ Monteiro, George. “Introduction to 'For Glory and for Use': Robert Frost at Brown University.” *The Gettysburg Review* 7.1 (1994): 89 - 99. Print.

on who was asked to interpret them. Frost once said, “I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds”.⁶ As such, he needed to create a poetry that appealed to both the farmers and the professors. It was this desire that necessitated his creation of a poetics that would allow varied interpretations without seeming airy or unintentional. He found such a poetics in the principle he referred to as the “sound of sense,” which necessitated the involvement of a reader who could identify and interpret the sound images in his poetry. The use of this principle, in conjunction with his distancing of himself from the reader, allowed his poems to give the independence of interpretation to his readers while simultaneously acting as a focal point for nationalist rhetoric.

Much critical attention has been given to Robert Frost’s theory of poetics the “sound of sense.” Also referred to as “sentence sounds,” this principle, Frost is quick to mention, is not his invention. Rather, we are indebted to him for its explication in these terms:

If we go back far enough we will discover that the sound of sense, existed before words, that something in the voice or vocal gesture made primitive man convey a meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language.⁷

The goal of the poet, as Frost conceives it, is to get tone into a poem. Frost proposes that one must “learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sound of sense with all the irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the meter” (Frost, 665). Timothy Steele

⁶ Letter to John T. Bartlett November 5, 1913 *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays* Library of American p.668

⁷ “Robert Frost, New American Poet,” Boston Evening Transcript, May 8, 1915. Part three, pp. 4, 10

does an excellent job articulating the finer formal points of how Frost's sentence sounds break themselves across the metered line⁸, but it is my purpose to examine how Frost's attempt to incorporate those sentence sounds into a poem and the reader's attempt to reproduce them effectively creates a "democratic" poetry that is individual and communal at the same time.

Voice and voices in dialogue have been, since before his first publication in England, a preoccupation for Frost, but the voice that he always fancied he was reproducing was the living tones of the people and things he encountered in the world. As Robert Newdick states in *Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense*:

So one of the unobtrusive but really revolutionary aspects of his first important book - its emphasis on living speech- is properly to be regarded only against a background of principle and practice to which the poet devoted himself for twenty years before winning the applause of fellow artists and of the poetry reading public. (Newdick, 290)

Newdick emphasizes the painstaking testing that Frost did with his new principle before publicizing it. Frost's diligence as a farmer during his pre-published years is left wanting but his diligence as a poet on a farm is unquestionable. The years between 1906-1911, just prior to his move to England and subsequently the launch of his formal publishing career, he spent writing poetry at his farm in Derry and teaching at Pinkerton Academy (Parini). This was a time of listening for Frost. Entrenched as he was in his roles of poultry farmer and educator he would have had the opportunity to listen to the voices of

⁸ "Across Spaces of the Footed Line": the Meter and Versification of Robert Frost. From, [The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost](#).

students and farmers and he attempted to replicate these tones in his poetry. Those years of listening, not just to the sounds of human speech but also to the sounds of the movement of a scythe (*Mowing*) or the noise of a buzz saw (*Out, out*), allowed Frost to carefully weave them into his poetry so that they would replicate in the mind of his solitary readers. Those years were well spent and the quality of the sound in his poetry was an almost universally lauded trait of his first publication.

Even though Frost came back from England a successfully published poet he was by no means financially secure. Frost began a series of lectures and appearances in order to promote his work, in particular his theory of the sound of sense, as well as to try to earn some much-needed income. Sydney Cox wrote to his mother of one such appearance at a Woman's Evening Missionary Society of the First Presbyterian Church in Schenectady: "A poet, [Frost] says, is one who goes about looking and listening. Not in books, but in life. Sound is the main thing in poetry. And the good poet takes in the auditory images of human speech. Then, when he writes, he summons the appropriate sound images" (Evans, 118-119). The most well known example of the sound of sense is the often quoted letter that Frost wrote to John Bartlett dated the Fourth of July, 1913.

The best place to get abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied:

You mean to tell me you can't read?

I said no such thing.

Well, read then.

You're not my teacher⁹.

Implicit in the creation of the sound of sense is a reader who has heard these sounds before and can reproduce them as he reads the poem. Frost was made particularly conscious of this by the feedback he received from his audience members at some of his lectures. It was reported after his lecture at the University of Michigan that Frost "wasn't very much pleased when someone told him, once after hearing him read his poems, that now they knew how to read them right, because they had heard his voice."¹⁰ It is reasonable to assert that this statement disturbed Frost not because readers of his poetry couldn't identify how he would have spoken the lines but because readers of his poetry couldn't identify the living tones in the poetry itself. Those readers could have been misled by the authorial fallacy and believed that the poet's reading must have been correct because it expressed the author's intentions. Frost would claim that sentence sounds, "are apprehended by the ear. They are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books... I think no writer invents them. The most original writer catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously" (Frost, 675). The reader is tasked then with identifying tones he/she can recognize from the actual world around him/her independent of Frost.

This contrasts starkly with Whitman's technique to continually position himself as close to the reader as possible to guide his interpretation of the poem. The positioning of

⁹ Letter to John T. Bartlett 7/4/1913

¹⁰ "A Poet on the Campus of the University of Michigan," Detroit News, Nov. 27, 1921, part seven, p. 1.

the poets in relation to their readers is one of the chief differences in the way these two poets attempted to create space for their readers and for national ideologies. In part this is because both answer Emerson's call for an American poet but do so in different ways.

Emerson writes in his essay *The Poet* that "... the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth."¹¹ Emerson suggests that through our study of the poet and his poems we come to some understanding about society as well as our selves. For Frost this statement means that he is creator of a poem which reflects the commonwealth to its readers, whereas Whitman takes this much more literally and inserts himself into the poem in an infinite variety of ways such that his poetical self becomes the common wealth.

Whitman enthusiastically picks up the charge to create a poetics of the United States in his preface to the Leaves of Grass (1855). Whitman challenges the conventional belief that words are static and texts are permanent when he states, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."¹² The metaphor linking state and text unfolds as we consider Whitman's process of writing and revising his book Leaves of Grass. For Whitman a poem did not consist of inert and lifeless words on a page; rather, the poem was constantly evolving. The clearest evidence of this is that throughout the many editions of his book he revises, replaces, and relocates the poems constantly. Furthermore, Whitman very much considered the poem to be valueless in the absence of

¹¹ Selected Essays of Emerson 260

¹² Whitman page 711

a reader. In many ways the poem was for Whitman what happened between the words on the page and the reader in the act of reading the poetry. Whitman saw the United States as similar to the poem as its laws and its territorial boundaries were constantly being re-written. Further, the people of the nation, the very essence of the nation from which this government in particular drew its authority to rule, were constantly changing, and in the absence of those citizens the nation, too, becomes valueless.

Benedict Anderson's conception of nation in Imagined Communities is enlightening to this discourse because of the way that he positions nation in the realm of imagination. Anderson states that "... all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 6). Anderson privileges imagination as the space where nations exist and in so doing he defines the imagination as the most powerful political space; in light of this claim, the emphasis that Whitman's metaphor of nation as poem puts on the individual becomes clearer. The poem engages an individual's imagination and the collective responses of those individuals continually imbue the poem with substance.

In an interesting if unintentional extension of Whitman's metaphor Anderson observes that national monuments, in particular tombs of unknown soldiers, demonstrate a concern for the dead and the unborn. Anderson writes, "The cultural significance of such monuments becomes even clearer if one tries to imagine, say, a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals. Is a sense of absurdity avoidable?"

The reason is that neither Marxism nor Liberalism are much concerned with death and immortality” (Anderson, 10). Anderson makes this observation in light of the fact that the rise of nationalism was contemporaneous with the fall of predominantly religious modes of thought (Anderson, 11). If the nation attempts to comfort its members by providing a mode of rebirth, in this case the continuing of an “American” tradition, then it attempts to fulfill a role that poetry has long held as its charge as a bridge between generations. Suggestively, then, a poem as a metaphor for nation is appropriate not just because it was created by the imagination and has been the focus of interpretative acts in the past, nor simply because it exists in the present as a similar focus for interpretive acts, but also because a poem functions similar to national identity in its struggle for perpetuity.

Section Two: Positioning the Poetical Self

“And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.”

(Whitman, Crossing Brooklyn Ferry)

For Whitman and for Frost nation and poetry are imaginary productions created in the interpretative processes of the citizen and reader. Whitman attempts in his poetry to direct the imaginations of his readers to what he perceives should be the common values of the American citizen. From the beginning of his writings in “Song of Myself” and throughout his *Leaves of Grass* the positioning of the reader is always in response to the poet’s imperative that “What I assume you shall assume.” If the readers of the poem are each connected to the poem by acts of interpretation then it isn’t much of a stretch to say that they are also connected to the poetic persona of Whitman in the text. By extending the thought I argue that those readers are each connected with each other through their relationship with the text and their interpretation of what value the text or author has. Whitman attempted to foster this community in his readership through the use of a strong and opinionated poetical persona throughout all of his writing but with a more specific purpose in his Civil War writings. Put simply that purpose was to unite the divided population of the post-war United States. The means by which he attempted this is through anticipation of future readers and the creation of space in his poems for those readers. This anticipation is similar to that of Frost but the means of the two poets differ

greatly. Frost, working absent the very specific purpose of uniting the nation as “wound-dresser,” is able to give his readers more freedom in the interpretative process. Each poet conceived of the needs of the nation differently at the time of his writing. For Whitman, national harmony in post civil war United States was his chief concern. Frost was writing during the height of such modern crises as the Great Depression and both world wars and believed that his readers required a “momentary stay against confusion,” or a fleeting moment of clarity which results from a “successful” interpretative process from reading poetry.

While Whitman and Frost differ greatly, their underlying assumptions about poetry, nation and the imagination remain the same. Both poets understood the connective process between the subjects (readers or citizens) and the idea (poem or nation) as a necessary vehicle of their influence. Implicit in this is a positioning of the speaker in relation to the readers and to the text itself, be it nation or poem. Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” provides a relevant example for the way he anticipated his future readers and positioned the poetical persona in his work.

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” was originally published in 1856 under the title “Sun Down Poem.” It was later revised and published under its new title in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It was published at a time when the American Civil War was all but inevitable. Whitman, working as a journalist in Brooklyn at the time, was very much in touch with the current political climate. While I don’t mean to suggest we should read this poem as a Civil War poem I would proffer that approaching the poem with the

understanding that it was written in a tense political climate may offer some insight in to the acts the speaker undertakes as bridge-maker. The speaker of the poem is invested in crossing gaps between time and space and acts as the mediary between past and future in an imagined present where all Americans can find common ground. While these initial attempts are a far cry from his role as national “wound dresser” that he adopts later in his life the general method of bridge building is similar.

Whitman’s persona attempts to cross the space between the poet and the reader while simultaneously crossing the Hudson and the gap between Brooklyn and Manhattan. The speaker is in transit from one shore to the other. The scenic commute is not one just of space but also of time. Whitman’s poetical imagining of his future reader(s) takes shape as he, in the first stanza, considers his current journey as synonymous with the journey of the future traveler.

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose (Whitman, 308)

Whitman actively attempts within the poem to construct a representation of the future traveler. The emphasis throughout the poem on both spatial and temporal crossings suggests that this traveler is not merely a person who crosses the same physical space of the Hudson River that Whitman is writing about but also any reader who comes to the poem. As the reader begins to construct in his or her imagination an interpretation of the poem there is a curious reflexivity that occurs in the process. Engaged in meaning making, the reader attempts to imagine a speaker who is at the same time imagining the

reader and is left to consider the possible significances of that reciprocal imagining. Whitman description emphasizes “the similitudes of the past and those of the future.” He references the “crowd” and the “shipping” without mentioning the particular faces or mechanisms involved. This allows the reader to construct the familiar present day crowd he is familiar with in lieu of the specific one of 19th century Manhattan. The interpretation is thus guided by the careful direction of the poet. Whitman’s goal is not merely to collapse the temporal space between poet and reader but also to involve the reader in acts of imaginative construction that privilege the poem as the inspirational source of those imaginings.

There is another aspect of Whitman’s poetics to consider in the creation and positioning of his poetical self and the imagined self of the reader who comes to his poetry. “Whoever you are, holding me now in hand” outlines the relationship between the persona of the poet and the reader is very deliberately constructed in this particular poem as a relationship between the pursuer and the pursued with the latter clearly setting the terms of the chase. It has the effect of stimulating the curiosity such that if one weren’t initially interested in what Whitman was hiding, or even aware of his having hidden anything, by the end of the short poem the reader clearly has ventured to guess several times what it is without which.... “all will be useless.” It almost feels as if the book wrote the poem to lecture and chastise the passing reader who nonchalantly picked up the tome and flipped the page without having first the proper reverence for the poem or the work of reading. The posturing of the “me” and the “I” within the poem exemplifies the demands that Whitman places on his reader to read the poem *with* the poet thereby

reconfiguring the traditional assumption that reading is a solitary activity. The presence of Whitman (as poetic persona of the poet) becomes even more palpable in his overtly national works. Still, however far Whitman does guide his reader, he does more to enable that reader than previous poets. Although Whitman is negotiating the text with the reader he does so with a multifarious, often contradictory, self that the reader must reconcile with his/her own reading.

Stephen Railton provides an interesting metaphor for thinking about the many versions of Whitman's "I" in his essay "'As If I Were with You' - The Performance of Whitman's Poetry." Railton compares Whitman's poetry to a stage where the dramatic action is perpetually renewed within the mind of each new reader. In this analogy the plot of the poem becomes the dialogue between the reader and the speaker. Whitman, Railton suggests, uses the present tense and makes specific mechanical choices within the poetry to place the reader alongside himself within the unique privileged space reserved for poet and reader. In this framework we more readily see how the reader is dragged into a dialogue with Whitman, on the poet's own turf, and on his own terms. Whitman ambiguously structures the various conceptions of the lyrical self, and Railton suggests that because of the immense and diffuse definitions of self within the poem the lyrical "I" should be read as many different aspects of the same whole, while the "you" of the poem remains undefined. He argues that in order to reconcile the lack of definition given to the "you" and the wealth and diversity of "self" one must understand the poem as a performance as opposed to the traditional form of national poetry, the epic. While the comparison between Whitman's poetry and epic poetry may be alluring because of the

implicit rhetoric of nation formation in both, Whitman (and here is where we see the agreement with Frost) conceives of the process of nation formation -like the process of writing a poem- as constantly in a state of revision and perpetually evolving. Railton suggests that by conceiving of it as a poem of performance, we can remove the normal assumptions of genre that usually accompany a more traditional narrative or epic lyric.

If we conceive it (Song of Myself”) generically as an epic poem, we will continue to expect a narrative structure of some kind. We are less likely to bring such expectations to a performance. ‘Song of Myself’ is not a poem about ‘what happened’; instead the poem itself, like any performance, is what is happening as it is being read. That is the when of the poem: the ‘this day and night’ the reader spends with the poet, reading the poem. (Railton, 9)

Railton argues that Whitman’s goal to “cross the gap between I and you,” is inherently an attempt to bridge a gap of time. The drama renews itself in the minds of the reader every time it is read allowing for the “experience” therein represented to be witnessed again, and relived. If Railton is correct then Whitman’s process of positioning the poetical self enables each reader to redefine the meaning of the experience, in relation to that specific reader.

Bridging this gap of time between the creation of the poem’s finished version and the date of its reading in the future, and the gap of space between the Whitmanian “I” and the subjective “you” in the poem, are both essential to Whitman’s method of nation building. He champions all and assumes all in his various selves throughout the poem to conceivably include all of mankind in his persona. These assumptions allow a wide range of readers to identify with his voice and thus be won over by his nationalistic agenda. In

the case of “Song of Myself” this agenda is the brotherhood of the diversity of man. In the case of his Civil War writings it is to champion the brotherhood and sisterhood of Americans and thereby create national harmony and unity.

Frost and Whitman share the role as bridge maker between the past and the ever evolving present. However, Frost’s methods are a bit different. Whereas Whitman stood next to his readers, Frost positions himself outside and away from the poem. Frost conceives the lyrical “I” in his poetry to be not a phantasm of the reader’s projection of Robert Frost; rather the “I” is meant to be representative of the reader. Similar to the “I” in Whitman, this “I” is reinvented by the reader during each and every subsequent reading of the poem.

Throughout the poetry of Robert Frost, including A Further Range, we confront a speaker who routinely withdraws himself from society to seek the solace of the wilderness. This speaker does not, however, leave never to return. Even in the emptiness of the wilderness the work of others can be seen signifying a presence. For example, in “The Wood-pile” the speaker is technically alone in the wilderness but the drama of the poem centers around the presence of a marker (a pile of chopped wood) that signifies another person.

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled--and measured, four by four by eight.
And not another like it could I see.

No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.
And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
Or even last year's or the year's before.
The wood was grey and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
What held it though on one side was a tree
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
These latter about to fall. I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labour of his axe,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay¹³.

Textual clues, such as the intricacy of the act of cutting and piling the wood and the play on the word cord, suggest an analogy between the speaker's attempt to rationalize the presence of the woodpile and the reader's attempt to make sense of the poem. For example, the physical shape of the wood is reminiscent of a poem that is also deliberately measured and the laborer who creates it (the poet) is also never found near his work. Frost is suggesting that there is a link between the poet who creates the poem and the

¹³ Robert Frost, *The Wood-Pile* North of Boston

reader who finds the poem and struggles to interpret it; the link is to be found in the labor associated with the act of creation and the act of interpretation.

The analogy suggests more about the social nature of the relationship between the poet, poem and reader. A “cord” delineates not only the dimensions of the cut wood but is a homonym with the word “chord”. When we read the former we hear the latter word and must reconcile that sound with our analysis of the poem. As a noun it describes a harmony that is created when multiple notes are played simultaneously. As a verb the word means to bring agreement or to reach an accord. All of these variations are implied in the one word both acting as a chord and demanding the reader come to some accord with it. What Frost has described as a “momentary stay against confusion¹⁴” is here found when the reader interprets the various meanings of the word “cord”. At first the reader understands only one definition of the word and even if only shortly thereafter recognizes the second and then third definition. With each moment that passes the interpretative process is undermined and then reestablished only to be replaced by confusion again. The process rewards casual and close readers alike with a “stay against confusion”. While momentary, this reassurance represents an order the reader has imposed on the poem. This acts as an affirmation of independence as well as an induction into the reading public of Robert Frost and hence the creation of a community. In thinking about how poetry and the act of reading poetry can function as a tool of nation building we must

¹⁴ “It [the poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and 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.” – Robert Frost, *The Figure a Poem Makes*

consider the poetry and the reading of it not merely as the representations of action but as actions themselves. In so doing we must then discuss not just how the speaker of poems is solitary, and in what ways that speaker opens up the exclusiveness of that solitude to the readers, but also how the very act of reading poetry is itself both a solitary and a communal act.

Section Three: Whitman, War and National Harmony

[the civil war's] interior history will not only never be written, its practicality, minutia of deeds and passions, will never be even suggested. The actual Soldier of 1862-'65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits, practices, tastes, language, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp -- I say, will never be written -- perhaps must not and should not be. (Whitman, 3)

Understanding the goal of Whitman and Frost to create a community of readers over time my next step will be to illustrate the differences between the poets in the tools they use to connect with a future reader and thereby create that community. Whitman's attempts to create this readership lie in his portrayal of and proximity to the body, specifically the injured bodies of the soldiers in the American Civil War. Ultimately, Whitman positions himself close to the reader to direct the interpretative process. Frost, in contrast, creates contraries (both in dialogue and in the poem itself) that require active positioning by the reader in response to that contrary. For both authors, this textual positioning is an inherently political and social act as it allies the reader with others who share a common interpretative stance.

Whitman's most overt project to connect to the unborn masses of Americans may perhaps be his "Memoranda During the War." While not literally speaking a poem, it contains many of the same conventions he uses in his poetry to attempt to unite his experiences with those of his future readers. The word "memoranda" literally means "it is to be remembered" and "a note to help the memory... esp for future consideration and

use¹⁵.” For Whitman, these memoranda were taken by the bedsides of wounded soldiers and their needs were written down to remind him of the act that he must do in the future to help comfort the soldier. Be it write a letter to his family or secure some of his favorite tobacco, these acts to be done later were for Whitman part of the healing process. As they appear to us, from Whitman, they are acting again as a reminder of something that we ought to do in the future to help heal the nation. “The present Memoranda may furnish a few stray glimpses into that life, and into those lurid interiors of the period, never to be fully convey'd to the future. For that purpose, and for what goes along with it, the Hospital part of the drama from '61 to '65, deserves indeed to be recorded ” (Whitman, 3). In reading these memoranda the reader undergoes an imaginative exercise whereby, with the direction of Whitman, that reader re-experiences the injuries inflicted on the bodies of the soldiers. And, like Whitman, that reader moves on from having experienced that injury anew and must, in some way that honors the fresh sacrifice of that body, work to continue to renew the common ties of the American nation.

These “few stray glimpses” originate from the notebooks Whitman used at the bedside of the wounded soldier. As they are presented to us as in “Memoranda” they appear in a revised form as either a daily account or short narrative tale. Whitman separates the Memoranda into different spectacles or “fragments” of experience with each fragment following another and the interpretative processes that accompany reading the consecutive fragments is much like creating order from chaos. Each fragment is equivalent to one of his notebooks or, as we experience it, his edited and revised version

¹⁵ OED Etymology A and B.1a

of the notebook. The focus is on one day, or one small story, or a building, or a soldier, or the president, yet within each fragment he begins with a large whole, a crowd of people, a mass of wounded bodies, and then begins to structure intimate space within the text. Whitman frames these isolated fragments of narrative, as he does with his poetry, to create a private, privileged space between the speaker and reader. In the creation of this space he immerses the reader in the chaos of the moment so that the reader must create order and meaning out of the chaos. Both the reader and Whitman become active participants and witnesses to the performance of the text.

In the “fragment” labeled “Feb.23, Whitman describes the “great hospital at the Patent Office” simultaneously as a “vast area” and as being “crowded close with rows of sick, badly wounded and dying soldiers”. The area is both open and crowded, and therefore it becomes immediately a scene of chaos, of confusion. He announces his purpose to the reader, which then becomes the reader’s purpose as well, “to soothe and relieve particular cases.” He describes how the wounded are crowded in between two very large glass cases that are also, “crowded with models in miniature of every kind of utensil, machine or invention, it ever enter'd into the mind of man to conceive”. The patent office seems a particularly telling scene to analyze. As an institution it serves the function of copyright or formalizing the right to profit from an invention. The reader can’t help but question, given the proximity of the wounded soldiers to the inventions, both in narrative and physically in the imagined scene Whitman lays out for the reader, who retains the right to profit from the injured bodies produced by the war. Furthermore the office proper, and as it exists in the narrative we encounter, serve to make record of

the various artifacts. This is to suggest that not every invention retains its novelty forever but they still remain categorized in the records office.

Whitman's narrative continues by sectioning out the chaos of the scene dividing it into two categories, the dying men, and the inventions. Both are on display, but the bodies of the men are not enclosed within glass cases; they are near at hand, and able to be touched. The text creates a division between man's mind and man's body, with the latter suffering while the former bears witness. This dichotomy is paralleled between the mind of the reader, and the body of the prose. Whitman begins then to portray, using on a narrative level the structural consideration he adopts for the whole work, disconnected fragments that the reader must sew together in his mind.

Having described the relation of the scene panoramically, and then having divided the scene into two categories of being, mind and body, Whitman goes on to describe the position of the reader and speaker on a grid axis, both vertically, with the towering high glass cases, and horizontally with the lateral rows of wounded bodies.

Between these cases are lateral openings, perhaps eight feet wide, and quite deep, and in these were placed the sick; besides a great long double row of them up and down through the middle of the hall. Many of them were very bad cases, wounds and amputations¹⁶.

The movement of the mind, within the glass cases, is upwards, while the bodies of the dying men spread out, and over. After situating the reader thusly, Whitman then relays a series of short images, which in their movement and brevity seem to mimic the actions of a speaker who looks at what he describes: "The glass cases, the beds, the forms lying

¹⁶ Walt Whitman, Fragment 27 *Specimen Days*

there, the gallery above, and the marble pavement under foot". These short images focus at first on objects that surround, panoramically, and then they look up and then down, situating the reader with Whitman, before he quickly moves to relating "-- the suffering, and the fortitude to bear it in various degrees." The men's suffering is described as if it were another physical object present alongside the others named.

-- occasionally, from some, the groan that could not be repress'd -- sometimes a poor fellow dying, with emaciated face and glassy eye, the nurse by his side, the doctor also there, but no friend, no relative -- such were the sights but lately in the Patent Office. The wounded have since been removed from there, and it is now vacant again¹⁷.

Whitman brings the reader close to himself and the wounded bodies, close enough to perceive the groan of pain, or the gaunt expression of sickness, or the "glassy eye" of death, from a lonely soldier separated from his family, and then he removes the experience, leaving nothing but an empty vacancy in the mind of the reader. The short bursts of rapid narrative description followed immediately by the image of emptiness, leaves the reader feeling empty from the sudden loss of the dead soldiers, recreating in the reader the loneliness and emptiness that the soldiers, dying unnamed and away from their families and homes, felt.

These fragments of experience exist within a privileged space of intimacy that Whitman creates for the reader. Whitman takes careful, painstaking steps to transfer the actual dramatic action from the real experience to the page and into the imagination of his readers. His emphasis on touch and tactile sensation is one of those steps. And his

¹⁷ ibid

privileging of that sense is caused by his belief that, through touch, the experience will replay itself. We must consider this in light of his protestations that the “real war” will never get in the books. We can then conceive of the act of writing as producing not necessarily words to be read, but the dramatic enactment of the words within the imagination of the reader. This dramatic enactment within the imagination of the reader recreates the actual scenes of suffering under the direction of Whitman. Using Whitman’s writings as sort of a screenplay, the reader enters the scene and embodies the lyrical “I” that Whitman created and bears witness to the scene anew. So while the “real” war stays in the past, a recreation of that war and a recreation of the acts of sacrifice by the soldiers of that war renews itself within the imagination of a future reader who becomes, as Whitman was, a caretaker of the legacy of that sacrifice.

The introduction of “Memoranda During the War” serves as an advertisement for the authenticity of the documents in the reader’s hands by describing the proximity of the texts to the actual bodies of the wounded and dying soldiers.

I leave them just as I threw them by during the War, blotch'd here and there with more than one blood-stain, hurriedly written, sometimes at the clinique, not seldom amid the excitement of uncertainty, or defeat, or of action, or getting ready for it, or a march.

(Whitman, 1)

It is interesting to note here that Whitman uses the present tense, “leave”, instead of “left”, when he is referring to the notebooks he used. He does this because he wants the

actual notebooks he used to be considered as physically the same as the copy of the book in the reader's hands. It is his emphasis on touch. "I leave them just as I threw them," is to say as much about the notebooks as about the writing of "Memoranda." He leaves them on the page, and wants us to consider the text we hold in our hand as having been stained with the blood of the soldiers. Whitman went so far as to promote his "Memoranda" in *The New Republic* by saying that each copy had been "handled" by the author (Miller, 2). It is in this way that Whitman hopes that his associations with the text will become ours, and that when he, after many years, returns to them, he remains a part of the drama and action as much now as he was then; so too, he hopes, will the reader. "Even these days, at the lapse of many years, I can never turn their tiny leaves, or even take one in my hand, without the actual army sights and hot emotions of the time rushing like a river in full tide through me" (Whitman, 1). The "actual images" relive themselves producing again the "hot emotions" within him as if he were actually living the experiences again. Whitman wants this blood to stand in for more than just the few soldiers whose blood fell upon the pages of his memoranda, but rather every soldier who died during the war, whether north or south, whether in the field or in the hospital:

Out of them arise active and breathing forms. They summon up, even in this silent and vacant room as I write, not only the sinewy regiments and brigades, marching or in camp, but the countless phantoms of those who fell and were hastily buried by wholesale in the battle-pits, or whose dust and bones have been since removed to the National Cemeteries of the land.

Whitman, 1

The "countless phantoms" of the physical bodies who were "hastily buried by wholesale in the battle-pits" are as included in our imaginations and as connected to the blood on

the page as the soldiers in the hospital and the ones buried in “the National cemeteries.” This effort to reconcile the localized wounds of the war, to help justify the death of so many men, takes the form of a deliberate construction of a national consciousness.

For Whitman, it is in the commodification of these bodies that the nation is reborn. Elaine Scarry states in her The Body in Pain that in the economy of war, success and failure are measured in terms of dead and wounded bodies. For Scarry, the injured soldiers even after the formal close of the war function as signs pointing to the acts of loss which substantiate the abstract notion of nation.

...but the legitimacy of the outcome [of war] outlives its end because so many of its participants are frozen in a permanent act of participation: that is, the winning issue or ideology achieves for a time the force of material “fact” by the sheer material weight of the multitudes of damaged and opened human bodies. (Scarry, 62)

It is through an interesting reappropriation of those wounded and dead soldiers that Whitman’s poetry becomes empowered time and again to retell and reinforce nationalistic ideology. The temporal limits Scarry notes on the victory won “for a time” are circumnavigated by Whitman when he encases the vignettes of the dying and wounded soldiers in his writing. In the act of reading they re-emerge as injured and suffering bodies again, which function to reinscribe national harmony. For Scarry, it is the site of injury that acts as signifier and the nation approaches it as interpreter similar to the way a reader must interpret the words of Whitman’s memoranda. The nation of Whitman’s time approached the presence of those signifiers differently than modern

readers and his most immediate project was to “bind” those wounds through the ties of a normalizing interpretive process.

That process has different implications for the Whitmanian past readers who had to undergo it with the physical presence of the wounded bodies and modern readers who undergo it with the dramatic re-imagined injury. Both readers are tasked with contextualizing the presence of those injuries within their conception of their American Nation. Scarry’s notion of “perceptual reversal” seems to have interesting implications given the context of the American Civil War. She writes, “The losing country must erase part of the slate and begin to re-imagine itself, re-believe in, re-understand, re-experience itself as an intact entity, but one not having some of the territorial or ideological attributes it had formerly” (Scarry, 93) Whereas, in a war between two countries the “winner and loser’ are distinct nations before and after the conflict, in a civil war you have a divided country that when it reunites has both lost and won the war. The methods of interpretation differ for the post-war north and south and Whitman’s contemporary unification project was to help manage the discourse of the wound by imagining America’s lose of Northern Soldier or Southern Soldier as a loss for both sides. At the same time both north and south are tasked with assigning a value to that loss. The injured body becomes a signifier for what the war cost, to be sure, but there must exist in the national imaginary an ideological worth assigned to that loss. In other words, what did the American nation gain through the act of war? If the United States of America was both winner and loser in the Civil War then what did the nation win? Whitman’s emphasis on recreating the bodies is done in part to recreate the wounds and the

signification process they begin. In this way the process of assigning a value to those wounds and the national interrogations that follow are constantly refreshed.

The modern reader comes to the injured bodies through an imaginative reconstruction that reproduces the wound, the signifier of the war and its costs, without the same familiarity that it would have for Whitman's contemporary readers. Scarry writes on a particular aspect of the temporality of injuries as signifiers: "Injuries-as-signs point both backward and forward in time. On the one hand they make perpetually visible an activity that is past, and thus have a memorialization function. On the other hand they refer forward to the future to what has not yet occurred, and thus have an as-if function" (Scarry, 121). The "memorialization" and "as if" functions are embodied within the signifier-wound and the readers of that signifier must interpret not only what the wound memorializes but also what the wound has created. Scarry later calls the "as if" function a "fiction-generating" or "reality-conferring" function. The wound resides in the human body, Scarry would argue, and therefore has an urgency of the real as the body is the source of all that we experience as real. In this way the soldiers' wounds act simultaneously to cause the reader to question what was created by the war (undivided America) while simultaneously instantiating that abstract concept by the presence of the wounded bodies. The "physicality" of the bodies within the text prompts the reader to engage in acts of imaginative reconstruction to fill the void of their loss by reinscribing the unified nation as that which was gained by the sacrifice of the body. The temporality of those imaginings is in the perpetual present as the reader interacts with the text.

Whitman's choice of the genre of "Memoranda" and his emphasis on letter writing are two ways that he authorizes the reader to act as agents to construct that concept of nation.

These memoranda not only describe the act of letter writing but also function as a letter. While the notebooks that inspired them were originally a collection of notes that Whitman used to remind himself to do certain things for the comfort of the wounded soldiers, the "Memoranda" we experience is a public document reminding readers to do (or imagine) certain things for the nation which they thereby help constitute. The difference in the text itself may be minute at times but in the way that text functions on the imaginary of the reader the difference is profound. As a signifier for the person who writes a memoranda the signifieds are much clearer. For instance, when Whitman reads the memoranda that he writes to pick up tobacco or write a telegram to a soldier's mother his imaginary is flooded with the images and sounds and emotions he has already felt surrounding that particular case. However, these specific signifieds are likely not available to the readership of the memoranda outside of Whitman. These specific acts of sacrifice exist so far outside the realm of knowable experience for the reader that the process of recreating them relies exclusively on the direction of Whitman and his lyrical voice. This voice, whose testimony has been authorized by the physical bloodstains of the soldiers, empowers the reader to become a co-witness to the events thereby sharing in Whitman's authority. The reader has no choice but to operate under Whitman's assumptions and create not only the scene that the author describes but also the emotional response that that kind of scene demands. The reading public imagines for themselves that which Whitman describes. In so doing that readership summons up as best they can

the imaginings of dying and wounded soldiers who call on, in the absence of Whitman, the reader himself to fulfill the role of comforter and healer. At this point the act of interpretation has ceased and the reader has become Whitman in the sense that he or she is now author of the moment and has adopted the role of healer and comforter. Further, Whitman's role in writing "Memoranda" was also to carry on a testament of the sacrifice of those soldiers. So too must the reader take on that role to continue to honor their sacrifices.

Whitman wrote many letters, for many dying soldiers, sometimes because they physically couldn't write because of injuries, but also, as Wynn Thomas notes, in his article "Fratricide and Brotherly Love: Whitman and the Civil War," because many could not read or write.

The semiliterateness of many of the ordinary soldiers, which made them ill at ease with the written word, was another factor preventing their experiences from finding an effective voice. But if they needed a scribe, they also needed an interpreter—someone who could faithfully translate the reality of their situation into terms distant non combatants could comprehend imaginatively as well as intellectually.

(Thomas, 34)

The soldiers, in their need for basic communication to their families, further empower Whitman to act, as Thomas suggests, as their interpreter both to convey the pertinent information about the events that transpired, and also to reaffirm their emotional bonds with their loved ones from whom the war has separated them. "When eligible, I encourage the men to write, and myself, when call'd upon, write all sorts of letters for

them, (including love letters, very tender ones)” (PAGE ME). Whitman takes pains to glorify and honor the sacrifice of those who die, as well as those who are but wounded. For example, take the soldier who, “Wants a telegraphic message sent to his wife, New Canaan, Ct.”; Whitman sends the telegram, but also sends a letter of reassurance and comfort almost immediately: “but to make things sure, I also sit down and write the wife a letter, and dispatch it to the post-office immediately, as he fears she will come on, and he does not wish her to, as he will surely get well.” The individual suffering of the soldier as it is presented to us in Whitman’s writing works to form an evolving national conception of the war, and our continued reading of the memoranda renews our sense of unified commitment to the previous acts of sacrifices by the soldiers of this nation.

Whitman conceives of his “Memoranda,” from the introduction, as an instrument of creating national unity. For him it stands in place of “centuries of native passion, first-class pictures, tempests of life and death” and becomes an “inexhaustible mine for the histories,” by virtue of the suffering of the actual soldier whose blood has soaked the page and whose lips have empowered the speaker. The history, however, as he conceives it, exists not necessarily within the text, but within the understanding of the minds of Americans, “for all future America.” The way that readers of Whitman’s work perceive the sacrifice of their soldiers in this war will affect the bonds of national unity. The memoranda are far more authentic and more powerful than fiction because of their proximity to the wounded and the dead: “(far more grand, in my opinion, to the hands capable of it, than Homer's siege of Troy, or the French wars to Shakespeare)” (Whitman, 2). And to understand the contradiction of the work as more powerful, and

with more agency, than regular fiction, and yet simultaneously as a work of fiction (an imagined reconstruction of the past injury,) is to understand how, for Whitman, it is within the imagination of the reader that the lived experience and suffering of the past renews as a living history.

Section Four: Robert Frost and the Politics of Ambivalence

“There is one qualifying fact always to bear in mind: there is a kind of success called 'of esteem' and it butters no parsnips. It means a success with the critical few who are supposed to know. But really to arrive where I can stand on my legs as a poet and nothing else I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands. . . . I want to be a poet for all sorts and kinds.”
(Robert Frost)

Whitman demonstrates his understanding of the limits of writing in his poem from Leaves of Grass entitled “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.” He writes, “For it is not what I have put into it that I have written this book,/ Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it, /” The reader does not simply read these texts, but is forced to imagine these spectacles as Whitman imagined them. In the reading process the reader is placed, as Whitman was, kneeling by the bedside of a dying soldier. This move by Whitman is central to the nationalism present in his text. Whitman attempts to honor the idealized independence of Americans in a national portrayal by accepting all readers into his conception of self but he fails to allow his readers the choice to define what is American. Frost’s poetry, like Whitman’s, demands interpretative acts by a future reader to reinforce a conception of nation but does so without placing the reader in the same position as the poet “I” or defining in advance what that conception should be. Whitman forces the reader to define self in relation to the poetic “I” and to the others that “I” absorbs. Frost also allows the reader the freedom to read the poem casually without necessarily resolving the contradiction present. Simply put, Whitman compels the reader to interpret as Whitman would whereas Frost allows for the freedom of interpretation.

Frost follows in the Whitmanian tradition by actively constructing his poems to include the reader. However, he does so without positioning the reader as poet or defining in advance what his reader's conception of America should be. While Whitman's poems force the reader to define self in relation to others, innately a political and social move, Frost's poetry places similar tropes in front of the reader but does so without prejudicing the reader's decisions by overtly favoring one side. Frost's poems also allow the reader the freedom to read the poem casually without necessarily resolving the contradictions present. The national rhetoric is not as one-sided as in Whitman's poetry. Frost posits both sides of the dialectic without necessarily committing to either side. For Frost, the reader's involvement in the poem is not so much about bringing the reader back in time to kneel by the dying and wounded soldiers as it is to reconcile a conflict inside of the reader's imagination.

This conflict is established through the presence of contraries within the poem that the reader is forced to reconcile in order to make sense of them. In positioning himself in relation to the conflicting image or idea, be it on one side or the other, both sides or neither, the reader is setting up boundaries of his or her own beliefs and ideas and differentiating himself from others. In such a way, the reader asserts his individual independence while at the same time becoming a part of a larger social whole that agrees or disagrees with that position. Nation, indeed society, as Frost conceives it is made up of people in dialogue with each other. The foundation of that dialogue is oppositional. While that may suggest to some a discord it is in fact those opposing voices and viewpoints which create harmony.

The dramatic dialogues of Frost exemplify this strategy because these poems contain not only speakers and their sounds (as he does in his lyrics) but also a preliminary reader of those sounds in the form of another character in the poem. An interesting case study is found in the poem “Mending Wall.” Arguably, the dialogue is limited in this poem. Unlike “Home Burial,” or even “West-running Brook,” most of the conversation is one sided. The neighbor’s responses to the speaker are extremely limited, but it is perhaps because of this limitation that we have a good example of the dichotomy that these dialogues create and the negotiations the reader must then have with the text as he attempts to position himself in relationship to that dichotomy.

The speaker and his neighbor represent two different polemics in debate. The philosophical ruminations of the speaker play against the staunch conservatism of a neighbor in a drama that unfolds for the reader. While the majority of critical debate surrounding this particular poem centers around which character the poet invariably sides with. It is in fact the interplay between the two voices that deserves more critical attention. Frost recalls at Bread Loaf in 1955 how the future president of Rollins College approached him about this poem.

[H]e took both my hands to tell me I had written a true international poem. And just to tease him I said “How do you get that?” You know, I said I thought I’d been fair to both sides—both national [and international]. “Oh no,” he said, “I could see what side you were on.” And I said: “The more I say I the more I always mean somebody else.” That’s objectivity, I told him. That’s the way we talked about it, kidding. That’s where the great fooling comes in. But my latest way out of it is to say: I’ve got a man there; he’s both [of those people but he’s man—both of them he’s] a wall builder and a wall toppler. He makes boundaries and he breaks boundaries. That’s man. (Cook, 82-3)

The speaker in the poem philosophizes about the necessity of a wall that constantly crumbles and needs re-construction every spring. The irony here is that despite his interrogations about the wall the speaker initiates the reconstruction effort every year; that initiation suggests that, while the speaker is opposed to the idea of the wall, he desires, if only half consciously, to “set the wall between us [them] once again”. This desire for division arises not from practicality, for as the speaker says: “There where it is we do not need the wall: /he is all pine and I am apple orchard”. Rather, this need for division arises from a more intangible need for the speaker to define himself in opposition to his neighbor. The poetical division between the two characters occurs through the way that the speaker labels his neighbor and represents two apparently different approaches to the task of rebuilding.

The liberal-minded speaker of this poem takes a whimsical and know-it-all tone as if he believes it is his role to instruct his neighbor about his annual folly in re-building the wall. He is attempting to “put a notion in his (neighbor’s) head” by his inferences and his capricious remarks about the nature and purpose of building walls that nature itself seems to want to bring down. He further represents his neighbor as one who is contented to rebuild the wall annually merely because it is what he has always done and his reasoning is justified and packaged in an adage inherited from his father. The neighbor needs no more logic than “good-fences make good-neighbors”. This proverbial wisdom is in form very similar to but in content very different from the speaker’s “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,/ that wants it down.” Both characters rely on proverbial phrases that possess Frost’s “Sound of Sense.” Here we have two sounds that are

championing different philosophies and different political outlooks: the liberal speaker who demands change and the conservative neighbor who relishes the rituals of the past. Furthermore, these statements (the sense within the sound) as embodied by the different characters are processed by the opposing characters before the reader. We react to the neighbor's "good fences make good neighbors" only after the speaker does and have to account for his disapproval before we do. Following that we can only process the speaker's claim that "something there is that doesn't love a wall," in the face of the neighbor's refusal to respond.

The different forces [to build and to break down boundaries] as expressed by the different characters while in opposition do reach a certain accord within the poem. For example, consider how at various points throughout the poem, the "something that doesn't love a wall" is configured as something natural ("ground swell"), something distinctly human ("the work of hunters") and something supernatural ("elves"). The first force, and the most powerful because of its inevitability, represents the constantly changing world. The landscape in which man constructs his physical world is subject to many changes that will forcibly undermine man's attempts at permanency. The speaker toys with this idea suggesting at times that it is futile to resist such pressure from the world and also implying that there is an as of yet unattained harmony to be had between man, his environment, and other men, and that harmony ought to be sought after. Furthermore, it would seem that the speaker laments the fact that this harmony cannot come to being in a world where men continue to reconstruct their boundaries. However,

this idealized natural harmony is contrasted with a brutal world when we explore what else can happen when you topple a wall.

The wall is figured as a deliberate human construction fulfilling specific human needs. And so, “The work of hunters” is an especially provocative set of images because the deconstructive force is distinctly human. It is important to remember that the speaker is not the hunters to whom he refers in this line. The wall is his and it fulfills his needs (even if he spends most of the poem toying with its destruction) and not the hunters’. If the wall serves as a division, which enables identification by the distinctions one can make between the divided, then the hunters represent the pressure a society exerts on its members to conform. These hunters tear down the wall, and thus destroy the barriers between the self and other members of that society. Remember that the hunters do this to “please the yelping dogs,” and not out of necessity. We can assume they do not live off the meat of the rabbit. Rather, we feel sympathy for the rabbit that is no longer able to hide behind the defenses of the wall. And when the hunters reveal the timid rabbit that was hiding in the brickwork to the howling and hungry hounds that have sniffed him out the reader cringes. The rabbit is a metaphor for what we would like to shield from the outside world. The hunters, other humans, seek this out and work to expose and exploit it.

Finally, the speaker fancies that the *something* that doesn’t love the wall is supernatural in origin:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,

But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather

He said it for himself¹⁸.

The speaker is trying to distinguish himself from his neighbor by suggesting that he is capable of these imaginative leaps outside preexisting formulas. The wall represents both physical and mental divisions between people and this coy desire that the speaker expresses about his neighbor and what his neighbor would say is similar to his gesture to let the wall remain fallen between them. It is only half made by a voice playing devil's advocate. In fact, these walls are under constant revision by each generation that makes them. Further, the walls separate the men, and by doing so, work to establish their individual identities and inform their collective group identity as repairers of the wall.

The neighbor's reason for desiring the rebuilding of the wall is highlighted by the line "He will not go behind his father's saying". In other words, he will not logically analyze what support, if any, this saying has but enjoys the adage for the value it has in helping him respond to the speaker and for the connection it maintains to his father. This frustrates what Richard Poirier regards as the speaker's attempt to make meaningful conversation with his neighbor. These attempts falter in the face of the neighbor's stony resistance.

Though the speaker may or may not think that good neighbors are made by good fences, it is abundantly clear that he likes the yearly ritual, the yearly 'outdoor game' by which fences are made. Because if fences do not 'make good neighbors' the making of fences can. More is 'made' in this 'outdoor game' than fences. The two men also 'make' talk, or at least that is what the speaker tries to do as against the reiterated assertions of his companion, which are as heavy and limited as the wall itself. (Poirier, 105)

¹⁸ Lines 35-8

But that wall signifies both individuality, by its division of their land and contrast of their attitudes about it, and cooperation, as two men engaged in the “mending” share physical labor by re-constructing the wall. While the speaker may not find the companion he desires his neighbor to be, he does, through the process of labor, begin to understand his neighbor through a process of negation, i.e. he is not me. This is the opposite of Whitman’s technique which is the identification with the speaker as the reader and the assumptions of the speaker as the assumptions of the reader.

Whitman and Frost have at the center of their agendas the creation of a poetics that develops a framework for the nation and yet will allow for the individuals of that nation to feel independent. Both poets want their readers to feel as if they have the freedom to be themselves and that those individual selves are connected to the rest of the nation. Whitman and Frost go about this differently. Whitman maintains that his voice is representative of the individuals of the nation through a rhetoric of inclusion. Since all are accepted and loved in Whitman’s poetical self it is easy to identify with. The reader can identify only with some of the claims that Whitman makes for his poetical self but in so doing is thereby connected with the rest of the nation, which has also been included in Whitman’s poetical self. This method, however, only allows for interpretive acts that the poet has anticipated. Frost, on the other hand, sets up contraries and conflicts that the reader can ignore or attempt to resolve. In either case, the freedom of the reader to interpret is preserved. In attempting to resolve the conflicts that arise from the presence of the contraries within the poem the reader positions himself with and against other interpretations that the poem allows for. In this case, and even if the reader chooses not to

attempt to resolve the conflict that the poem presents, the reader chooses a position in relation to the poem and that positioning is inherently a political move because each reader assumes a relationship to other readers whose interpretations may differ. Frost's attempts at building a national poetics are far less overt than Whitman's attempts. Frost's anticipation of all kinds of readers in the availability of his poetry demonstrates calculation that allows and encourages various reading practices. This availability in his poetry privileges the individual reader while connecting him or her with a larger reading public.

Chapter Two: Poetic Belief and Building Soil

Section One: Politics and the Sound of Self

“The thought I have, and my first impulse is
To take to market- I will turn it under.
The thought from that thought- I will turn it under.
And so on to the limit of my nature.”

Robert Frost *Build Soil- A Political Pastoral*

Robert Frost's sixth book A Further Range was received harshly by critics who disapproved of these poems for failing to live up to their expectations of Frost in light of his previous work. In particular, contemporary critics singled out the parody of Vergil's first eclogue "Build Soil—A Political Pastoral" as a moment of particular failure. The critics categorized Frost's most recent publication as an ineffectual jaunt into the realm of politics. He was attacked in the *Partisan Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation* and again in *The New Masses* here Rolfe Humphries wrote of the volume that "The further range to which Frost invited himself is an excursion into the field of political didactic, and his address is unbecoming.....A Further Range? A further shrinking" (Humphries, 41-2). Perhaps most interesting of the charges levied against the volume, and "Build Soil" in particular, were the criticisms against his voice.

And it is precisely here (in the poem "Build Soil—A Political Pastoral"), where one would naturally have looked for the strongest writing, that the manner seems to break down completely. The voice is still the voice of Frost, it is true, and all the tricks are here: but the diction is faded, the expression imprecise and the tone

extraordinarily tired and uneasy. It is a strange thing that Robert Frost, pondering the problem of a sick society, should suddenly become ineffectual.... (Fitts, Dudley 520)

It has been suggested that Robert Frost's "political" poems did not receive a fair hearing at the time because he was writing against socialism and counter to the then current political thinking. "Frost's Poetry in the early thirties ran deeply against the grain of what was being said and written in intellectual circles..." (Parini, 287). Part and parcel of reading Frost is negotiating the contraries he establishes within the poem. It seems that his initial incursion into politics is no different. He positions the ideology of the poem in contrast with the dominant politics. "...though we granted from all that was argued about 'Build Soil' that Frost's views were not our views and his faith—whatever it was—differed from ours. And in terms of political practice and program, we were probably on opposing sides" (Burnshaw, 53). This would become *modus operandi* for Frost who, despite becoming an iconic national symbol laurelled with four Pulitzer prizes, a congressional medal of honor, the title Poet Laureate as well as being a consultant in poetry to the library of congress, would maintain this contrary politic by aligning himself against the mainstream political thinking.¹⁹ In the grasp of the great depression the ideas and ideologies of socialism appealed to a vast audience in America and the world perhaps because socialism seemed to many to be a much more pleasant alternative to fascism. The fact that Frost was promoting the Emersonian virtue of "Self-Reliance" did not seem

¹⁹ See "Frost's Politics and The Cold War" by George Monteiro for a description of Frost's activities as a cultural attaché to The Soviet Union and a description of his falling out with Kennedy as a result of some remarks he made upon his return.

to matter much to critics who, whatever their distaste for the sentiment, attacked Frost's use of voice in the poem.

To conceive of the poem "Build Soil-- A Political Pastoral" as a set of instructions alone would be imprecise at best. It not only prescribes a certain didactic as a remedy to protect individualist thought and existence in the modern era but acts as a kind of worksheet for it as well. That is to say in the reading of any poem the instructive didactic of metaphor and "building soil" is at work, but the unusually dense amount of Frostian nuance in this poem seems contrived to put that didactic to use. Laurence Perrine, in "The Meaning of Frost's 'Build Soil'", articulates this feature of the poem:

[Build Soil] modulates continuously through literal statement, irony, overstatement, metaphor and symbol, and it is not always easy to determine, in this mixture of seriousness and playfulness, the precise weight to attach to any given utterance." (Perrine, 230)

While I do not defend the early critics for their reception of this work it is understandable how a poem with this "mixture of seriousness and playfulness" (indeed characteristic of Frost's poetry) in such abundance and whose subject matter resonated with all Americans at a time of national crises (the great depression) was liable to incite a heated reaction from critics who perceived an attack on a philosophy which they believed would deliver them from the woes of economic hardships. The salvation of socialism was indeed interrogated by this poem.

The poem begins on a campus, probably representative of Amherst college where Frost was resident at the time and with Meliobeus, an interlocutor who becomes disciple,

interrogating Tityrus who represents Frost and in a broader sense the intellectual poet or academic. Meliobeus desires that the poet Tityrus who “live[s] by writing/ [his] poems on a farm and call[s] that farming”, use his profession to help make things better for him and by extension the common American man.

Why don't you use your talents as a writer

To advertise our farms to city buyers,

Or else write something to improve food prices.

Get in a poem toward the next election.

So not only are we oriented immediately to the role of professor and student but also the student has demanded a practical intervention from the intellectual. Yet even in the onset of the poem the questioner, Meliobeus, and the thinker, Tityrus, have different conceptions of the current state of things. For Meliobeus they are “revolutionary bad,” whereas Tityrus slyly suggests that they have yet to reach:

.....a depth

Of desperation that would warrant poetry's

Leaving love's alternations, joy and grief,

The weather's alternations, summer and winter,

Our age-long theme for the uncertainty

Of judging who is a contemporary liar—²⁰

Meliobesus sees the current state as typical of human affairs and will not indulge the over reactions of his companion. He is assured in this conviction presumably because as a well-read intellectual fluent in the rise and fall of human empires the current economic crunch has yet to reach the devastation and chaos necessary for a complete “revolution” in the social order the likes of which Meliobesus suggests. Meliobesus represents the panic present in the newspapers and the average American at the beginning of the Great Depression. Tityrus ignores his cries for a revolution or, more specifically a change to “socialism”, in part because he does not believe the times warrant a drastic revolution and also because his political beliefs won’t allow him to accept that sort of government. Tityrus is (as indeed was Frost) a stern believer in the Emersonian principle of self-reliance and as such can not accept the kind of “new deal” socialism as anything but destructive to the individual. The relationship between the freedom of the self and things being made free to use by all seems to be the central theme of their conversation. For Meliobesus defines what has been socialized as something that has been,

Made good for everyone—things like inventions---

Made so we all should get the good of them---

All, not just exploiting businesses²¹.

While Meliobesus may be talking about things like radios, washing machines and plastic, Tityrus takes him to mean much more abstractly things like ambition, greed and

²⁰ Ln 34-9

²¹ Ln 101-3

ingenuity. The last of which he ironically calls “the worst one of all to leave uncurbed.” It is clear that Tityrus is against the regulation of ingenuity even if it will “put ten thousand farmers out of sheep.” Yet, all three of these qualities, which are arguably the center of a capitalist society and represent the best and worst motives for invention, are also responsible for causing the financial crisis that America was in the middle of. Ingenious new credit schemes made by ambitious and greedy corporations allowed for an inflation of the market that eventually burst and took the stable economy with it. Logically, then, it would seem that all three of these culprits should be regulated as Meliobeus has suggested. Tityrus, on the contrary believes that the regulation of men is not what is required for:

Everyone asks for freedom for himself,

The man free love, the business man free trade,

The writer and talker free speech and free press²²,

And these freedoms, he argues, are what socialism will limit. He would rather ambition and greed be curbed in the political organizations. For as he says, “Political ambition has been taught,/ by being punished back, it is not free:” In this ironic twist Tityrus declares these qualities inherent in political systems, which are “just fool enough to think itself/ self-taught.” Further he declares to Meliobeus that “bounds should be set/ to ingenuity for being so cruel/ in bringing change unheralded on the unready.” Socialism, here, may be read as either that which sets the boundaries or the “unheralded” change.

²² Ln 119-21

These contrary views are often ascribed to each of the characters where Meliobeus represents the view that Socialism is necessary to regulate human behavior and where Tityrus represents the view that Socialism is an unwarranted change limiting human freedoms. As with the contrary viewpoints presented in “Mending Wall” and “West-Running Brook,” we are tempted to view these two characters as representative of two characters that conflict with each other and we are tempted to read the poem by trying to resolve that conflict with one viewpoint dominating the other. However, Frost once remarked to early biographer Lawrence Thompson in regard to his poem “Build Soil,” “Both those people in the dialogue are me.” This leads us to view the poem not as two conflicting viewpoints external to one another but as representative of a struggle of those viewpoints within the mind. Seen as such we can begin to conceive of the poem as not just a textual record of one man’s (Frost’s) deliberations about the benefits and drawbacks of socialist policies but also a deliberation that reoccurs for the readers as they react and responds to the poem’s deliberations. For example, the advice that Tityrus gives Meliobeus is to “Build Soil”:

Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself

Until it can contain itself no more,

But sweating-full drips wine and oil a little.

I will go to my run out social mind

And be as unsocial with it as I can.

The thought I have, and my first impulse is

To take to market--- I will turn it under.

The thought from that thought--- I will turn it under²³.

Not only is this sound advice for a farmer, to enrich the soil to yield a better crop, but it is sound advice for the critic. It resonates with the disinterestedness that Matthew Arnold championed for the critic in “The Function of Criticism at the Present time.” He writes, “Let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there (Arnold, 823). For the reader of poetry, especially Frost poetry, this turning of thought is a necessary step. In the process of unpacking a metaphor, of understanding it and its limitations, indeed the very act of analyzing poetry one undergoes this thought process. In the teaching of poetry in the classroom I often have to walk my students through this process of building soil although I had never thought of it as such. I might tell my students that to understand how the produce of the farm is and is not like the produce of the mind requires that one ask oneself, “How is a thinker like a farmer?” And further, “How is a thinker not like a farmer?” The first response would be something like, “They both produce something.” Indeed, but we don’t leave the metaphor thus as explained. In fact, it has been barely engaged. With prodding I might also find that both thinkers and farmers have to put in some form of labor, require some kind of training and use their produce as a means of survival. All of these are valid interrogations of the metaphor. Thinker and farmer are unlike for a number of reasons as well. Exploring how and when the metaphor breaks down is an important step. While a thinker and a farmer

²³ Ln 257-263

both use the produce of their labor for survival they do so in different ways. The farmer must bring his produce to a market and sell it. He then uses the money to buy whatever else he may need. But how does the thinker use his thoughts? He could sell them in the form of books but this is a rare type of thinker. What about a student in a college classroom learning about poetry? How does he make use of his thought as a means to survival? This question was one that Frost addressed several years before the publication of “Build Soil” in an address to an Alumni council at Amherst in 1930. In many ways this text, which has been published as “Education by Poetry,” is a precursor to “Build Soil”. In it Frost philosophizes about the role and value of poetry in instruction.

When Frost asserts that “education by poetry is education by metaphor,” he is not merely engaging in the defense of a profession and art form for his intrinsic interests. This is to say he declares this not merely because he was a teacher and a poet but because the value of this type of thinking extends beyond the poem and the classroom.

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, “grace metaphors”, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, “Why don’t you say what you mean?” We never do that, do we, being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and hints and in indirections—whether from diffidence or some other instinct²⁴.

Frost is quick to define the “we” as not just poets and students but also as scientists, citizens and politicians. In his appropriation of the sciences as an art of making metaphor he creates his own useful metaphor about the relationship between individual and mass society and the freedom of choice of that individual.

²⁴ *Education by Poetry* Frost, 719

You know that you can't tell by name what persons in a certain class will be dead ten years after graduation, but you can tell actuarially how many will be dead. Now, just so this scientist says of the particle of flying matter at a screen, striking a screen; you can't tell what individual particles will come, but you can say in general that a certain number will strike in a given time. It shows, you see, that the individual particles can come freely. I asked Bohr about that particularity, and he said, "yes, it is so. It can come when it wills and as it wills; and the action of the individual particle is unpredictable. But it is not so of the action of the mass. There you can predict." He says, "That gives the individual atom its freedom, but the mass its necessity"²⁵.

Perhaps, the objection Frost articulates as Tityrus against socialism stems from his understanding the system as addressing the masses before the individual. If it assumes failure in the masses it negates the individual's possibility of success. Frost would have us think first of the individual and personal before we begin to think of the national or the interpersonal. He starts this discussion at the alumni council but articulates it much more concisely in "Build Soil".

My friends all know I'm interpersonal

But long before I'm interpersonal

Away 'way down inside I'm personal.

Just so before we're international

We're national and act as nationals²⁶.

Frost wishes to conceive of personal and national identities as existing prior to any exchange between those identities. One knows and recognizes "I" before "we". However, one may object and say that this belief assumes that "I" can and does exist before "we".

²⁵ *Education by Poetry*, Frost 721-2

²⁶ Ln 157-161

Frost does not assume that we are not part of the society before we begin to identify ourselves. Surely, we have an identity imposed upon us before we can begin even to speak as a boy, as a son, as an American etc. Identity for Frost is a process of making and believing. To say I am an American is to create a metaphorical relationship between the two things; an individual and a conception of what an American is. By attempting to take apart that metaphor we would have to begin to question who it is we think we are as well as what characteristics we assign to your typical American. For Frost each facet of identity should be thought of as a color on a palette. Not because they necessarily exist as such but because in the thinking of them as such we may begin to come to an understanding of the many facets of ourselves.

The colors are kept unmixed on the palette
Or better on dish plates around the room,
So the effect when they are mixed on canvas
May seem almost exclusively designed²⁷.

Whatever portrait we are painting be it our own identities or our national or international ones Frost advises us to take possession of them by identifying the factors that contribute to the making of them. So, too as readers of poetry must we dissect the poem to its metaphors and images so we can put it back together with a better understanding of its meaning. We have more confidence when we read it the second time and then the third

²⁷ Ln 162-166

and so on. Frost is advocating a retreat into one's self as a way to juxtapose our individual nature against the masses.

We're always too much out or too much in.

At present form a cosmical dilation

We're so much out that the odds are against

Our ever getting inside in again²⁸.

When we are too much outside of ourselves we allow the other identities (be it as a thinker, person, or citizen) to overtake us and we are capable only of a reflection or a processing of what others have thought. This occurs to all individuals as they are attempting to whittle out a consciousness of an individual within a pre-existing society. For a person or a poet comes after and must negotiate with the voices and ideas of those who have come before him. Frost, championing Emerson (see the American Scholar,) declares that each thinker, each individual must work independently before beginning to function within the greater whole.

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

²⁸ Ln152-155

More wonderful, more beautiful producer²⁹?

The capitalist model of thought thus envisioned only disseminates the ideas of a few for consumption by the mass. The individual's ideas become overshadowed by the thoughts of others effectively halting the thinking process and, Frost is arguing, jeopardizing their status as individuals. But how in the face of a society that reinforces that economy of thought can an individual gain the necessary self confidence to not refrain from communal market practices and “Build Soil” with their thoughts?

For Frost, poetry as a genre enables the reader to practice the didactic that “Build Soil” suggests. This is because the genre's emphasis on metaphorical thinking is an interpretative process that undergoes constant revision. For Frost, the ability to maintain confidence in your ideas (especially as a reader of poetry) despite the constant reevaluation of those ideas that is required when one attempts to interpret the abstract concepts metaphor demands. Arriving to the point where one can question one's ideas while proceeding with confidence is tricky, however. Frost underwent a tremendous struggle creating and maintaining a belief in himself as a person and a poet.

²⁹ Ln 272-277

Section Two: Faith in the Face of Fear

“It [the poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and 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.”

– Robert Frost “The Figure a Poem Makes”

The epigraph to this chapter comes from a three page preface that Robert Frost wrote for a volume of his collected poems in 1939. Entitled “The Figure a Poem Makes,” the short essay sets up an analogy between love and poetry. Central to Frost’s proposition is a kind of Emersonian faith in the act of writing as a sacred activity. This poetic faith is in function very similar too religious faith but differs in form. While religious faith produces “great clarification” that is a “truth” for the many, poetic faith produces a more localized clarification which affords “truth” for the individual. Frost writes, “It (the poem) has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood.”³⁰ Frost sees this faith as an integral part not only of the composition of poetry but also in their consumption. During the act of writing the poet must have faith not only that his poem will in fact be read but also a faith that those who do read it will be affected by the words he left for them to find. Put another way the

³⁰ Library of America page 777

poet has to have faith that the “outcome” he arrives at after having composed the poem in some way survives the reading process and reproduces itself again at the time of reading.

Describing this effect later in the essay Frost suggests not only that this faith is necessary to preserve the effect of the poem but also that a genuine emotional response must be produced from the poet in the act of writing if he expects to elicit a similarly affective response from his reader. “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”³¹ Frost’s claims undermine the idea of a poet leading a reader through a literary journey and towards some conclusion or life lesson predetermined by the poet. Instead it repositions the poet as one standing next to the reader undergoing the same journey. While both poet and reader may be participating in the act of creating the poem they do so from different perspectives and as such have different reactions to that process of creating the poem. This is similar to how different readers may have different understandings of the same poem. However, Frost insists that the similarity lies in that both poet and reader have an affective (emotional) response to some stimulus that at the onset of the creation of the poem (whether creating it by writing the words or through the interpretation of them) was unforeseen.

So when Frost writes about his experiences writing poems in the following paragraph we can infer that he is creating an analogy between the poet’s experience and the reader’s experience. Frost begins by elaborating on the axiom he proffered earlier in the essay that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” He writes, “For me the initial delight is the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew. ... The

³¹ Ibid

impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when taken³²...” And so this delight is seemingly synonymous with the surprise he described earlier in that essay with the nuanced distinction that it must lead in some way to something familiar. The reader or poet come to the “something I didn’t know I knew” and having encountered that thing unexpectedly is surprised by the encounter and delighted by the familiarity at having rediscovered it. Taken literally, this feeling of rediscovery suggests that the reading or writing of a poem may help recover lost ideas, images or feelings that the poet or the reader had at one time thought, seen or felt. This delightful surprise then leads the reader and the poet to wisdom, or put another way, to insightful interpretations of past experiences. Frost provides us with an interesting analogy for this process of discovery and wisdom. He writes: “...like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick.” Readers (as much as writers) are the giants and their experiences are the experiences they have had with language. Few poems present to a skilled reader words which he has not seen before. His experience has prepared him in some extent for the interpretative process which he must undergo. Frost is saying that poetry instead of conforming to those experiences deviates from them and those readers (and writers) follow a path that is not necessarily paved with the boulders of expectation. This straight crookedness of the line across experience is so bent in part because a writer can’t always

³² Ibid.

identify the experiences that will produce the greatest effect on a reader. So for the poet that thing that you didn't know you knew, may find itself written into the poem unintentionally and its value to the poem may only be recognized later. The reader's "experience" in reading the poetry is not simply the experiences garnered while reading but the life experiences of that reader which resonate and inform the experience of that particular reading of the poem. In both cases, the writing and the reading of the poem, the labor of the poet and the reader is focused on the production of value.

"The Figure a Poem Makes" is a document attempting to secure the objective value of poetry through subjective means. It describes how we might think about the value of the poem by creating an analogy between poetry and love. Love is perhaps the most subjective and abstract concept that is applied to literature and poetry. There is no argument against the statement "I love this poem." Frost's attempt to equate a poem with love is itself a poetic exercise. Some clarifications on love as it relates to this discussion should prove useful in understanding how we can think about and talk about this analogy. Donald Sheehy's reading of "The Figure a Poem Makes" meticulously articulates the personal context of what "love" might mean for Robert Frost given the specific biographical circumstances of the poet during the time period he wrote the introduction. Sheehy reminds us in his "(Re)Figuring Love: Robert Frost in Crisis 1938-1942" that the introduction is a document best read in context: "Given its public occasion and its prose form, the preface has generally been taken as context rather than in context, as a timeless statement of poetics rather than as a timely poetic statement" (179-180). Sheehy reads this document in the context of the crisis that Frost was experiencing when he composed

the preface. That crisis was initiated by the recent death of his wife Elinor and was compounded by Frost's subsequent dependence on the attention and affection of Mrs. Kay Morrison. Sheehy analyzes the connection between Frost's mental stability as a person and a poet and his relationship with these two women. That is to say he finds a connection between Frost's labor as a poet to be directly related to the love the poet had for another person. Frost was feeling tremendously guilty over the death of Elinor in part because he felt as if he demanded too much of her physically and emotionally. This guilt was coupled with a prevailing sense of fear that without Elinor as an anchor to assuage his self doubt her death would also signify the death of his poetical career.³³ As such he latched on to Mrs. Kay Morrison the wife of a Harvard Professor with whom Frost was acquainted. In this new relationship he found the courage to continue writing his poetry and it was under these circumstances he wrote "The Figure a Poem Makes," and established the analogy between a poem and love. This reading of the document in the context of Frost's own life is both sensible and thought provoking. It is also, however, too biographical for our purposes here³⁴. Since the subject of this dissertation is how Frost's poetry contributes to the formation of a national consciousness in his readers then these connections between poem, labor and love are better understood in the context of the readers of Frost poetry.

The question becomes then, "How can we unpack the elements of the analogy Frost makes between love and poetry in the context of the various and often unknowable

³³ Sheehy, 191

³⁴ See Sheehy's article for a detailed description of the ways in which both Frost and Morrison attempted to influence Thompson's biography.

readers of Frosts poetry?” This question is complicated by the fact that our existing template for contextualizing the analogy comes from the intensely personal circumstances of Frost’s life. The “love” he compares a poem to, according to Sheehy is the love he felt for his wife Elinor or Mrs. Kay Morrison. This love in some way suppresses the fears and self doubts that Frost felt. Qualifying this fear and love in terms that can apply to the diverse readers of Frost’s poetry is a difficult task but it is also one that Frost spent a good deal of time considering himself in his writing and his speeches.

Almost ten years before he published the preface “The Figure a Poem Makes” Frost delivered a speech to the Amherst Alumni Council entitled “Education by Poetry” in which he appears to be developing some of the ideas he later expands upon in the former. In particular, Frost describes the *belief* that a student of poetry must cultivate.

The person who gets close enough to poetry, he is going to know more about the word *belief* than anybody else he knows, even in religion nowadays. There are two or three places where we know belief outside religion. One of them is at the age of fifteen to twenty, in our self-belief. A young man knows more about himself than he is able to prove to anyone. He has no knowledge that anybody else will accept as knowledge. In his foreknowledge he has something that is going to believe itself into fulfillment, into acceptance.³⁵

A student of poetry (and here I mean either a writer or a reader) must proceed in her endeavors confident of herself and her ability to create meaning through the acts of reading and writing. At the onset of her career she must believe that she has the ability to do this even though it has been untested. Further, at the twilight of her career she must retain this belief in face of the fear of faulty faculties, which is to say of “becoming

³⁵ Library of America page 726

rusty.” Through engagement with poetry, as described in the first few paragraphs of this section - with the surprising delight and the discovery and production of wisdom - confidence is achieved and self-belief grows. This self-belief is one facet of the belief that is cultivated by the student of poetry. For ease of explication we will term it here poetic-belief. Frost will proceed to categorize other aspects of the poetic-belief as the love-belief, the national-belief and the art (literary)-belief, respectively.

Frost’s description of the love-belief is probably the description that most easily lends itself to the comparisons made here. He defines the love belief as follows: “...the belief in someone else, a relationship of two that is going to be believed into fulfillment. That is what we are talking about in our novels, the belief of love. And the disillusionment that the novels are full of is the disillusionment in that belief. That belief can fail, of course.”³⁶ In the context of Frost’s life this love-belief in his wife Elinor propelled his self-belief. He gained strength from this bond to overcome his self-doubt and write his poetry confidently. When she died he was stricken with guilt and fear and perhaps even loneliness. In his relationship with Mrs. Kay Morrison he found his love-belief, and subsequently his self-belief, renewed once again. While I don’t mean to state that this relationship between the two types of belief is necessarily connected for everyone, it was the case with Frost. However, I would proffer that this love-belief can be either consummated, as in the case of Frost’s relationship with his wife Elinor, or remain platonic as in the case of Frost’s relationship with Mrs. Kay Morrison. Generally, I would

³⁶ *ibid*

submit that this is the belief we put in other individuals as individuals and stands in contrast to what Frost later describes as the national-belief.

Generally speaking, this latter belief is one that an individual cultivates with the societies with which that individual connects. Like the love-belief this belief can help the individual bring about some project of action in the future (poetical or otherwise). The national belief can fail as it did with Eliot and can be abandoned for a new national belief. Regardless, each individual must contend with groups of other individuals and some kind of national, or social, belief is formed. A poet, as much as a reader of poetry, must contend with the ideas and values fostered by the society they exist in, and those societal values are perhaps more pervasive and compelling than the values of other individuals. Frost was invested not only in the way that poets and readers related to the nation but also the way regional populaces coalesced into a national one. He was a “New England” poet who would grow to be a national poet and in his later years he would be sent as an ambassador to Russia and South America in the name of international cultural exchange.³⁷ It is clear in his description of the national belief that Frost considered this expansion of societal belief (from regional to national to international) as analogous to the growth of an individual mind. That is the societal belief added to the self belief and did not replace it. More plainly, he did not believe that national belief need destroy regional belief or international belief need destroy national one. In fact he believed that such a sacrifice was counterproductive.

³⁷ See *Frost's Politics and the Cold War*, George Monteiro

I have been where I came near getting up and walking out on people who thought that they had to talk against nations, against nationalism, in order to curry favor with internationalism. Their metaphors are all mixed up. They think that because a Frenchman and an American and an Englishman can all sit down on the same platform and receive honors together, it must be that there is no such thing as nations. That kind of bad thinking springs from a source we all know. I should want to say to anyone like that: 'Look! First I want to be a person and I want you to be a person, and then we can be as interpersonal as you please. We can pull each other's noses do all sorts of things. But, first of all, you have got to have the personality. First of all, you have got to have the nations and then they can be as international as they please with each other.'³⁸

The wholehearted embrace of binary oppositions seems to be the source of "that kind of bad thinking" and represents the current against which Frost's poems run counter to.³⁹

The history of the rise and fall of The League of Nations seems an appropriate backboard for Frost's criticism. The coexistence of contrary forces in the poem is a central tenet of Frost's poetry and political ambitions. The section of this chapter will consider the use and significance, of contraries in some of Frost's lyrical poetry.

³⁸ Library of America page 726

³⁹ See my analysis of West-running Brook in chapter three.

Section Three: Reading the Contraries and A Poet's Calling

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.

Robert Frost- *Two Tramps in Mud-Time*

The above epigraph, taken from the end of Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time," serves as the point of departure for my examination into the way Frost's lyrical poetry represents the relationship between contraries as well as the implied nature of the labor of reading and writing poetry. Working backwards⁴⁰ through the poem, this section will unpack the numerous images in the poem to clarify the significance not just of this particular passage but also of the function of these types of contraries in Frost's poetry and political vision.

I begin by examining the nature of the primary metaphor in this poem, namely the lines: "My object in living is to unite/ My avocation and my vocation/ As my two eyes

⁴⁰ A not unprecedented move considering my reading of *West-Running Brook* in the next chapter.

make one in sight.” Upon first inspection, the two words “avocation” and “vocation” appear to be opposites. The prefix “a-⁴¹” generally speaking can be read as synonymous with the words “not” or “without.” Read casually, then, a reader could easily assume that these two words are in fact opposites. To put it another way, readers may initially consider that the primary metaphor of the poem is to unite two binary opposites. Vocation is defined as being “The action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position;” as well as being defined as “One's ordinary occupation, business, or profession.”⁴²

On the one hand, we have a word whose definition means one's profession with the implication that the business being done is divinely ordained. On the other hand we have the word avocation, which is commonly defined as a distraction from that employment, as in “The calling away or withdrawal (of a person) from an employment; diversion of the thoughts.” Both words are configured as a type of calling. I'll come back to this point presently. But first, I want to explore more deeply the meaning of the word avocation. The first definition of the word avocation was, according to the OED,⁴³ “improperly foisted upon the word.” As the editors point out the word avocation has more traditionally been written with the implication being that the thing which is calling

⁴¹ Oxford English Dictionary “a-, prefix”⁶

⁴² Oxford English Dictionary “Vocation” Def 1.a and 2.b

⁴³ “But as, in many cases, the business which called away was one of equal or greater importance (see quot. in a., where *avocation* is rightly used), the new meaning was improperly foisted upon the word: Ordinary employment, usual occupation, vocation, calling.”

the person away from his or her duties (read vocation) is not less important⁴⁴ rather it is of equal or greater importance than the “employment” of the individual.

The nuances of the definitions of these words complicate the relationship between them. Instead of a simple binary like “working and not working” we have two contradictory forces. Accordingly, we presume that one’s vocation is the work “God” calls one to do (and we can read this as the work that comes naturally by opportunity or skill to a person or what we may colloquially refer to as the work one is “meant” to do) and one’s avocation is the work we do apart from our external (religious, circumstantial or societal) “calling.” Although it is worth noting that we could define avocation as a calling away, and I will argue that these two words represent a calling towards society and its functions (vocation) and a calling away (avocation). In the poem this distinction between one’s vocation and one’s avocation is really a distinction between the work we need to do and the work we love to do.

This distinction is one Frost sets up early in the poem as the speaker, who is engaged in the labor of avocation, namely, chopping wood, identifies early on in the poem that the approaching “tramp” (down on his luck lumberjack) “wanted to take (his) job for pay.” The poem begins as the tramp notices the speaker and concludes in the final stanza as the tramp reaches the speaker. The action of the poem is itself the ruminations of the speaker as he is approached by the “tramp”. The lumberjack is a tramp not just because he has been walking for sometime but also because he is currently unemployed.

⁴⁴ “That which has the effect of calling away or withdrawing one from an occupation. *Hence*, A minor or less important occupation, a by-work” OED Avocation 3 Also, “The calling of a cause or action before itself by a superior court.”

The speaker recognizes the intent of the man approaching him, to ask him for work, and the socioeconomic pressure to give him that work. In spite of that pressure the speaker continues to chop the wood and begins to rationalize his actions to himself and the reader. Frost writes, “The blows that a life of self-control/ spares to strike for the common good,/ That day giving a loose my soul/ I spent on the unimportant wood.” The speaker has in the past tempered his desire for the “common good.” The society the speaker lives in depends on people employing others and he has in the past allowed the needs of others to take precedence over his own desires. However, on this occasion the speaker doesn’t need the chopped wood for a fireplace but rather he needs the act of chopping the wood as a sort of catharsis. Here we see a complication in terms of the primary metaphor of the poem. For as the speaker was engaged in labor for which he did not get paid we can say he was involved in his avocation, that is he was doing it because he *loved* to do it. The tramp, for whom chopping wood is his vocation, however, *needs* the work because his very survival depends on him acquiring work- and subsequently money- as a lumberjack as much as a diner owner would “need” the lumberjack to spend some of his money buying his food. So the “need” we see is configured as a societal need⁴⁵.

The speaker continues in the next three stanzas to give detailed descriptions of his surroundings which at first seem unconnected to the situation at hand. He describes the sun and the clouds, the sound of bird song and the melting water each in a distinct way that highlights impermanence and juxtaposes images of a pleasing present with those of a

⁴⁵ The speaker arguably *needs* the catharsis but this is a personal need.

foreboding future. The emphasis on presenting these images as both pleasing and foreboding highlights the speaker's ability to anticipate change and the future⁴⁶.

The first stanza describes the instability of the weather in April but links that instability directly to man in a specific way.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March⁴⁷.

The stanza starts off describing the way in which this particular April day is now, that is warm with a chilly wind, while simultaneously acknowledging this to be a quality of all April days. However, the stanza goes on to describe that while all April days could be this pleasing they also possess the capability of turning cold and unpleasant at a moment's notice. April, then, becomes a metaphor for a state of being that has the ability to

⁴⁶ It would be fair to assume that this poetical framework of tentative happiness was informed by the bleak economic situation of 1936 but it is clear that it is not just money that is subject to mood swings of fortune but all aspects of one's life.

⁴⁷ Ln 17-25

progress or regress at a moments notice. Compellingly, the representation of this change in the state of being occurs on the line, “But if you so much as dare to speak”. This not only brings the reader directly into that April day, and that tumultuous state, with the pronoun “you” but also suggests that the reader is the catalyst of that change. While this is obviously untrue in terms of the weather, we can concede that the individual holds some, even if it is marginal, control over his fate and that his actions or inactions affect the quality of his life. This notion is confronted in the next stanza where the image of the catalyst, or potential catalyst, is configured as the bluebird.

In the beginning of the next stanza Frost draws on the springtime trope of a bird singing in such a tenuous way that it recasts that image to replace the jubilant promises of the future normally associated with the image in the light of a fragile and conditional present.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,
His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.
It is snowing a flake; and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.
Except in color he isn't blue,
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Ln 26-33

The hallmark of springtime comes bearing a message of delay. We could say, then, that the bird's job is to inform the inhabitants of the world that winter is over through the use of his song. He sings here, however, not in the performance of that function; rather he bears a cheery ("except in color he isn't blue,/ but he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom") if attenuated song for the world. The bird's song, which would herald the coming of spring, is carefully reserved and he flies through the poem full of potential energy which could be used to bring about the change. Similar to the tenuous double-think of the speaker in the previous stanza, Frost paints a portrait of a bird as if it were aware of the power it held and consciously chooses to hold it back. This withholding must invariably give the reader of the poem pause for it is in direct contrast to expectation. The warm image of a bird voicing joy at the spring to come chills in this passage and cautions us that the winter past may yet return. A similar moment confronts the reader in the next passage concerning water.

As a symbol spring represents rebirth and the resurrection of the earth from the long winter's hibernation, water is a fitting trope in the complex imagery that accompanies springtime and is perhaps as common as the song bird. A drink of water is refreshing and water has long been a part of the imagery in the Christian faith regarding baptism and cleansing. It is the lifeblood of the farm. The connotations that come with the use of water in a poem come almost naturally to a student of poetry and the image and its references are equally as available to the casual reader so ingrained are they in our cultural imaginary. Frost utilizes the common tropes we identify with water in his description of the water in the world around the speaker and reverses the implications of

the symbol by the end of the stanza. As with the song bird above the water which ought to herald the start of spring instead is reinvented and become a warning to onlookers that all is not as placid as may seem.

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheelrut's now a brook,
In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth⁴⁹.

The image of water in the first few lines of this stanza is accompanied by comforting and homely images of springtime. A magnified view of the world where there is a “pond” in the hoof prints and a “brook” in the wheelruts conjures a picturesque fanciful farm where the world is small, safe and simple to understand. But the speaker warns to remember the frost that “lurks” in the water table beneath still cold with winter. The water on the surface is in fact in league with that frost and will in absence of the light of the sun display it’s “crystal teeth”.

These three preceding stanzas are each feature a reading that the speaker makes about the world around him. In each of them he highlights how what he sees is contrary

⁴⁹ Ln 34-41

to what he expects to see. The beautiful weather for the speaker becomes a foreshadowing of the colder and more unpleasant weather in the horizon of his mind. Both the image of the birds and the water hallmark a foreboding that the speaker- here the reader of those images- has. They stand as an analogy for the fear he has as his personal need is being infringed upon by the “greater” societal need that is represented by the approaching tramp. They serve another function however. They highlight the ability of man to perceive the coming changes and the frustrating futility present in attempting to predict the nature and effects of those changes without knowing the significance of those changes until they are upon him⁵⁰.

The speaker can read the world around him and make interpretative gestures but these are only fleeting and at best informed guesses. These interpretative moments may come from a well informed reader as we presume the speaker in the poem has lived on his farm for years and is well acquainted with the cycle of weather. But his readings can't be proved correct until the future becomes the present. Those moments of meaning making serve the purpose of providing clarity in the present and are what Frost describes as a “momentary stay against confusion.” But the argument of the poem seemingly conflicts with this idea. The speaker contends at the climax of the poem that there is a type of permanence that becomes attached to our labor and productions if we are motivated by both the calling to fulfill the needs of others (vocation) as well as our own personal needs (avocation).

⁵⁰ Much like the speaker in Robert Burns' poem *To A Mouse...* says, “Still thou are blest, compared wi' me! / The present only toucheth thee: / But och! I backward cast my e'e, / On prospects drear! / An' forward, tho' I canna see, / I guess an' fear!”

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 sakes⁵¹.

What is the nature of this permanence then? How do fleeting acts of interpretive solace contribute to a lasting posterity? Our interpretative acts depend upon future knowledge to be proven accurate but the speaker seems to imply that whether right or wrong our attempts at deconstructing the world around us have a value for securing our own individual posterity as well as providing for the as yet unnamed individuals who will connect with us at some future time.

Frost writes that this perpetuity is achieved when “the work is play for mortal stakes.” This “sound of sense” phrase is an important part of Frost’s claim and in unpacking the layers of its meaning we may better understand the claim. First the phrase unifies the traditional conception of the contraries work and play and in so doing illustrates a literal textual example of the combination of vocation and avocation. The work (that which we have to do and society expects us to do) *is* the play (that which we love to do and that which we do to fulfill our individual needs). These contraries are separate but united in

⁵¹ Ln 66-73

focus to construct one line of poetry which is similar to how the poet's "two eyes make one in sight." Moreover the "work is play *for mortal stakes*" (my emphasis) which is initially read as a wager with one's life. The word mortal suggests that whatever activity the individual engages in which effects the future and preserves the individual in some way is an activity that could cost him his life. That is if we read stake as synonymous with wager. This connotation is clear but there is another; namely if we read stake as synonymous with claim. This notion is a bit more philosophical but the poem suggests that if the labor we engage in is work/play and "stakes a claim" about life and death or our existence as mortal conscious creatures then that labor is done for posterity and perpetuity.

Chapter Three: Resisting the Abyss

Section One: The Tribute of the Current to the Source

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

Robert Frost “West-Running Brook”

Robert Frost once said, “I want to be a poet of all sorts and kinds,” I think in part because he took literally what Emerson said of the job of the poet: “... the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth.” The national overtones implicit in the term “commonwealth” resonate with the poet’s work and, I believe, with my attempts to describe the political maneuvering that helped Frost secure a legacy as a great American Poet. One of his biggest challenges in creating a market for his poems with both professors and farmers was to create euphonious space for several voices in his poems.

This chapter explores the role of voice and contraries in Frost’s poem “West-Running Brook”. I will unpack the dramatic dialogue between the husband and wife and show that their interrogation of the world around them leads them to different

interpretations about the meaning of life and ultimately to a moment of crisis. This moment of crisis causes the reader to confront his/her own limitations and, by implication, mortality. Further, I wish to suggest that in lieu of a structured faith Frost offers salvation in the form of inducting the reader into a larger poetical conversation. In short, Frost proffers the preservation of voices within the poem as a means to circumnavigate what he describes as “the abyss’ void.”

“West-Running Brook,” from the self same titled volume, opens with a question of orientation, “Fred, where is north? ”, which is answered by the speaker’s husband: “North? North is there, my love.”⁵² This line and its interrogatives serve two purposes. First it tells us about the characters. Because the two characters speak on one pentameter line they and their speech (in this poem inductive interpretations of a wave they see in the brook) are unified. They are unified in their marriage, and their speech is unified in that when they read the brook, their conclusions, while contrary, don’t negate each other. This contrariness is further reinforced by the way the broken line appears on the page, which also serves the practical purpose of helping the reader distinguish voice. It appears thus:

“Fred, where is north?”

‘North? North is there, my love.’”

The second purpose this line serves is to immediately set out an analogy between the subject and the form of this poem. The lines across the page resemble in form the water

⁵² All quotations from Frost’s poetry are taken from the Library of America edition entitled *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*.

running in the brook it sets out to describe. As the water in the brook flows, it hits a rock and splashes back sending water counter to the flow of the brook. The movement of the wave that is the material for the poem's inductive analyses is a backwards motion. This movement is exemplified in the first line. Notice how the last three syllables of the wife's question resonate in the husband's reply. Hear how the second "north" jars like water hitting the rock, followed by the syntactic reverse of the wife's question "where is north?" with, "North is there." The inversion of these sounds (the tone of the inflective question is inverted in the husband's reply) represents the flow of water coming back upon itself.

The same inversion of tones in the first line continues to the next line of the poem, as the husband's reply becomes the wife's imperative for naming the brook.

The brook runs west.'

'West-running Brook then call it.'

(West-Running Brook men call it to this day.)

'What does it think it's doing running west

When all the other country brooks flow east

To reach the ocean? It must be the brook

Can trust itself to go by contraries

The way I can with you -- and you with me --

Because we're -- we're -- I don't know what we are.

What are we?'

This inversion re-emphasizes the connectedness between the husband and the wife⁵³. Their inverted tones are contrary and yet the one tone depends upon the other, much as their relationship depends upon contraries. The brook's unique quality becomes its name as its movement and direction prescribe its referent. This is a poem that sets out to define, at first, the relationship between the two speakers. However, when the wave becomes a metaphor the characters then seek to infer meaning from that wave. As the brook and the wave become defined by their direction and their motion, so too does the definition of the poem's "us" become defined as the direction and motion of their varying interpretations. This particular brook runs contrary to every other brook in the county, and it is this counter movement that distinguishes the brook from other brooks and these two individuals from each other even though they are united.

Within the poem a third voice interjects twice. The first interjection "(West-running brook men call it to this day)" has the effect upon the reader of suggesting that the process of definition that these characters are undertaking in this poem extends well into the future. The second interjection of this narrator occurs in Fred's response to his wife's initial personal, and romantic, reading of the brook and wave.

Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave

⁵³ Though this line is one syllable in excess of pentameter it still possesses the same inversion of tones and words as in the previous line. Note: "brook runs west./ West *running* Brook" my emphasis.

To let us know it hears me.'

'Why, my dear,

That wave's been standing off this jut of shore --'

(The black stream, catching a sunken rock,

Flung backward on itself in one white wave,

And the white water rode the black forever,

Not gaining but not losing, like a bird

White feathers from the struggle of whose breast

Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool

Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled

In a white scarf against the far shore alders.)

The narrator interrupts Fred's analytic flow and focuses the reader's attention back to the wave.⁵⁴ In the process it provides a compelling image for analysis about the wave. The image of the bird, riding the white water forever, describes not only the wave but also the

⁵⁴This image and the description of the wave cannot come from either of the other speakers as that would prejudice the reader's interpretation of the wave to either one-side or the other. Frost intentional has the wave described by the third impartial voice of the narrator so that we can use that description to compare it to the inductive interpretations of the other two speakers. In this way we can see Frost's anticipation of the reader.

poem and the effect of the contraries within it⁵⁵. The conflict of the bird's struggle is both active and stagnant; the bird struggles for eternity to be free but will never and has never moved. Furthermore, as the narrative voice progresses through the description of the image, the effect of the image moves from violent to comforting. The bird is trapped, unable to fly away from the bondage of the water and its wet feathers shake free from its body and float away in the river. The metaphorical feathers that fall away from the bird reference the actual bubbles and foam produced by water crashing against the rock in the brook. These bubbles float to the sides of the bank enshrouding it as if it were a scarf. The image of violent resistance of the bird produces a comfortable enclosure of the brook's edges. The contrary forces of violence and comfort and the contrary colors black and white help elucidate the purpose of contraries within poetry.⁵⁶ The image of the white wave on top of the black water ("And the white water rode the black forever") serves to establish that at that particular space and moment there exists for eternity a contrast and therefore clarity. The characters in the poem so readily notice the white of the wave because it rests on the black background of the water much as the black letters of the poem contrast with the white page. In such a way the contraries within the poem help to clarify and call attention to the subject of the poem.

Fred, however, protests his wife's reading and asserts that the wave should not be read in such a personal way. He insists that the image of the wave exists not simply as a

⁵⁵ The placement of the bird in a state of suspended animation is reminiscent of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* a poem that Frost seems to be responding to in another poem, *Never Again Would Bird's Song Be the Same* in which Frost opposes Keats' assertion that the song of birds does not change. Although for Frost it requires the pseudo divine presence of Eve to do so.

⁵⁶ This "momentary stay against confusion," suggests that for Frost all interpretative acts are fleeting.

divinely ordained personal “annunciation” placed for this one particular moment but instead the image has existed before them and will continue to exist as the subject of inductive analyses long after they die. Fred says:

'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook

In that white wave runs counter to itself.

It is from that in water we were from

Long, long before we were from any creature.

Here we, in our impatience of the steps,

Get back to the beginning of beginnings,

Reading these lines literarily suggests Darwinism and microbes in the water. For an explanation of human evolution this maybe accurate. But as the wave is analogous to the poem then it also stands to reason that the origins of poetry are somehow represented by the contrariness and the “counter”-ness suggested by the wave. For Fred, this backward motion propels his thoughts towards an existential crisis: He says:

The stream of everything that runs away.

Some say existence like a Pirouot

And Pirouette, forever in one place,

Stands still and dances, but it runs away,

It seriously, sadly, runs away

To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.

Existence, like the image of the bird stuck in the water, at the same time possesses both motion and stillness (“stands still and dances”). Frost highlights the futility and temporality of mortal actions. The action of our lives is a kind of motion but that action cannot outweigh the infinite passivity of death, which is the destination of all that lives. The motions of our existence work “*To fill the abyss’ void with emptiness*”⁵⁷ and provide self-stimulating, but inherently meaningless, activity. The image of violent perpetual struggle of the bird is reminiscent of the image of the Pirouette and her partner in that the both are stationary and moving at the same time. Neither can escape the bounds in which they have been placed just as neither husband nor wife can escape the limits of their own mortality. The violent struggle of the bird from the crest of the wave and the consistent rhythmical motions of the toys are motions that work counter to the bounds of their physical realities. Neither bird nor doll can ever be free from their restraints and the inevitability of their fate would seem to make any attempt at changing it futile. They perform those actions to add meaning to their existences but ultimately fail because of their isolation and the running away, or filling of the abyss, that Fred notes is a representation of the utter meaninglessness of those actions. We can conclude that the actions of bird and doll, and we can assume Fred and his wife, devoid of past or future context are empty and meaningless.

⁵⁷ My emphasis

Fred, in turn, stumbles on solace much as the narrative voice stumbles on a comforting image while pursuing a violent one by continuing his analysis of the relationship between the wave and brook. The brook is analogous to existence and the “static movement” of both only truly arrives at nothingness. But it is the wave, or the resistance to that inevitability, that is “most us”.

The universal cataract of death

That spends to nothingness -- and unresisted,

Save by some strange resistance in itself,

Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,

As if regret were in it and were sacred.

It has this throwing backward on itself

So that the fall of most of it is always

Raising a little, sending up a little.

It is this backward motion toward the source,

Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,

The tribute of the current to the source.

This “backward motion” is described as “The tribute of the current to the source,” a phrase that suggests deifying our predecessors will alleviate our mortal fears in the

present through the promise of similar future acts by others. Here, specifically, I mean future poets, readers and Americans. The word “tribute” has the semiotic and etymological relationship to the word tributary, or a smaller stream that contributes its flow to a larger one. This contextually fits with the subject matter of this poem and suggests that the “resistance” of the individual is connected to a collective “resistance.” But the word has a more literal meaning: “A tax or impost paid by one prince or state to another ... as the price of peace, security, and protection.”⁵⁸ The resistance Fred sees on that sunken rock, then -the resistance of the individual to the void - helps solace the individual by orienting the individual away from the disorienting object that is the abyss and simultaneously contributes to a larger social orientation. In other words, the orientation of the individual has an element of social positioning and that social positioning creates the comfort the individual experiences.

Sara Ahmed in the introduction to “Queer Phenomenology” highlights the implicitly social nature of the subjective individual’s experience of orientation. “This point can be made quite simply: orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend the world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (Ahmed, 3). The wave is an investment of an individual’s energy and attention. The action of turning backward in resistance to the void (inevitable death, nonexistence) becomes an act of orientation towards objects and ideologies that are capable of being experienced by the body and comprehended by the mind. As Ahmed

⁵⁸ Oxford English Dictionary

claims, “Orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing*” (Ahmed, 7). However, orientation in the example of the poem is complicated by the fact that the void is unknowable and un-experience-able because it is perpetually outside of the individual and that individual’s experience confronting it is disorienting because of the inability of the body and mind to create a familiarity with it.

Ahmed observes that disorientation is a necessary precursor to the act of orientation. She writes: “It is by understanding how we become oriented in moments of disorientation that we might understand what it means to be oriented in the first place” (Ahmed, 6). When she considers Heidegger’s and Kant’s example of walking blindfolded into a familiar room she posits how the blindfolded subject might orient herself if she were sent instead into an unfamiliar room. She describes how when that person reached out and touched a wall or a door then she would find recognizable “social forms”. The disorientation experience dissipates as the object of our disorientation becomes knowable and recognizable even if that recognition isn’t to the unique object (that door) but to the familiar social forms (a door). That familiarity is bred by comprehension of existing social forms and arises out of the individual as a feeling. As it relates to “West-Running Brook” the speaker’s familiarity isn’t produced through a transformative orientation process that turns the feeling of disorientation into one of familiarity through recognition of social forms. Rather, it is produced in response to the orientation of the individual away from the disorientating object that produces social forms which create the feeling of comfort.

For Ahmed, “we become orientated in moments of disorientation,” but in this poem Frost orients the reader *towards* a collective moment of disorientation. The abyss, the inevitable demise of one’s own consciousness, is a universal moment of ultimate disorientation because it is completely incapable of being inhabited by the body or the mind and no familiarity can be had with it. The wave, or the ways in which we orient ourselves away from the abyss, are moments of social convergence. While each individual’s resistance may be contrary, as is the case between Fred and his wife, those individuals are unified by the act of resistance and aligned with other individuals whose acts of resistance are similar. Frost illustrates two types of resistance, or turning away, from that moment of disorientation in each of the characters in the poem.

Fred and his wife both experience moments of disorientation in the poem and the wave is for both of them a moment of clarity and orientation though for different reasons. His wife initiates the poem from a state of physical disorientation and throughout the poem attempts to orient herself to what she finds in her environment. Her husband Fred, as well as the brook, becomes familiar to her as she interrogates and interprets the significance of her relation to him. From her moment of physical disorientation she orients herself to Fred and the brook and in so doing induces a recognizable social form. “What are we?” She asks Fred, who replies “Young or new?” She continues her meaning making in the stanza that follows:

We must be something.

We’ve said we two. Let’s change that to we three.

As you and I are married to each other,
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me.

She sees the things we call a wave, that is the water splashing on the rock, and infers the other thing we call a wave, that is a physical hand gesture. She creates a comfort for herself from a moment of disorientation by orientating herself to the brook through the familiar social form of marriage. She and Fred are now married to the brook. They are lovers and the metaphorical relationship allows her to feel situated and comfortable. The process by which she arrives at the feeling is one of induction and here I mean “to infer by reasoning from particular facts to general principles⁵⁹”. However, to “induce” has several layers of meaning in this example which I’d like to also consider.

Her orientation processes induces meaning from and onto the brook. To induce, “to bring in, introduce (a practice, condition, state of things...)” is to not just introduce herself to the brook but also to introduce her interpretation of the brook to Fred and the reader.

⁵⁹ Induction is defined in the following ways in the OED and each one of these definitions shades my interpretation in a particular way. It can refer to an inference by reasoning, an introduction, the act of drawing something on or over and the act of persuasion.

Further, induce can also mean, “To draw (something) on or over; to put on or overspread as a covering or the like.” In her process of introducing (orientating) herself to the brook she claims they ought to cover the brook with a bridge: “We’ll build/ Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be / Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.” This act of covering can be read as concealment, protection or enclosure. And, if she can induce (“To lead (a person), by persuasion or some influence or motive that acts upon the will, *to* (*into*, *unto*) some action, condition, belief) Fred, or the reader, that her interpretation is correct then that interpretation habituates the disorientating object in a familiar form and instead becomes the orientating object. From that perspective subsequent interpretative acts would be made in response to the now semi-concealed brook. If her inductive interpretation creates a metaphorically bridge then future readers who come to the brook would see it and could only orient themselves to the brook as it exists with bridge. In other words the inductive interpretation process that she undergoes in her orientation of self to brook adds something to the disorientating object (the brook) in order to align it with existing social forms and create familiarity with it. This is contrary to the process that Fred undergoes in his orientation to the disorientating object of the brook and he must first dismiss that interpretation before he can begin with his own.

If his wife metaphorically clothes the brook in the dress of her inductive interpretations then Fred must disrobe it before he can proceed with his contrary, deductive interpretation. He attempts, at first, to convince her that her inference that the physical water “waving” in the brook is a fact of nature that has preceded them by

millennia and because of the fact could not be said to be a symbol of the brooks
recognition of her reading of the brook. “It wasn’t waved to us,” Fred concludes.

It wasn’t, yet it was. If not to you

It was to me – in an annunciation.

Fred cannot unmake the intensely personal and self validating experience she describes as an “annunciation.” When she discovered the recognizable social form of a wave in the physical manifestation of the raised water in the brook her inductive interpretation of the wave was validated and her disorientation faded into a feeling of familiarity. The overt religious overtones implicit in the word annunciation imply that the interpretative process was, for her, spiritual. Fred finds that since he cannot divorce her from her opinion he must dismiss his interpretation before he even makes it: “It is your brook! I have no more to say.” His wife coaxes him on and his contrary interpretation of the wave and the brook begins.

While his wife’s reading is representative of an inductive interpretation process Fred’s reading is representative of a deductive process. Deduction is, “The process of deducing or drawing a conclusion from a principle already known or assumed; *spec.* in *Logic*, inference by reasoning from generals to particulars.”⁶⁰ If the logic in the beginning of the stanza in which he reads the wave were broken down to a traditional deductive premise it might look like this:

⁶⁰ This mode of logical reasoning operates by deducing facts from general principles and is defined in the OED as an opposition to induction. The OED also gives the following definition for deduction: “Its mediæval use for a narrative poem with an agreeable ending”

The wave runs counter to itself.

Man originates from that wave

Man runs counter to himself

His conclusion that “Man runs counter to himself” is explored throughout the rest of the stanza and he emphasizes what the brook represents and what the significance of running counter to it is. His deductive interpretation culminates in the following formulation which seems like circumlocutions but in fact traces the development of the counter movement in true deductive fashion by tracing out a detailed account of the movement.

Our life runs down in sending up the clock.

The brook runs down in sending up our life.

The sun runs down in sending up the brook.

And there is something sending up the sun.

Each statement follows the same structure the X “runs down,” that is diminishes in form and substance, in “sending up,” or promoting, Y. It’s worth noting that the verb “send up” has an alternate meaning which is similar to mock or parody. With all the seriousness with which Fred attaches to the counter-movement I would suggest that we read the overtones of parody attached to the object being sent up as not to promote humor but perhaps with the more traditional connotation of comedy. That is, there is a sense of completeness and agreeableness to it. Our life, Fred says, is reduced in our raising of the clock. The clock is a representation by man of the passage of time but implicit in the

recording of that time is the presence of man. Fred maintains his deductive movements as he moves backwards through the list of things he sees contributing to that life. He continues stating that the brook, physically water but metaphorically existence, diminishes as it promotes our life. And further that the sun, a source of light and heat, diminishes as it promotes the brook or existence as Fred knows and experiences it. Fred reaches the climax of his deductions when he reaches the last point knowable to him, the sun. "And there is something sending up the sun." Whatever that something sending up the Sun is, Fred can't guess. Having reached the limit of his deductive methods he again faces a void of experience. Similar to the abyss he has no option but to turn backward. He is left with his consideration of the wave and the process of "sending up."

That sending up motion of the wave, of resistance, to the disorientating void is present at the beginning and the end of his deductive interpretations and always in the face of the unknowable disorientating object. His conclusion that "The tribute of the current to the source./ It is from this in nature we are from. It is most us" centralizes orientation as an act that not only defines existence but also creates meaning. At the very end of the poem, Frost privileges neither but rather reemphasizes the coexistence of those contrary interpretive schema. I will return there, but first, in the next section, I explore more fully the movement between disorientating objects that Fred underwent in his deductive interpretations. As well, I consider the problem of self validation as it applies to the inductive interpretations exemplified by his wife.

Section Two: Recreating the Mirror: The Metaphors of Illusion

But once comparisons were yielded downward,

Once we began to see our images

Reflected in the mud and even dust,

'Twas disillusion upon disillusion

Robert Frost "A White-Tailed Hornet"

In "The Bear" Frost compares the existence of the caged Bear to that of man who is infinitely wrestling with the questions accompanying his mortality. The portrait is a startling representation of the frustrations that accompany a consciousness that is aware of its own existence, the inevitability of its own destruction and can find no comfort in its examinations of the world around it. I wish to consider how that portrait is representative of the oscillation between disorientating objects as previously discussed with the character Fred in the poem "West-running Brook." That portrait of man and woman is juxtaposed with that of the "free bear" who is unencumbered by the need to deductively examine the world around it in search for reprieve from the inevitability of its own demise and the angst that accompanies that ultimately futile quest. In contrast, the "free bear" is representative of a consciousness that is capable of inducting, or adding to, the world around it and finds a solace even if that solace is constructed. The speaker of the poem begins by describing the "cross-country" travel of the free bear.

The bear puts both arms around the tree above her

And draws it down as if it were a lover
And its choke cherries lips to kiss good-by,
Then lets it snap back upright in the sky⁶¹.

The bear “draws” down a tree and kisses the “choke cherries” as if the tree “were a lover.” With this image Frost creates an idealized representation of a bear in the wilderness. The destruction of the cherries imbues that animal with life. Another representation of this exchange could portray the same act as destructive. But the tone of the poem is idyllic and romantic. Furthermore, we notice that the tree is resistant: the bear must forcefully pull the branch down to ingest the “choke cherries,” after which, it snaps violently back upright. The image is both comforting and violent: both romantic and pragmatic. It conveys both the massive, lumbering potential of the bear, and implicitly refers to the harsher realities in the natural order that encompasses the bear. But the conflict is only apparent to the human mind. The bear has no knowledge of the ambivalent meanings sustained by her actions and is proceeding as usual with instinct as her guide, whereas the human witness to these events (in this case the reader of the poem) sees the coexistence of the contraries love and destruction as a subject of conflict.

Frost continues to describe the movement of the bear through the forest in equally contrary language.

As she flings over and off down through the maples

⁶¹ Ln1-3

leaving on one wire tooth a lock of hair.

Such is the uncaged progress of the bear.

The world has room to make a bear feel free⁶².

The lumbering bear is described as “uncaged” and as making “progress” leading us to assume the bear is free and powerful as she moves. However, the bear only feels free and must still pay for that freedom by leaving a piece of her fur on a barbed wire fence. The fence doesn’t prohibit the bear from moving in the wilderness and is less a boundary than it is an almost unnoticed symbol of man’s presence in the wilderness. The fence represents man’s attempts to establish order in the natural world. In a way it is analogous to man’s conscious attempts to understand the world around him. The use of the word “tooth” however, leaves us to assume that the fence is more like another animal than it is an artifice. Such constructs of man have been incorporated into the natural order and do not exist apart from but rather as a part of nature. In other words, man’s attempts to “cordon” the world only serve to make those distinctions to other men. The “uncaged” bear in Frost’s poem represents the unfettered (despite man’s attempts at meaning making) natural order.

Almost playfully, Frost compares the activities of the free bear to the activities of the caged bear. Whereas the uncaged bear can largely ignore the attempts by man to classify, confine and comprehend the natural world around him the caged bear is removed from nature and placed in isolation for sterile scientific scrutiny. How the bear acts in that

⁶² Ln 8-11

environment, Frost writes, is equivalent to how man acts when trapped solely in the confines of his own mind.

The universe seems cramped to you and me.

Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage

That all day fights a nervous inward rage,

His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.

He paces back and forth and never rests

The Toe-nail click and shuffle of his feet,

The telescope at one end of his beat,

And at the other end the microscope,

Two instruments of nearly equal hope⁶³,

The bear existing within the “world” feels free. On the other hand, man feels trapped within the confines of the “universe”. This suggests that man is in a terminal state of agitation through perpetual movement that, unlike the free bears, produces no progress. That rage is produced not just from the peripatetic motion between the two instruments but from the orientation those instruments are supposed, but fail, to provide.

The instruments that supposedly exist to enhance and clarify human vision seem only to increase the agitation. The telescope is an instrument man uses to look outward whereas the microscope is an instrument he uses to look downward and inward. Both

⁶³ Ln12-20

instruments allow man to extend his vision. The former allows him to view the stars and the universe above him and the latter allows him to examine the cells, molecules and atoms that comprise the material world. Both perspectives seem not only to be futile in dispelling the angst of the caged bear but work instead to increase that agitation. The focus of Frost's criticism isn't so much on the tools themselves as on the ways in which man brings himself to those tools and the assumptions he has about the nature of the work they will allow him to do. His orientation to those endeavors produces and exacerbates a "nervous inward rage." That rage grows as he oscillates between the two instruments, which seem to be contrary. Just because when man is in front of a telescope he looks out one way and when he is in front of a microscope he looks another way doesn't preclude the fact that both activities are approached with a similar mindset. Both activities as described by Frost illustrate a deductive mental process by which a man attempts to objectively consider the world around him:

The Toe-nail click and shuffle of his feet,
The telescope at one end of his beat,
And at the other end the microscope,
Two instruments of nearly equal hope,
At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,
At the other agreeing with another Greek⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ln17-22

Both tools extend man's vision beyond its normal capacity but neither instrument of seeming orientation (telescope/microscope) offers a solution to the mortal crisis each helps to illuminate. Using these instruments one can see deeper and farther than naturally allowed. One can look at his own mortality and the structure of the universe without being able to effect a change in his own position as it becomes ever more apparent that that position is limited, finite and mortal. The caged bear is pitiful and moving between these two poles is as "pathetic" (ineffectual) as stasis. Frost thus highlights the conflict between man and his own consciousness. Man's frantic actions (or inactions) are equally as futile in preventing his ultimate demise.

Frost's main concern in the first half of his poem "The Bear" then is really to describe the disaffection man experiences when his orientation to the world around him fails to comfort his conscious mind. This failure is caused by a conflict that arises when what is anticipated differs from what is perceived. Man's expectations can be seen in the fence that fails to divide or contain the "nervous inward rage" that is produced in the caged bear (man) when his examinations of the world around him fail to produce lasting meaning. The fence is a physical insertion of man's classificatory and organizational schemes onto a world that resists and disrupts them. As the wall in mending wall is undone by various "something(s)" so too do those forces work to continually disorient man and reposition him in a space of confusion. The interpretative acts of man are never done as he must constantly construct new narratives of interpretation in response to those undoings and thereby re-orient himself to the ever changing world around him.

This conflict between man and his own consciousness arises because a conscious mind comprehends the limited scope of its own faculties as well as the inevitability of its own demise. Man is necessarily vexed by this conflict but his attempts to construct belief structures that allow for his consciousness to transcend death are in stark conflict with his understanding of reality through observation. In the absence of devout religious faith, Frost offers a prosody of comfort and renewal and a means for perpetual re-orientating the self to familiar social forms. As we will see in the way that Frost's lyrics work to represent orientation of the subject to the objects and other subjects around him, the lyric's conception of immortality is not reconciliation of these perspectives, but a perpetual renewal of the portrayal of the conflict between them.

Frost elaborates the above conflict in another poem which also orients the subject as one who looks up and down. In the poem "The White Tailed Hornet" Frost initially discusses the false belief that man sometimes has of something natural as an object of worship because of the misconception that natural is synonymous with perfect.

To err is human, not to, animal
Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,
Only too liberal with our compliment
That really takes away instead of gives⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ Ln53-6

He categorizes this type of orientation to nature as a “downward comparison.” Frost dispels this belief in the perfection of nature by narrating a description of a hornet, which the speaker has witnessed attempting to eat a nailhead in the wall and a huckleberry because it mistook those objects for a fly. The hornet, buzzing confused and disoriented about the room, is compared to a poet. His acts of misrecognition are compared to the acts of poets creating metaphors.

But for the fly he might have made me think

He had been at his poetry, comparing

Nailhead with fly and fly with huckleberry:

How like a fly, how very like a fly.

But the real fly he missed would never do;

The missed fly made me dangerously skeptic⁶⁶

The hornet’s disoriented and confused blows against nailhead and huckleberry suggest to the speaker a poet creating metaphors to describe a fly. But he missed the fly and that fact for Frost is enough to dismiss the hornet as poet. The hornet’s instinct failed him. Frost uses this failure to do more than just dispel the belief that nature is perfect; he is saying something about poetry, and metaphor, as well. Whereas the hornet’s metaphors are only

⁶⁶ Ln 45-50

half made because he does not complete them by latching onto the fly the poet's metaphors are complete. The comparison of poet to hornet is what Frost calls, later in the poem, a "downward comparison," an angle of vision which, Frost explains, "really takes away instead of gives."

As long on earth

As our comparisons were stoutly upward

With gods and angels, we were men at least,

But little lower than the gods and angels⁶⁷.

When people compare themselves upwardly to "Gods and Angels," Frost argues, they hold themselves against an ideal. Their subsequent actions as men place them below those ideals but, as Frost puts it: "we were men at least." This is a deliberate construction of an illusion but it is an illusion that is more palatable than the disillusion of a purely deductive, downward comparison-making, mind. That mind is trapped if it only considers that which it can know and experience and can't take the creative leaps that its contrary partner the inductive mind is capable of. The interpretations of the purely deductive mind can only produce the "rage" of the caged bear when faced with the purely disorientating object of something beyond its ability to experience or comprehend. When that mind looks at into the world it can see its reflection in the "mud and even dust." To see that

⁶⁷ Ln 60-3

reflection is to be awakened from that dream, and the illusion that our consciousness will transcend death is shattered.

But once comparisons were yielded downward,

Once we began to see our images

Reflected in the mud and even dust,

‘Twas disillusion upon disillusion,⁶⁸”

The disillusion occurs, because when we have looked downward and inward and we see that we are the same material as most of the inert material around us, we must conclude that we eventually will return to that material.⁶⁹ The metaphorical process that compares man to “lesser” natural objects inherently limits man. It reduces him down to his material components and that deductive process doesn’t allow for that which isn’t already known. Whereas, a metaphorically inductive process that compares man to an ideal allows for more flexibility when considering the nature of men as it allows for as yet unknown possibilities by virtue of the imaginative acts that draw similarities to the abstract ideal.

The presence of the inductive and deductive interpretative processes in Frost’s poetry provides a framework for orientating the subject away from the radically disorientating object death. In the previous poem the disorientating object “dust” and the

⁶⁸ Ln-64-7

⁶⁹ Ash Wednesday reference?

accompanying frustration “disillusion” are counteracted by the presence of its contrary interpretative process induction. Such an understanding of those contrary reading practices implies that the latter is more valuable because it has the ability to produce comfort by orientating the individual away from the disorientating object and towards familiar social forms through a metaphorical process. However, for Frost both perspectives are necessary to the production of poetry: the deductive process of looking at the dust, of perceiving the disorientating object, is essential to the process of building metaphors, whereas the inductive process is crucial to understanding those metaphors and taking the creative leaps necessary to allow the poem to become a vehicle for thought. To put it another way, one can deductively analyze any metaphor but will thereby only arrive at finite material and be able to conclude only one’s own limitations. To read metaphor as a way to connect to something larger, be it spiritual, poetical or national, one must read inductively. To read in such a way is to make an investment of creative energy as a reader and that is a primary reason why Frost considers the labor of writing poetry as analogous to the labor of reading poetry. That concept of the labor of the reader is integral to understanding how Frost’s poetry acts as a vehicle of poetical salvation by re-orientating the reader away from the paralytic disorientation, and subsequent pandemonic futility, that arise from encountering the object of death.

Section Three: Reorientation

Robert Pack, in Belief and Uncertainty in the Poetry of Robert Frost, discusses a covenant between poet and reader and the effect on subsequent generations of readers. Pack contends that we might view the relationship between poet and reader as similar to how a parent may feel that one's life is extended through that of one's child. He asserts that this *need* for continuance stems necessarily from our conscious awareness of our own mortality. I argue that this need is as much instinctual as it is produced by Frost's positioning of the reader towards the disorientating object of the abyss. Pack, using different terminology, sees it thus: "Again and again in his poetry Frost seeks to find meaning or believable consolation that runs 'counter' to natural entropy" (Pack, 62). To understand Frost as Pack does is to perceive that Frost though elusive and allusive does not shy away from the unpleasant realities of nature. The confrontation of those realities empowers the poet to create for the reader a necessary response to those unpleasant realities. In Frost's poetry, that response is the creation of social forms, which provide comfort and motivation for the reader. Furthermore, I argue that this space allows a perpetual renewal of the poetical acts of interpretation and orientation that not only provide some comfort for the present day reader but also some continuity with the past and possible futures. Past, present and future readers engage in similar acts of interpretation and orientation by confronting the disorientating object as presented in the poem and in subsequently resisting the inevitability of Readers create social forms that transcend the disorientating experience and bring about comfort, renewal and perpetuity. This is as close as Frost's poetry, perhaps any poetry, can come to granting

“immortality.” The links to that perpetuity are found in his lyrics by an endless return to poetry and the poem and the definite and deliberate connections Frost makes between poetical work and physical labor. Those connections reinforce the importance of the interpretative processes of the reader. Labor encompasses with the act of physical labor represented in the poem, writing and the readers’ acts of interpretation.

Frost’s poem, “After-Apple Picking” is an example of lyrical poetry that portrays both the fleeting moment of experience (the individual poem) and the implicit, infinite reflexive referral of poetry unto itself (the whole of lyrical poetry). What we see is often blurry and unclear at first, the vision is fleeting and when we have finished reading it we “cannot rub the strangeness,” from our sight. To take a look at one of Frost’s lyrics is to enter a situation like that of the speaker of this poem when he looks through a sheet of ice. Frost’s poetry resists hasty interpretations and we can relate the speaker’s first look at the world through the ice as our first attempt to read a Frost poem. We must melt the ice and apply our mental exertions onto the poem before we begin to make sense, or meaning. As the ice begins to melt the speaker begins to join with the “essence of winter sleep,” around him as he drifts into sleep.

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 disappear⁷⁰.

The image created in this last stanza, “magnified apples appear and disappear,” echoes within the mind of the speaker as the focus of his labor has imprinted itself onto his imagination and threatens to consume his dreams. A repetition of the same routine physical task can manifest itself in the dreams of the laborer and in this case denotes pure exhaustion both mental and physical. So profound is the consumption of the man by his labors in body and soul that his dreams will actualize the physical pain.

My instep arch not only keeps the ache,

It keeps the pressure of a ladder round.

I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend⁷¹.

The pain in his foot allows the speaker to remember the tree that he is leaning against for support. As the boughs of the tree sway, the ladder and speaker sway and that movement is reflected in the line “I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.” In such a way the previous physical labor and the speaker’s dream come together in the lines of the poem and reach out to the reader. The reader’s voice becomes synchronous with the movement of that tree. In the reader’s imagining of that movement in the tree he joins together in a unified labor with the speaker who is simultaneously imagining the tree and that labor.

⁷⁰ Ln13-18

⁷¹ Ln21-23

Poirier, in Poetry and Pragmatism, suggests that the correlation between the work of the poet and the work of a common laborer exists to establish for both a sense of accomplishment:

Just as for Frost's apple picker there comes, as a release from work, some pleasurable drowsy, strangely expectant uncertainty, along with a blurred sense of the objects on which so much energy has been expended, so too there comes as a reward to Emersonian pragmatist readers and writers an equivalent feeling generated by literary language. (Poirier, 85)

This reward is configured as a way to return literary work to the realm of the idea.

Poirier's claim is that the poetry of immediate experience peculiar to Frost positions itself as representative of both the moment and the future.

Literary work is socially repositioned, but only that it may regain its traditionally exalted status. It is no longer a monument to the past, and it does not offer the clarifications of life that might make us culturally dependent on certain texts. Rather it becomes a source of gratification that is full of vague promises as to the future.

(Poirier, 84)

Poirier reads these "vague promises as to the future" in Frost's poetry as a camouflaging of classical allusions as opposed to a privileging as seen in the poetry of Eliot. These classical allusions, because they appear within the common speech, ask us to conceive of an indirect timelessness on the page that is contained within the collective semiotic chain of all poetry, especially when the referents are obscured.⁷² Poirier's reading was

⁷² Poirier gives an example of this in the poem "Mowing." The speaker-laborer references a Latin proverb and Virgil's Third Eclogue and, as Poirier points out, is completely unaware, as most readers would be, that he does so. To even be made aware of these connections in Frost the reader must struggle with and dissect his poems while possessing knowledge of the poetical past. Because the reference goes unnoticed Frost suggests that the lyrical tradition is open to all even if they do not possess that knowledge of the lyrical past. Those readers become a part of the evolving history of language simply because they use it.

influential as part of a larger and successful critical project that deconstructed the traditional conception of Frost as American but not modern and reinvented it as both. I turn to his reading to illustrate a line of criticism that explores the ways in which poetical and physical labor reciprocate each other in Frost's poetry.

Priscilla Paton explores the complex critical and historical positioning of Frost by early modernists as an "American" and not a "Modern" poet as well as the defense of him as both by subsequent critics in her article "Apologizing for Robert Frost." She writes:

The paradoxes that coexist with a need to proclaim Frost "American" and "Modern" stem from the difficulty of reconciling these phases of aesthetic development and critical thinking: the defense of the American at the beginning of the century with the ascendance of the high modern aesthetic; the residual ideal of an American identity being bound to pastoral experience with the increasingly prevalent tropes of alienation in the city; the nativist emphasis on the poet's popular image as an ordinary man with dominance of potentially elitist formalist trends in criticism from roughly the 1930's through the 1960's. (Paton, 75)

The defense of what it meant to be American in early 20th century necessitated the construction of a binary opposition with the modern. In part this was because the high modern aesthetic rejected the core system of values developed by 19th Century America. Frost's emphasis on the pastoral theme of the labor of the farmer positioned his poetry as the model of those 19th century values despite the presence of fracture and disorientation within those poems. The problem is that this defense of the "American" omits the observations of the modernist whose recognition of the fragile state of civilization goes unacknowledged. In other words, you can't just ignore the modern condition. Frost's poetry doesn't and neither can the criticism of his poetry. What Paton observes then is the

opposite trend in later Frost scholarship where critics focus on exposing the modern, or “terrifying” (as Lionel Trilling put it), aspects of his poems but do so in contrast to the 19th Century pastoral American traditions. For Paton, this is because those two modes of critical thought are paradoxical. Her observation exposes the contrary veins of criticism surrounding Frost’s poetry and has interesting implications for any critic investigating nation and Robert Frost’s poetry. Specifically, how do we read the inclusion of the modern “terror” within Frost’s poetry given the context of the 19th Century pastoral American farm and the implicit contradiction that those two ideologies represent? The ordinary laborer whose everyday work seems at odds with that of the modernist whose perception of the fracture of society can only be remedied with art. In such a perspective though labor and art become opposites and the average individual is separated from the artistic processes of the artist. Frost positions the laborer as artist in his poems. It is the laborer who perceives the fracture, the terror, the disorientating object and it is the laborer who’s artistic (poet) and interpretative (reader) processes provide the remedy. Frost purposefully masks poetical tradition to suggest that history lives on whether the mind is aware or not.

Frost’s poems offer access to a poetical perpetuity, a persistence beyond death, through the lyrical mode even to readers who may be unconscious of their participation in that mode. This opens up the world of poetry, and all of its claims of immortalizing verse, to all readers who may have used similar idioms or expressions. The poet labors as the common man does in his everyday struggle to create and assign meaning to deeds. The reflexive nature of this relationship between poet and laborer mirrors the overall tendency

within Frost's lyrics to isolate moments within time and connect those isolated moments to a shared poetical past and, by implication, future.

Frost isolates such a moment of time in his poem "Mowing." The laborer-speaker in the poem ruminates on the sound and lack of sound during his work at the edge of a field mowing the grass. The speaker's mind moves back and forth, like his scythe, contemplating the acoustic effects of his work and the meaning of the sound it creates.

There was never a sound beside the wood but one

And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.

What was it it whispered?

The interpretive imperative is set forth for the reader (and speaker) in the line "What was it it whispered?" But similar to the line in "After Apple-Picking" there is a correlation between the movement of the laborer and the line itself. The reader can hear the movement of the scythe swinging back on the fulcrum that is the word "it" in the line. The repetition of that word coupled with the proximity and repetition of the "s" sound that surround mimic the movement of the scythe through the grass as well as the "swoosh" of its movement. Further, this repetitive movement back and forth centers the poem on a disorientating act similar to the way the pacing of the caged bear in "The Bear" does. However, the function of the movement here is very different. This pacing is not frustrating, rather it soothes and relieves. Both movements are a kind of disorientation in that they both instigate interpretative processes by de-familiarizing the subject of the poem. The difference is that whereas in the bear's movement between two perspectives

perpetuates a frustration, the movement of the scythe perpetuates a question. “What was it?” For the bear the expected answer that the instruments at each end of his cage were supposed to provide never comes and the anticipation that they will provide him with an answer only contributes to the frustration. In this example the disorientating movement instigates the interpretative process and prompts the reader to supply his own answer. While the poem, as most Frost poems do, provides a seemingly sufficient answer in the line, “the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,” that “answer” only promotes more questions. “What fact?” and “how can it know a dream?” The movement of the scythe continues at the end of the poem and perpetuates the sound and by implication the questions about the sound. “My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.” The object that is the poem will be insufficient to answer the questions unless accompanied by the inductive interpretative acts of a reader who can create a certainty, albeit only a momentary one, to the terms of the poem.

“An Old Man’s Winter Night” reverses the typical Frostian perspective that usually has a man looking out through a lens to nature. In this poem, “All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him,”. Nature, and the implied darkness of night view him within the confines of his house. He cannot look back at nature because he has a light in his hands, which reflects on the glass ostensibly blinding him. Alone, aged and forgetful, the old man stands in his cellar holding his light and forgets what led him in there. This image leads the reader to link, as Jay Parini does, this man with the human condition of loneliness: “The poem meditates implicitly on the human condition as a whole and it remains neatly, even mechanically, focused on the single old man here who ‘stood with

barrels round him – at a loss.’ The old man is somehow made to bear the weight of all human loneliness,” (Parini, 270). Parini implies that the old man is “a hermit who nonetheless lets his light shine, keeps the faith, holds steady against the chaos of the universe.” However, the light that guides him is the light that blinds him from seeing out of his enclosed shell and into the real world. The hermit ignores the reality of dark nature staring in. As a realist Frost understands that the darkness that surrounds the old man in his house exists, and the rules of nature will find him, with or without the light of faith, and that the lights of certain faiths serve only to blind humans from the reality of inescapable death. Robert Frost’s lyrics offer no escape but rather attempt to provide for the reader the continuance, or as Pack suggests, the ability to look at this dilemma and yet “not to flinch.” Though the desire of man is to look through the telescope and see himself among the “Gods and Angels,” when we are confronted with the reality of our own mortality elucidated by modern scientific theory we find that as creatures of dust we cannot reconcile these perspectives: “... poetry is always a search for something beyond reach, a quest for a simulacrum of heaven, a place where the absolute is attainable and where all contrarities are reconciled” (Parini, 272). Frost understands, at the same time, that we will never cease to desire this simulacrum of heaven, the reconciliation of finite consciousness with infinite timelessness, and that this reconciliation will never occur. His ability to be able to understand this paradox allows him to construct a lyric that provides for a continuance in the absence universal certainty.

Central to that continuance is a poetics that constantly undermines interpretations to renew the process of interpretation which repositions the poem perpetually as the locus of

meaning making. Frost accomplishes this through a deliberate orientation towards disorientating objects of death and uncertainty as well as not only encouraging but necessitating the inductive interpretative contributions of his readers. This necessity is most clear at the end of such Frost poems as “West-Running Brook” where the attempt to engrave a lasting meaning upon the interpretative processes of the speakers in the poem is undermined. The poem characterizes the exchange between wife and husband:

‘Today will be the day

You said so.’

‘Today will be the day

You said the brook was called West-Running Brook.’

‘Today will be the day of what we both said.’

The poem itself will not privilege either speaker’s interpretation because to do so would limit the ways that the wave could be interpreted. Just as physically as building a bridge over the brook might hide the wave, the poem that seeks to orient the reader towards disorientation must allow for space for various types of interpretative practices. In creating that space there is only room for fleeting certainties. Those moments in Frost’s poetry usually form around a sound of sense phrase that dissolves under scrutiny. The “fact (may be) the sweetest dream that labor knows” but only if the reader can induce how a fact could be a dream.

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