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Dark Journeys: Robert Frost's Dantean Inspiration

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

DARK JOURNEYS: ROBERT FROST'S DANTEAN INSPIRATION

SUBMITTED TO
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AND
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BY
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INTRODUCTION: ROBERT FROST AND DANTE ALIGHIERI

In the play *A Masque of Reason* Robert Frost fabricates a conversation between Job and God, imagining that God used Job's afflictions to teach man to submit to unreason (*A Masque of Reason* 379). According to Frost's play, once people became aware of good and evil God "had to prosper good and punish evil" until Job's miserable life demonstrated that "There's no connection man can reason out / Between his just deserts and what he gets" (374). The God of *A Masque of Reason* has no desire to enforce justice. By exploring this concept of divinity, Frost calls into question the existence of any source of meaning and reason beyond what people can find on earth. Job's wife asserts, "Of course, in the abstract high singular / There isn't any universal reason; / And no one but a man would think there was. / You don't catch women trying to be Plato" (376-7). Thus Frost suggests that the search for high forms of truth is a futile and typically male undertaking. Eventually Job joins his wife in voicing disbelief in the existence of some pure, governing form of reason. Frost objects to the Platonic view that transcendental forms lend earthly objects their meaning. Instead of finding a profound truth hidden behind the mysteries and unreason of earth, "It will be found there's no more given there / Than on the surface" (381). Through the petty motivations of the God in *A Masque of Reason*, Frost even challenges the existence of some ideal form of a human being. Man is fashioned in the image of a God who tortured Job merely to show off to the Devil. When God reveals this purpose underlying the years of Job's torture, Job realizes that God did not act differently than a human. "I expected more / Than I could understand

and what I get / Is almost less than I can understand,” Job responds (383). Job’s expectation of a reasonable God reflects the human tendency to desire and believe in the significance of earthly events. However, Frost proposes that people might only find disappointment when they search for meaning beyond the surface.

In the *Commedia* Dante Alighieri presents his own journey to understand divine reason. Contrary to Frost’s portrayal of a selfishly unreasonable God, Dante describes God as “the good of the intellect” that sinners have lost (*Inferno* III.18). Dante views God as “the primal Truth,” “the source from which all truth derives” (*Paradiso* IV.96, 116). Not only does God act in accordance with reason, God is the origin of reason. However, human intellect is inadequate for fully comprehending divine reason. Dante describes the God that Job expects in *A Masque of Reason*, whose motives are beyond human understanding. As Beatrice explains to Dante, ““For divine justice to appear unjust / in mortal eyes is evidence of faith”” (IV.67-68). Dante argues that human inability to grasp divine justice indicates that transcendental reason does exist. Since humans cannot understand this primal Truth, however, human reason is insufficient for knowing God and earning his favor. The path to the purest form and the source of truth therefore requires faith in addition to reason. Thus Virgil, the model of human reason, can only guide Dante the pilgrim through hell and purgatory. Beatrice, the exemplar of faith, must help Dante complete his journey into and through heaven.

The pursuit of truth is a central theme in the poetry of Robert Frost and Dante Alighieri. While Frost imagines that earthly events might have no meaning beyond the surface, Dante portrays a world in which everything has eternal significance. Both poets consider the possibly negative consequences of seeking reason. Frost focuses on the

fruitlessness of searching for nonexistent meanings, but he also describes a God who reacts with anger when “reason-hungry mortals ask for reasons” (*A Masque of Reason* 376). Dante explores the punishment of people who have sought meaning from sources other than God. Given the conflict between the religious perspectives of Frost and Dante, Robert Fleissner questions whether Frost is truly inspired by Dante in a substantial way. As he observes, “*The Divine Comedy* is hardly reflected in, let us say, *A Masque of Reason*, somewhat indebted though that may be also to the Bible” (Fleissner 3). However, Fleissner concludes that Robert Frost borrows from the great writers of the western literary tradition and that “it is by no means strained to bring in Dante in addition” (3). In fact, Frost owned four editions of Dante’s *Commedia* in his personal library, which suggests that Frost studied the text thoroughly (Serio 220). John Pollock argues not only that Dante was a potential influence on Frost but also that resonance with Dante is an important component of Frost’s poetry. Referring specifically to “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” he writes, “Whether consciously intended by Frost or not, the fact is that this echo of Dante is an important and integral part of the poem” (Pollock 5). Frost’s familiarity with Dante is certainly reflected in the form and content of many of his poems. “Fire and Ice” might be one of the most apparent allusions to Dante’s work because both its themes and its structure mimic the *Inferno*. John Serio calls “Fire and Ice” a “brilliant, gemlike compression of Dante’s *Inferno*” (218). Perhaps the disparity between the two poets’ views is actually one of the reasons Dante acts as a rich resource for Frost. For example, Jeffrey Hart reads “Birches” as “Frost’s defense of his own poetic method against Dante,” and he calls Dante the “antagonist” of the poem (Hart 567). Weaving in Dantean structure and imagery allows Frost to create variations on

Dante's ideas and to position his own ideas within a conversation about reason and depth of meaning. Given the echoes of Dante throughout Frost's work and Frost's knowledge of the *Commedia*, readers can view the Dante-Frost affinities as not only existent but also intentional. Frost incorporates Dantean ideas and imagery into his poetry in order to ponder, extend, and challenge concepts related to the pursuit of true meaning. Similarly to Dante, Frost portrays human reason as limited. Both authors nevertheless present truth as a desire that often drives people's journey through life. Frost differs from Dante by dwelling in apparent contradictions rather than appealing to a clarifying divine light.

CHAPTER ONE: LOSING THE ONE TRUE WAY

“Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost” (*Inferno* 1-3). Thus Dante begins his *Commedia* with the moment of shock when he becomes aware of his foreign surroundings. He has strayed from the “straight way” without realizing. His own lack of attentiveness to his journey has caused him to end up in a *selva oscura* or “dark wood,” which evokes a sense of mystery and danger. It also hints at an image of postlapsarian Eden with its dark overgrowth. Dante the pilgrim begins his journey in an environment that reflects the effect of sin on both himself and humankind. According to the Genesis story, God placed man in the Garden of Eden “to dress it and to keep it,” and God dwelled with him there (Genesis 2:15 KJV). After the serpent tempted Eve with the idea that the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden would make Adam and her “as gods, knowing good and evil,” then Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise” (Genesis 3:5-6). Adam and Eve’s subsequent act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil earned them exile from the garden and from God’s presence. They chose the wrong course in their pursuit of wisdom, resulting in the eternal consequence of separation from God. Rather than living in fruitful surroundings, they were condemned to toil over a cursed ground. Without a gardener to tend its trees or a divine presence filling it with light, Eden must have become increasingly dark as the trees grew and thickened. This physical change acts as an illustration of the state of man’s life when governed by sin. Readers know from the first line of the *Inferno* that the journey

represents life, so Dante losing his way in the wood indicates that he has fallen into sin. Dante adopts the image of the *selva oscura* to describe how his own life has become dark and dangerous because he has allowed sin to pull him away from God's presence.

Dante the pilgrim views the wood as menacing: "Ah, how hard it is to tell / the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—/ the very thought of it renews my fear!" (*Inferno* I.4-6). The mysteriousness of the wood's nature complicates the already frightening situation of being lost. Bound by darkness, Dante has no recollection of how he has reached this point because he "was so full of sleep / when [he] forsook the one true way" (I.11-12). Dante lost his way because he stopped attending to his path. The mystery of the wood, though intimidating, serves to make Dante mindful of his journey. It motivates him to search for the true way rather than aimlessly wandering through life. Dante's detour through the afterlife, as a journey through foreign surroundings and as a guided lesson about divine reason, is intended to give him a fresh perspective and attentiveness toward his own life. Since Dante has lost focus on his goal and wandered from the true path, he must make his way through the eternal justice system to gain understanding of how to properly pursue goodness. Frost uses this premise of journeying through a dark wood along with the other geography that Dante creates in his *Commedia* as a foundation for many of the journeys in his own poetry. This encourages readers to compare the ideas about seeking reason in Frost's poetry to those in Dante's work.

In addition to considering the setting of the *selva oscura*, Frost imagines the nature of the wood before it grew dark. Frost sets his poem "After Apple-Picking" in an orchard during harvest time, allowing readers to envision a situation in which a garden remains under a worker's care. The poem begins with the speaker describing the scene of

his work, where a “long two-pointed ladder’s sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still” and a barrel remains unfilled by the few apples still on the trees (“After Apple-Picking” 1-2). Like the journey of Dante the pilgrim through the *Commedia*, this speaker’s route points him toward heaven. The word “still” implies that the direction of his ladder has not changed for a significant amount of time or that some task remains incomplete. Though all signs indicate that the harvest is continuing, the speaker follows this rambling five-line sentence with an emphatic single-line sentence: “But I am done with apple-picking now” (6). This statement conveys that the speaker is unwilling or unable to endure his work any longer. The apple orchard establishes a setting reminiscent of Eden when man maintained the garden before the Fall, but Frost’s poem focuses on the moment when the gardener stops attending to his work.

Readers might consider Frost’s harvester of apples in “After Apple-Picking” relative to Scriptural and Dantean illustrations of Christian responsibility. The concept of gathering a harvest resonates with New Testament illustrations of Christian duty. To describe the need for witnesses and healers among the needy, Jesus tells his disciples, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few” (Matthew 9:37). Dante the poet also uses the harvest illustration in *Paradiso* when Dante the pilgrim reaches the starry sphere and sees “the hosts / of Christ in triumph and all the fruit / gathered from the wheeling of these spheres!” (*Paradiso* XXIII.19-21). In this sphere of heaven Dante witnesses the following wonders: the light of Christ, a garden of flowers representing Mary and the Apostles, and the beautiful souls of “angelic love” crowning Mary’s soul (XXIII.103). To conclude his meditation on these glorious images, Dante the poet returns to the idea of harvest: “Oh, how great is the abundance / that is stored in granaries so rich

above, / that down on earth were fields ripe for the sowing!” (XXIII.130-132). These fruits of the harvest are redeemed souls, who have succeeded in finding and following a path to heaven. Dante explains that Christ himself is “the Wisdom and the Power that repaired / the roads connecting Heaven and the earth” (XXIII.37-38). Dante describes God as the source of ultimate wisdom, which is essential to reaching heaven and completing the harvest. In Robert Frost’s rendition of gathering a harvest, the poem’s setting allows readers to view the worker in a religious light to some extent. The “ten thousand thousand fruit” might on one level be thought of as the multitude of lives for which the speaker feels responsible (“After Apple-Picking” 30).

The speaker in the poem explains his reason for stopping his work: “For I have had too much / Of apple-picking: I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired” (27-29). The abundance of this harvest is too great for a single worker “to touch, / Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall” (30-31). Frost chooses tender words in this description of the harvester’s task, showing the care he must take to prevent losing the fruit. He must send each fruit that strikes the earth “to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth” (35-36). His work requires love for the harvest, and he loses motivation when his initial desire for the harvest becomes overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work. In relation to the souls that Dante portrays in his *Commedia*, the speaker of Frost’s poem could be one of those faulted for not loving others enough. Though he has invested a large amount of his energy into the harvest, he has succumbed to his human weakness and failed to complete it. A successful worker in Dante’s world would rely on God’s wisdom and power to help him achieve his responsibility. Frost does not directly refer to this possibility, instead focusing on how human strength can be insufficient for fulfilling

desires. The speaker's particular goal, however, does relate to the goal of Dante and the souls he portrays: the harvest. When Dante the pilgrim observes the eternal consequences of earthly actions, he sees souls being punished for their misdirected, insufficient, or excessive love. After his journey through the afterlife has shaped his understanding of true love, he explains the form of love he feels called to share. He claims that Christ has saved him "from the sea of twisted love" and carried him "to the shore where love is just" (*Paradiso* XXVI. 62-63). Dante here connects love to justice. The God of his *Commedia* blesses people with His love if they have rightly loved on earth. Dante the pilgrim proclaims his own attempt to achieve this type of love, "I love the leaves with which the garden / of the eternal Gardener is in leaf / in measure of the good He has bestowed on them" (XXVI.64-66). The laborer in Frost's poem likewise seems compelled to treat the fruit of the garden with love, a calling with which his sleep interferes.

In "After Apple-Picking" it is too late to complete the harvest because "Essence of winter sleep is on the night, / The scent of apples: I am drowsing off" ("After Apple-Picking" 7-8). The state of falling asleep is marked by confusion of dream with reality. The separation between the two grows increasingly blurred throughout the poem. After the speaker mentions his drowsiness, he describes looking through "a pane of glass / [he] skimmed this morning from the drinking trough" and being unable to rub its distorting effect out of his eyes (10-11). Discerning reality continues to become more difficult as the sense of sleep infiltrates even the rhythm of the poem:

But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell

What form my dreaming was about to take. (14-17)

The poem sways with the sleepiness, and the speaker mixes a description of his dream, magnified apples appearing and disappearing, with a description of the feeling of picking apples, which makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish what he is really experiencing. Sleep conveys the idea of struggling to understand what is real, and it also portrays human weakness and inability to fulfill tasks. In “After Apple-Picking,” the speaker desires the harvest, but his work has wearied him. Even when one’s will aligns with desire, sleep can pull a person away from the right path. Frost’s portrayal of sleep in this poem aligns with Dante’s idea of sleep. Dante the pilgrim cannot recall his own entrance into the woods because he was “so full of sleep” when he “forsook the one true way” (*Inferno* I.11-12). Readers of Dante might look to Scripture to understand the implications of sleep in the *Inferno*. In the Bible, moments of sleep reflect the inability of humans to act as they should without God strengthening them. When Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane, he returns to his disciples three times and finds them asleep each time. The first time he returns, he comments, “What, could ye not watch with me one hour?...the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:40-41). Dante’s reference to sleep therefore draws upon this concept of sleep as an illustration of human weakness. By giving in to sleep, Dante the pilgrim sacrifices his agency over his own life and loses the path toward goodness. Unlike in the *Inferno*, “After Apple-Picking” does not portray sleep as the cause of someone losing the “one true way.” However, the poem does reveal how sleep might lead to becoming lost. Since sleep blurs the distinction between reality and imagination, it creates the danger of confusing what is truly real and what is simply an appearance of reality. Through “After Apple-Picking,” Frost provides a

closer examination of the limits of humanity by using the illustration of sleep. In Frost's poem the speaker is incapable of filling the final barrel with the remaining apples because he is drowsing off. In the *Inferno*, Dante cannot recall a portion of his journey through life because he was "so full of sleep" (*Inferno* I.11). The limits of their understanding prevent them from seeing the world clearly, and both of these figures have failed because of their human weakness.

Frost continues to ponder human limitation in other poems as Dante considers it throughout the *Commedia*. Using the structure of a journey, both poets begin with the idea of becoming lost. In the opening stanza of the *Inferno*, Dante concludes with "the straight way was lost" or, in the original Italian, "*la diritta via era smarrita*" (I.3). The word *smarrita* is a form of *smarrire*, which can mean "to lose one's way, to go astray," "to stray," "to be bewildered," or "to lose heart" ("smarrire" Oxford Dictionaries). The multiple meanings of this word all express aspects of Dante the pilgrim's need for an intervention on his journey. Dante the poet uses this word again when Dante the pilgrim explains to his teacher Brunetto Latini why he is traveling through hell:

'[I]n a valley there, I lost my way
before I reached the zenith of my days.'
'Only yesterday morning did I leave it,
but had turned back when [Virgil] appeared,
and now along this road he leads me home.' (*Inferno* XV.50-54)

Confusion and discouragement act as elements of straying spiritually and losing the way in the *Inferno*. Because Dante the pilgrim does not carefully follow the light of truth, which is Christ, he needs a guide to bring him back to the right path. Frost similarly

refers to depending on a guide in his poem “Directive.” Though the title of the poem implies a source of reliable guidance, Frost reverses the typical purpose of directing by describing a guide “[w]ho only has at heart your getting lost” (“Directive” 8-9). Such a guide contrasts with the Dantean guides, Virgil and Beatrice, who save Dante the pilgrim when he is already lost. The need for a guide in both situations reflects the difficulty of succeeding alone in a journey. However, Frost views getting lost as an essential part of a person’s journey. He dwells on the word “lost” through the “Directive.” The opening lines speak of a time in the past when “the loss / Of detail” made things simple, a time to which the speaker calls the reader to escape (2-3). Thus Frost prepares readers to think of loss in a positive manner. He later describes the “height of the adventure” as the place where the cultures of two villages have blended together. He writes, “Both of them are lost. / And if you’re lost enough to find yourself / By now, pull in your ladder road behind you” (35-37). With this play on the words “lost” and “found,” Frost suggests that wandering in unfamiliar territory can aid a person in understanding his own thoughts and emotions. This idea somewhat coincides with Dante’s portrayal of being lost because Dante the pilgrim needs to take a detour through the afterlife in order to better comprehend the implications of God’s truth on his own life.

Frost echoes certain language and images from “After Apple-Picking” in “Directive” in order to connect these two illustrations of human limits and attempts to discern reality. “Directive” imagines the resulting landscape once a gardener has abandoned his orchard. Here the trees of the wood rustle proudly because they have “shaded out / A few old pecker-fretted apple trees” (“Directive” 22-23). By describing this shift in landscape, Frost reveals how nature can erase the marks of man’s efforts to

tame it, suggesting the futility of human labor. This particular wood is relatively young, less than twenty years old, so the path that originally was “[s]omeone’s road home from work” is still clear enough for someone to walk (30). This worker could have been someone like the harvester of “After Apple-Picking,” which Frost implies by mentioning the ladder and reusing the phrase “the instep arch” (55). Whereas in “After Apple-Picking” the speaker struggles to separate real events from his dream, the speaker of “Directive” describes a number of items that are no longer what their forms suggest, “a house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm / And in a town that is no more a town” (5-7). Although the convoluted form lightly mocks the search for an origin, it simultaneously expresses the human desire to discover some ultimate reality. The speaker later indicates that reaching such a reality is the traveler’s destiny. Frost implies that feeling lost acts as an important element of the journey, but he then reveals that the trip does not truly lack a destination. The end of the journey is “A brook that was the water of the house, / Cold as a spring as yet so near its source, / Too lofty and original to rage” (50-52). The speaker concludes by urging the reader to “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” (62). Readers might compare this to Virgil addressing Dante the pilgrim’s bewilderment in the opening of the *Inferno*: ““Why do you not climb the peak that gives delight, / origin and cause of every joy?”” (*Inferno* I.77-8). Dante the poet establishes the existence of a source of clarity, and Frost’s final line seems to mimic this idea. However, the context of Frost’s line might indicate its irony. The speaker sends the reader on a grail quest that ends with a “broken drinking goblet” stolen from a “children’s house of make believe” (“Directive” 57, 41). This framework mocks the pursuit of a sacred vessel to hold water of truth. Frost implies that both of these objects are merely the

materials of make believe. Frost modifies the Dantean pursuit of divine origin to ponder whether one can discover a source of reality on earth, but both journeys gain their urgency by starting with a sense of being lost. Feeling lost encourages the traveler to seek something concrete and true rather than continuing thoughtlessly down some path.

Frost further considers how one might lose the true path in “The Road Not Taken.” The speaker stands at the place where the road splits, trying to decide which path to follow. Since Frost describes the wood as “yellow” rather than dark, it appears the trees have not yet engulfed the speaker to the point of blocking out the light (“The Road Not Taken” 1). The speaker seems aware that embarking down one path will almost certainly prevent him from ever experiencing the alternative, “knowing how way leads on to way” (14). Thus Frost reminds us that the journey does not involve a single significant decision but rather a series of continuing divergences. As the options increase exponentially, the probability of choosing any single right path decreases at an increasing rate, resulting in a high probability of regret. The speaker acknowledges this likely result by remarking, “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” (20-24). Frost shifts to future tense at the beginning of this stanza to reveal that the decision has not yet occurred. However, the speaker already knows that whichever road he takes will alter him and that he will regret his decision to take the one less traveled by. Frost similarly marks the title of the poem with a note of regret by naming it after the road that the speaker will never experience, “The Road Not Taken.” Rather than considering where a path might lead him, the speaker focuses on the traveling itself. He seems to value the journey more than the destination, a common trait

among Frost's speakers. If people do not have the capacity to succeed in their journeys, as suggested by "After Apple-Picking," "Directive," and "The Road Not Taken," there is little incentive to emerge from the state of being lost.

CHAPTER TWO: THE NATURE OF THE TRAVELER AND HIS JOURNEY

Frost describes another moment of sylvan reflection in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” In this poem, the speaker chooses to “stop without a farmhouse near / Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year” (“Stopping by Woods” 6-8). Frost clearly refers to the geography of the *Inferno* in the line “Between the woods and frozen lake.” Dante the pilgrim begins his journey through hell in a wood and ends with its frozen floor. Additionally, Frost places the scene within the “darkest evening of the year,” reminding readers of the darkness of the *Inferno*. Dante structures hell so that the lowest places are darkest because they are furthest from the revealing light of heaven (*Inferno* IX.28-29). However, the speaker in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” finds the darkness of the woods appealing. The speaker describes the woods as “lovely, dark and deep,” a stark contrast with Dante’s description of the wood as “savage, dense and harsh” (*Inferno* I.5). Frost presents an alternative view of the Dantean wood to show that the mystery created by wild darkness can be beautiful as well as frightening. The speaker’s description conveys some sense of desire related to the woods. Getting lost does not hold the negative connotation that it does in Dante’s work. With Dante’s journey in mind, Frost creates a contrasting traveler who wants to experience the mystery, the confusion of reality. However, the speaker qualifies his expression of longing: “But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep” (“Stopping by Woods” 14-16). Thus he struggles to prioritize obligations over his inclination to continue gazing on the woods filling up with snow or perhaps to enter into

their lovely dark depths. In this poem, Frost presents the conflict between need and desire.

Robert Frost considers a similar clash in “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” in which he weighs the right of need against the right of love. Here the conflict is manifested between the speaker and two strangers rather than within the speaker. This poem’s speaker explains that he splits wood as relief from his “life of self-control” (“Two Tramps” 13). However, the speaker perceives two approaching tramps as hoping to “take [his] job for pay” (8). Imagining the logic of these “[m]en of the woods,” the speaker describes his own work as mere play: “My right might be love but theirs was need. / And where the two exist in twain / Theirs was the better right—agreed” (53, 62-64). Frost expresses the idea that the right of need outweighs that of love. People view practicality as holding more importance than emotion. In a similar juxtaposition, the journey through the woods that is a duty for Dante the pilgrim is a desire for the speaker of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Because of the relative unimportance of desire, the traveler in Frost’s poem feels pressured to continue on his journey rather than enter the woods. If Frost settles on the assertion that need is a better right than love, then a journey through the darkness of the woods should arise, like Dante’s, from some responsibility. However, Frost adds a key ninth stanza to “Two Tramps in Mud Time”:

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. (65-72)

Frost proposes that an act with eternal significance requires the unity of need and love. Ideally, both reason and desire should motivate a person. According to Dante, this alignment can happen by experiencing the light of God. When one gazes on the light, “the good that is the object of the will / is held and gathered in perfection there / that elsewhere would imperfect show” (*Paradiso* XXXIII.103-5). Dante describes his own transformation, “But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving / with an even motion, were turning with / the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars” (XXXIII.143-5). By looking at Dante’s words relative to “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” readers can see how the limits of human reason might hinder the union of need and love. Dante speaks of joining his will with his desire, which is similar to making love and need one. Desire and love express the same idea of being motivated by one’s passions. The concept of will is more directly related to reason than need is, but both represent a more rational motivation than desire or love. Dante explains, “[M]y wings had not sufficed for that / had not my mind been struck by a bolt / of lightning that granted what I asked” (XXXIII.140-2). Thus he claims that divine intervention is necessary to resolve the motivations of emotion and reason. Dante thereby asserts that human reason is insufficient for bringing the two together.

In “The Demiurge’s Laugh” Frost recreates and reimagines Dante the pilgrim’s circumstances in the opening of *Inferno* from the perspective of a traveler who willingly embarks on a journey through the darkness. Dante opens the *Inferno* as follows: “Midway

in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost” (*Inferno* I.1-3). Frost starts his poem, “It was far in the sameness of the wood; / I was running with joy on the Demon’s trail, / Though I knew what I hunted was no true god” (“The Demiurge’s Laugh” 1-3). Both of these poems begin *in medias res*, producing the confusion and sense of urgency that comes with being lost. In Frost’s poem readers might anticipate a revelation of the meaning of the opening word “it,” but Frost does not satisfy readers with clarification. Instead, he sustains ambiguity with continued use of this pronoun. “It was just as the light was beginning to fail / That I suddenly heard—all I needed to hear,” Frost further builds suspense around the event or object central to this story with the caesura (4-5). By developing feelings of disorientation and curiosity simultaneously, Frost induces in his readers the potential allure of being lost. As in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Frost sets this journey in the evening, “just as the light was beginning to fail,” and again portrays the mystery of the darkness as appealing (4). The dying light in “the sameness of the wood” also evokes the scene in which Dante introduces his *Commedia* (1). Rather than despairing like Dante the pilgrim, the speaker of Frost’s poem derives joy from pursuing the demiurge’s laugh through the darkness.

The poem also takes advantage of the darkness to restrict the sense of sight and hone in on a particular experience. Frost focuses on a sound: the demiurge’s laugh. “Demiurge” is the Platonic name for the benevolent maker of the world, but some later groups, such as the Gnostics, use this term to describe a subordinate deity, the author of evil (“demiurge” OED). Frost adopts the latter of these meanings by describing the pursued entity as the Demon and “no true god” (“The Demiurge’s Laugh” 3). In this

poem the traveler knows that what he is seeking is false, not the source of reality.

Nevertheless, he revels in the pursuit until “A sleepy sound, but mocking half, / As of one who utterly couldn’t care” stops him, making him feel like a fool for being caught pursuing the Demon (8-9).

“Acquainted with the Night” describes another noise that interrupts a journey, and the poem provides an elegant example of Frost subtly incorporating Dante’s work into his own. The poem begins with two stanzas of short, simply structured sentences that seem to describe a man in the habit of taking rambling nighttime walks. Frost then transitions to a much lengthier sentence that spans the remaining three stanzas and disturbs the comfortable monotony of the opening lines. This structure resonates with the interrupted journey theme throughout Frost and Dante. The interruptions serve to heighten the traveler’s (and in this case the reader’s) awareness. The speaker of “Acquainted with the Night” stops at the sound of a far away “interrupted cry” coming over the houses “[b]ut not to call [him] back or say good-bye” (“Acquainted with the Night” 8-10). This sound disrupts the setting and allows Frost to draw attention to something else out of place in the muted scene of night, which lies “further still at an unearthly height” (11). With the word “unearthly,” Frost turns readers’ minds to thoughts of the supernatural. The next line reveals the sight: “[o]ne luminary clock against the sky” (12).

The reference to something “unearthly” combined with the allusion to a “clock against the sky” resonates with Dantean images in *Paradiso*. Dante uses clocks in *Paradiso* to portray motion of heavenly spirits and to consider both the achievements and the limits of technology. In the sphere of the Sun Dante compares the twelve figures of wisdom to a clock calling the church to matins: “[W]hen a cog pulls one wheel and drives

another, / chiming its ting-ting with notes so sweet / that the willing spirit swells with love, / thus I saw that glorious wheel in motion” (*Paradiso* X.141-144). Dante reprises the clock theme before Peter questions Dante the pilgrim on his faith. The spirits transform to “rings around fixed poles, circling, like blazing comets, in their brightness,” which Dante then describes as “wheels in the movements of a clock” turning so that “the innermost seems standing still, the outermost to fly” (XXIV.11-15). In Frost’s poem the clock at its “unearthly height...proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right” (“Acquainted” 11-13). Although Frost does not focus on the inner workings of a clock as Dante does in *Paradiso*, he does similarly consider its purpose. Frost describes this human creation conveying a message that is “neither wrong nor right” (13). This could simply reflect the nature of the time in between dusk and dawn. The speaker might feel ambivalently toward this time. It also could portray human inability to express any reality with certainty. The time is not wrong because it accurately displays the consensus that guides this town’s motions through the day, but it is not right in any deep universal sense. The clock itself, as a useful but inexact instrument, demonstrates both the power of human reason and its limit in trying to impose order on the natural world.

The connections between the content of “Acquainted with the Night” and *Paradiso* might seem insignificant or coincidental, but Frost endows them with more meaning through the structure of his poem. Frost employs the rhyme scheme that Dante created in his Divine Comedy, the *terza rima*. Thus the foundation of the poem encourages readers to consider the poem in relation to Dante. Frost is engaging in a conversation with Dante not only through content but also through form. The final line of the poem echoes the title and the first line: “I have been one acquainted with the night”

(14). Frost thus calls us to reconsider the theme and the opening lines of “Acquainted with the Night” in relation to the Dantean influence that appears with increasing clarity through the poem. The speaker’s wandering makes him familiar with the darkness like Dante, who becomes increasingly comfortable navigating through hell. However, the darkness never ceases to hold strange surprises. The circularity of the poem creates the feeling that this speaker’s journey, unlike Dante’s, is endless.

The speaker in Frost’s poem “Birches” expresses a desire to undergo a journey much like the passage of Dante the pilgrim through the afterlife: “I’d like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over” (“Birches” 48-49). With the image of swinging on birch trees, Frost illustrates the process of climbing toward heaven and then falling back to earth. When “life is too much like a pathless wood,” the speaker dreams of swinging on birches as he did in childhood (44). Again the image of a “pathless wood” draws in the Dantean idea of a life spent wandering in confusion, searching for the right way. In contrast to some of Frost’s travelers who crave the wood’s darkness, this speaker longs for an escape from the danger and pain of the wood:

I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again. (55-8)

The italicized “*Toward*” emphasizes that speaker of “Birches,” unlike Dante the pilgrim, desires only to travel toward, not into, heaven. The phrase “toward heaven” resonates with “After Apple-Picking,” in which the speaker’s ladder points “Toward heaven still” (“After Apple-Picking” 2). Both of these poems present a speaker who lacks either the

desire or ability to truly reach heaven. Although the speakers might want to “get away from earth awhile” when the journey becomes arduous, Frost suggests that his travelers find sufficient meaning on earth and so have no need to discover deeper meaning by entering heaven Dantean style (“Birches” 48). The swinger of birches expresses his satisfaction with the significance of earthly events: “Earth’s the right place for love: / I don’t know where it’s likely to go better” (52-3). Readers might recall how Dante centers his divine justice system on love. The just love of heaven governs each person’s fate. According to Dante, the “right place for love” is heaven, where God eternally blesses those souls who have rightly loved on earth. Frost challenges the idea that such a place exists. The speaker of “Birches” does not seem to seek any truth or meaning in this journey out of the wood. His focus is on the experience rather than making progress. Swinging on birches does not carry the speaker to any new destination, simply back down to earth. This type of journey corresponds with those portrayed in other Frost poems such as “The Road Not Taken” and “Acquainted with the Night.” Instead of acting as a motivation, truth in “Birches” is a source of annoyance: “But I was going to say when Truth broke in / With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm / I should prefer to have some boy bend them” (21-23). The speaker prefers an imagined reality to Truth.

In “The Black Cottage” Frost considers how people tend to apply the idea of truth on earth. While the speaker of the poem sits on the steps of a deceased woman’s cottage, he learns about her personality and beliefs from a minister of the area. The minister describes how he would have removed the words “descended into Hades” from the Apostle’s Creed if not for fear of disturbing this old lady (“The Black Cottage” 94). He claims that now he is glad that her presence prevented him from changing the Creed:

‘[W]hy abandon a belief

Merely because it ceases to be true.

Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt

It will turn true again, for so it goes’ (105-108).

Here truth varies depending on people’s fancy, but the minister imagines a desert filled with “the truths we keep coming back and back to” (114). Though truths fall “in and out of favour” on earth, perhaps there do exist some ideas with a power that keeps calling people to return to them (110).

The woman who once lived in the cottage suffered from forsakenness. Her husband died in the Civil War, her two sons moved far away, and the world simply passed the cottage by. The minister says, ““She had her own idea of things, the old lady. / And she liked talk”” (51-2). The forsakenness of the cottage thus must have been particularly painful for this woman. ““She had some art of hearing and yet not / Hearing the latter wisdom of the world,”” says the minister (73-4). Perhaps this characteristic of the woman contributed to the loneliness of her cottage. Her beliefs also were ““so removed / From the world’s view”” (62-3). She struggled to find meaning in the sacrifice she made during the war. To her simply keeping the states united or freeing the slaves were not reasons ““enough / To have given outright for them all she gave”” (58-9). Though the woman accepted that it somehow related to all men being created free and equal, she would not listen to conflicting ideas or to any news of events indicating the contrary. While she lived, the minister found her type of innocence a frustrating force that prevented change in his church. Her resulting isolation from the world might not have been entirely within her control, but her separation from her sons certainly was a

circumstance that she could change. Frost in a parenthetical reveals, ““Nothing could draw her after those two sons. / She valued the considerate neglect / She had at some cost taught them after years”” (40-3). Regardless of what caused her forsakenness, readers know the woman had to spend years of her life feeling isolated from the world and her family. This glimpse of suffering is a type of image that recurs throughout the poetry collection *North of Boston*. In this collection Frost takes readers on a journey in some ways similar to that of Dante through the *Inferno*.

““[A]ll those who die in the wrath of God / assemble here from every land,”” Virgil tells Dante the pilgrim as they enter hell through the River Acheron (*Inferno* III.122-3). On his journey Dante encounters souls who suffer the wrath of God for various reasons. As he travels through each of the nine circles of hell, Dante interacts with individual souls and hears stories of how certain people earned their eternal punishment. In the circle of gluttony, Ciaccio makes a request that other sinful souls echo through the *Inferno*: ““[W]hen you have returned to the sweet world / I pray you bring me to men’s memory”” (VI.88-9). Through his poetry Dante does preserve and share the stories of souls and their respective punishments. Readers of Frost’s poetry collection *North of Boston* might recognize it as a similar type of journey in which the poet records portraits of people trapped in their individual hells. Like the *contrapasso* in the *Inferno* which fashions each soul’s punishment according to his or her particular sin, Frost illustrates a variety of suffering experienced by figures in *North of Boston*.

A child has died in the poem “Home Burial,” and husband and wife are stuck together unable to understand each other’s grief. They can see the graveyard from the window, first described as the wife Amy “Looking back over her shoulder at some fear”

(“Home Burial” 3). This fear haunts her, and her husband only exacerbates and adds to her fear. She claims that he cannot speak of their loss because he does not know how to do so properly, and she accuses him of having no feelings. Amy takes his words on the burial day as a sign of his utter lack of care. However, they may be his way of conveying his sense of loss: “Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build” (96-7). Readers might consider the interaction of this couple in relation to Job and his wife in *A Masque of Reason*. According to Job’s wife, only a man would think that universal reason exists. In “Home Burial” the husband’s trait of seeming to accept their child’s death and attempting to respond with reason rather than emotion is what tortures Amy. She criticizes people in general for their reactions toward death:

‘Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’ (106-11)

Amy claims that people avoid grappling with the idea of death because they cannot bear facing something that they cannot understand. She also asserts “the world’s evil,” which suggests that people do not actually understand life or living people either. In her own grief Amy struggles to confront the lack of reason in life and death rather than avoiding it.

Amy thinks that her husband does not know how to speak of their loss, and she accuses him of immediately turning back to practical matters, even digging the grave

with his own hands. Though she tries to escape this type of grief that she despises, her husband wants to prevent her from taking her grief outside of their house. He indicates that his love should be sufficient consolation for her. As their conflicting expressions of grief frustrate each other, they drive each other more deeply into bitterness. Amy and her husband also serve as reminders to each other of the loss they have experienced.

Nevertheless, the husband does not want his wife to take the grief outside of the house, threatening to bring her back by force if she tries. This hell in which Amy and her husband are trapped is similar to the fate of Paolo and Francesca in the first circle of Dante's hell. Dante portrays these lovers as forever bound to each other and blown about in an eternal storm because they made their "reason subject to desire" (*Inferno* V.31, 39). Francesca explains the most painful aspect of their punishment: "There is no greater sorrow / than to recall our time of joy / in wretchedness" (V.121-3). Being forever joined with the source of lost joy is the suffering that these pairs experience in both Dante and Frost. Frost places this hellish situation in an earthly context to demonstrate how some people punish themselves for circumstances that are not necessarily their fault. He similarly uses a relationship in which emotion has overpowered reason. Perhaps because of the difficulty of seeing any reason in the death of their child, Amy seems to have abandoned reason, and her husband cannot express his own attempts at reason clearly. Both act irrationally throughout the poem, refusing to see any validity in the other's response to the death of their child. "Home Burial" associates people's disregard of reason with the lack of clear meaning in earthly events.

Another dramatic lyric in *North of Boston*, “The Fear,” also illustrates a relationship marred by fear and misunderstanding. The first moments of dialogue show the tension of the relationship of this man and woman:

“The woman spoke out sharply, ‘Whoa, stand still!

I saw it just as plain as a white plate’

.....

‘...—a man’s face.

You *must* have seen it too.’

‘I didn’t see it.

Are you sure—’

‘Yes, I’m sure!’

‘—it was a face?’” (“The Fear” 8-16).

The woman’s first words reveal her irritation. By italicizing the word “must” and inserting her ““Yes, I’m sure!”” in the middle of the man’s question, Frost shows that she expects the man, Joel, to doubt her. She wants Joel to believe that her fear is justified, not to simply comfort her. ““Don’t hold my arm!”” she protests, and she tells him, ““You’re not to come... This is my business”” (26, 41). She reveals that she is tormented by a fear of some unsettled matter with a particular person. Locked doors and drawn curtains do not ward off her sense that someone is watching them within their own house. Her fear has made her paranoid, and her defensiveness of this paranoia impairs her relationship with Joel. She knows that she cannot escape the fear unless she faces it, but this requires an opportunity to confront the person she fears. Thus she expresses determination to meet the person because if he leaves she will imagine him everywhere “looking out of trees

and bushes / Till I sha'n't dare to set a foot outdoors. / And I can't stand it” (52-4).

However, when a voice actually responds to her cry, she is startled. Then she reaches to Joel “for support” (75). Even though she has been pushing Joel away, she desires his presence in her moment of deepest fear. She repeats this cycle, ordering Joel to go back but then calling to him twice in her last lines. The poem ends mysteriously: “She spoke as if she couldn't turn. / The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground, / It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out” (101-3). The ending of “The Fear” leaves readers lacking a sense of certainty or closure, mimicking the feelings of the woman throughout the poem.

Frost in *North of Boston* introduces readers to people trapped in lives that lack positive relationships. The figures in his poems reveal the mismatch that Frost perceives between emotion and reason. Like Dante traveling through hell, readers can observe the suffering of people either disregarding reason or failing to recognize the limits of their own reason. Although Frost often makes the mystery of darkness appealing to his speakers in a way that Dante does not, he follows Dante in using both literal and figurative darkness as a component of searching for meaning.

CHAPTER THREE: A VISION OF TRUTH

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes a philosopher as "he who has a taste for every sort of knowledge and who is curious to learn and is never satisfied" and, more specifically, he who is a "[lover] of the vision of truth" (*The Republic* V). Frost explores this type of person in his poem "For Once, Then, Something." The speaker often kneels at wells and peers in, searching for something beneath the water. He laments the futility of his pursuit, "never seeing / Deeper down in the well than where the water / Gives me back in a shining surface picture / Me myself in the summer heaven godlike" ("For Once, Then, Something" 2-6). He looks for something beyond the image on the surface, but he always kneels "wrong to the light" (2). Though other people mock him, the speaker persists in looking into the wells. He maintains his thirst for knowledge, his curiosity. His dissatisfaction prevents him from giving up on finding a true vision beneath his own reflection. These qualities align with those of the Platonic philosopher in that he "is curious to learn and never satisfied" as he seeks "the vision of the truth" (*The Republic* V).

This insatiable desire for new knowledge and a vision of truth likewise marks Dante the pilgrim throughout the *Commedia*. In *Paradiso* readers see Dante in a related situation, studying visions that appear as "through still and limpid water, / not so deep that its bed is lost from view" (*Paradiso* 11-12). Dante has an advantage over the speaker in Frost's poem because he can clearly see past the water's surface. However, the images are still "so faint a pearl on a pallid forehead / comes no less clearly to our eyes" (14-15).

Since Dante the pilgrim has never seen such a vision of truth, he mistakenly turns to seek the original form being reflected. His heavenly guide Beatrice tells him that his thoughts do not yet trust truth but instead turn him toward the emptiness that he is accustomed to finding on earth. As Plato expresses in his cave allegory, a person cannot comprehend a true form after he has spent his life among shadows. On earth, the water would show Dante the reflection of a reflection, his own mirrored face, which in turn is an image of God. In Heaven, however, Dante finds not an image on the surface, but a form beneath it. The apparent faintness of this form is consistent with Plato's idea that light would be so dazzling initially after leaving the cave that shadows would still seem clearer than realities. However, in Frost's poem any potential form of truth is too faint for the aspiring philosopher to identify. He once thinks he can discern the substance "beyond the picture, / Through the picture, a something white, uncertain, / Something more of the depths" ("For Once" 8-10). Then a drop of water falls into the well, and a ripple blots out whatever is at the bottom. The speaker wonders, "What was that whiteness? / Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something" (14-15). In Frost's poem, the speaker can only speculate what might lie beneath the surface. He guesses that it might be truth, but he cannot clearly perceive what it is. Frost questions the idea of a person being able to find any form hiding behind reflections.

In a letter to Robert Coffin, Frost describes himself as "not the Platonist Robinson was," defining a Platonist as "one who believes what we have here is an imperfect copy of what is in heaven" ("Letter to Robert P. T. Coffin" 774). "The woman you have is an imperfect copy of some woman in heaven or in someone else's bed," he says (774). Frost plays with the idea of people always wanting the unattainable. He suggests that Platonism

aligns with the human desire for things that one cannot have. Considering this perspective might alter a reader's view of "For Once, Then, Something" regarding the speaker's pursuit of seeing past the surface picture. Frost recreates the Dantean situation of a persistently curious man searching for a form underneath the water, but the only reward for this man's continual efforts is a glimpse of what might be nothing more than a pebble. By rejecting the idea that earthly objects are imperfect copies of heavenly truths, Frost asserts that man cannot discover a transcendental meaning because it does not exist. Perhaps those who taunt the speaker for trying to discover something of significance beyond the water's surface are justified because no deeper meaning hides beneath the surface.

Frost's remarks in his letter imply that Platonism appeals to human nature because it allows people to rationalize their dissatisfaction with the world. If one believes this world is composed of mere shadows of heavenly forms, then one can more easily accept the parts of earth that seem imperfect or incomplete. However, Frost challenges the Platonic distinction between the earthly and the ideal. In the letter Frost claims, "I am philosophically opposed to having one Iseult for my vocation and another for my avocation" (774). Frost draws the language of vocation and avocation from "Two Tramps in Mud Time," in which the speaker claims "My object in living is to unite / My avocation and my vocation" ("Two Tramps" 66-7). The word "vocation" does not merely describe one's occupation; it stems from the Latin word meaning "to call" ("vocation" OED). Using the word "vocation" evokes the idea of being divinely called to some work. The word "avocation" means a calling away from something, often a distraction from one's occupation ("avocation" OED). Uniting a calling with a calling away might seem

impossible, but Frost clarifies that this simply requires making “love and need” one (“Two Tramps” 69). On one level, this refers to a joining of desire with will, as previously discussed. However, Frost reveals in his letter how it also relates to a non-Platonic view of the world.

After referring the reader of the letter to “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” Frost says, “You see where that lands me on the subject of Dante’s Beatrice” (“Letter” 774). Dante presents Beatrice as the ideal woman, calling her “the glorious lady of my mind” and the “scourge of vice and queen of virtue” (*Vita Nuova* 4, 17). In a *canzone* he even claims that heaven “lacks its full perfection only in lacking her” (36). Dante marries another woman despite (or perhaps because of) his profound reverence and love for Beatrice. As Frost explains, “A truly gallant Platonist will remain a bachelor as Robinson did from unwillingness to reduce any woman to the condition of being used without being idealized” (“Letter” 774). Since a Platonist believes that ideals exist separately from earthly forms, he is unable to view that which he experiences as ideal. A Platonist cannot unite his avocation and his vocation, nor can he turn his love and need into a single drive. In a world composed of forms of heavenly ideals, pure love holds the ideal as its object, while need revolves around forms, which can be attained on earth. Dante can only idealize Beatrice by placing a certain amount of distance between himself and her and by imagining her as belonging to heaven rather than earth. Dante centers the *Commedia* on Beatrice, who sends Virgil to guide Dante the pilgrim through hell and into purgatory when she sees that he has “gone so far astray” (*Inferno* II.65). She personally guides Dante the pilgrim through the rest of purgatory and heaven. It is Beatrice who explains that “the understanding / of mortals errs...there where the key / of the senses fails in its

unlocking” and that “dependent / on the senses, reason’s wings fall short” (*Paradiso* II.52-7). By referencing Beatrice in relation to “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” Frost challenges Dante’s portrayal of transcendental truth. He considers instead whether people must settle for the meanings they find on earth and accept the reason mingled with unreason. Since human reason fails to explain everything, Frost claims that he attempts to unite it with his passions. He strives to make his need one with his love.

Both Frost and Dante take their readers on journeys to witness the failure of human reason and the individuality of people’s suffering. By incorporating Dantean themes with his depictions of the natural order, Frost unearths some dissatisfaction with Dante’s answer to the apparent meaninglessness of the world. In “The Wood-Pile” Robert Frost creates a setting reminiscent of many of his other journey poems with their Dantean tones:

The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here

Or somewhere else: I was just far from home. (“The Wood-Pile” 5-9)

This speaker is another lost traveler wandering through a wood. “I was just far from home” summarizes the sense of being lost, knowing nothing except that one’s source of comfort and rest is nowhere close. A bird flies in front of the speaker of this poem, and the bird is careful to “say no word to tell me who he was / Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought” (12-13). According to the speaker, the bird thinks the speaker’s wandering is actually a pursuit of the white feather in the bird’s tail “like one who takes /

Everything said as personal to himself” (15-6). However, the speaker could as easily be the one taking everything personally because he interprets the bird’s action as a response to himself. As in Frost’s other poems regarding fear, ambiguity surrounds the question of whether the bird’s “little fear” is rational (19).

Frost’s poetry explores a variety of ideas related to the human journey and pursuit of reason, but it does not establish any governing idea of reason to give meaning to the human experience. Dante by contrast points to God as the source of reason in which people should hope and trust. Dante describes God as the “Light exalted beyond mortal thought” (*Paradiso* XXXIII.67). The source of truth is higher than human understanding, but this should not hinder people’s belief in it. Dante elaborates on his image of God:

In its depth I saw contained,
by love into a single volume bound,
the pages scattered through the universe
substances, accidents, and the interplay between them. (XXXIII.85-8)

It is impossible to separate substance from accident in this “dense knot” of earthly events (XXXIII.92). The two mingle and influence each other, and together they compose the divine Light.

Robert Frost in “The Trial by Existence” imagines a heaven that cycles through souls as they come up from earth and then choose new lives to return to on earth. Rather than a place of eternal rest where love reigns, souls find themselves in a temporary dwelling place where valor reigns. This heaven is, however, the home of truth. Even as God beautifully lays out each potential new life for someone to return to on earth, He never fails in “Setting the thing that is supreme” (“The Trial by Existence” 40). Truth

ultimately presides over the entire proceeding, as it does in Dante's portrayal of heaven. A brave soul then chooses the life, knowing he will have no memory of his choice once he is sent back to live on earth. God then binds "Spirit to matter till death come" (64). The premise of "The Trial by Existence" bears a strong resemblance to the Myth of Er that Socrates tells at the end of Plato's *Republic*. In the Myth of Er souls gather in between heaven and the underworld to pick new lives. Before returning to earth, each soul drinks from the River of Forgetfulness. Frost adjusts the myth, making the return to earth a choice rather than a requirement for all souls. Thus the return itself becomes something admirable, and each life holds something beautiful in its "little dream" (38). Socrates says, "A man must take with him into the world below an adamant faith in truth and right, that there too he may be undazzled by the desire of wealth or the other allurements of evil...For this is the way of happiness" (*The Republic* X). The souls who choose wisely and live diligently are promised a "happy and not undesirable existence" (X). By contrast, Frost closes his poem with this final stanza:

'Tis of the essence of life here,
 Though we choose greatly, still to lack
The lasting memory at all clear,
 That life has for us on the wrack
Nothing but what we somehow chose;
 Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
In the pain that has but one close,
 Bearing it crushed and mystified (65-72).

Since people cannot remember how their choices result in the lives they experience, they suffer. They lose the pride that comes with knowing how their own wills produced their lives. Therefore the essence of life is this lack of clear understanding rather than some lofty Platonic essence that endows earthly things with meaning.

CONCLUSION: DWELLING IN DARKNESS

“We were not given eyes or intellect / For all the light at once the source of light— / For wisdom that can have no counterwisdom” (*A Masque of Mercy* 412). This line from Frost’s play resonates with Dante’s portrayal of the human experience of divine light, which cannot be penetrated by any person’s unblinking eyes because it is “exalted beyond mortal thought” (*Paradiso* XXXIII.44-5, 67). In *A Masque of Mercy* Frost identifies the main area in which he thinks human reason fails, in trying to comprehend the relationship between justice and mercy. Readers of this play encounter a Jonah figure who says, “I’ve lost my faith in God to carry out / the threats He makes against the city evil. / I can’t trust God to be unmerciful” (*A Masque of Mercy* 393-4). The play considers whether justice and mercy are opposing forces, such that mercy prevents justice from being actualized. The character named My Brother’s Keeper tells Jonah,

...you make too much of justice.

There’s some such thing and no one will deny it—

Enough to bait the trap of the ideal

From which there can be no escape for us

But by our biting off our adolescence

And leaving it behind us in the trap. (404)

With this gruesome image, Frost conveys the dangerous allure of justice. The Keeper claims that only by abandoning the relative innocence of adolescence can someone escape the idea that the world is governed by justice alone. He describes the ideal life of

the Sermon on the Mount as “An irresistible impossibility. / A lofty beauty no one can live up to / Yet no one turn from trying to live up to” (408). The character of Paul in the play argues that this standard makes all people undeserving of God’s good judgment and thus needful of God’s mercy. According to Paul, a perfect life is “An end you can’t by any means achieve / And yet can’t turn your back on or ignore, / That is the mystery you must accept” (408-9). The Keeper in response says, “I’d rather be lost in the woods / Than found in church” (409). This sentence expresses a sentiment that seems to underlie many of Frost’s poems. Whereas Dante the pilgrim works to find his way out of the *selva oscura* and toward divine light, many of the figures in Frost’s poems prefer to wander lost in the mystery of the woods.

In Robert Frost’s notebooks he outlines his thoughts on justice and mercy, observing that mercy first appears in the story of Jonah. He writes, “Jonah ran away [for] fear Gods mercy would let him down and not carry out the prophesy [he had] assigned him” (*The Notebooks of Robert Frost* 4.35r). From *A Masque of Mercy* readers can see that Frost does not refer to a fear of God’s mercy failing but rather a fear that God might act mercifully and thus not fulfill the punishment of the prophesy. Jonah fears injustice. Frost continues to claim that mercy is “the whole thing” in the New Testament, where people’s failure to live up to the Sermon on the Mount leaves them no option “but to throw [themselves] on Mercy” (4.35r). Frost writes, “I wonder who...in heaven or hell or what in the nature of things is at the back of it. I can see in the nature of things the certain bafflement of reason” (4.35r). By connecting “bafflement of reason” with the tension between justice and mercy, Frost shows that the limit of human understanding relates to the way in which justice and mercy seem contradictory. “[M]ercy is [an] opposite of

justice. On the battle field of life justice comes first; mercy moves on like the ambulance...But if child rearing is the figure. Mercy comes first in a mother to prepare the way for our facing the rigors of justice” (29.9r, 8v). Like Jonah fearing God might not act in accordance with his prophesy, Frost seems to have some distaste for mercy and its lack of reason. He labels it “illogical kindness” (26.12r). He writes, “Handicapping needed if the human race is to be a race of Justice and Mercy. Mercy to the weak is handicapping the strong” (31.6v). Mercy imposes equality so that people do not receive the treatment that they seem to deserve. Frost answers the question of whether he believes in justice: “Yes not uncontaminated uncorrupted unvitiated by mercy” (21.11r). Though the irrational force of mercy prevents perfect justice, Frost maintains his belief in justice.

Dante writes in his *Convivio*, “[A]lthough every virtue in man is deserving of love, that is most deserving of love in him which is most human, and that is justice, which resides in the rational or intellectual part, that is, in the will” (*Convivio* I.12). Dante views justice as the most human virtue because it comes from human will and thus is an expression of reason. However, readers of the *Commedia* see that Dante portrays human reason as merely a reflection of divine reason. In Dante’s work God enforces justice comprehensively in a way that cannot be accomplished on earth. Dante places these words in the voice of an eagle composed of the souls of just rulers: ““The primal Will, good in Itself, / has never from Itself, the highest good, declined. / Only what accords with It is just”” (*Paradiso* XIX.86-8). Contrary to Frost, Dante does not view mercy as tainting justice; instead he portrays them as working in tandem. Mortal minds cannot comprehend eternal judgment, which relies on the mercy of God’s sacrifice. As

the eagle of justice says, ““To this kingdom / no one ever rose without belief in Christ, / whether before or after He was nailed up on the tree”” (XIX.103-5). No one can pass God’s judgment without the sacrifice of Christ that covers sins and fulfills His justice.

While Dante sees a beautiful alignment of mercy with justice in the image of the cross, Frost views mercy as interfering with the rationality of justice. Frost presents Christ’s sacrifice in a much different light: “Christ sacrificed himself...rather to show us that we must sacrifice ourselves on the altar of his impossible ideals than to suffer vicariously to save us from...sacrifice. No atonement quite vicarious” (*Notebooks* 23.9r). As he expresses in *A Masque of Mercy*, Frost thinks that Christian doctrine forces all men to surrender themselves to mercy. He continues in his notebook entry: “Justice is a very superficial...consideration. We strive in the lists, we are seduced into striving but the best man often goes down. Job established it that there was no necessary connection between virtue and success or even ability and success” (23.9r). Frost returns to the idea he considers in *A Masque of Reason*. He elaborates on the idea by claiming that mercy’s interference with the rationality of justice is what prevents virtue from being an accurate indicator of one’s fortune in life. This suggests that human efforts toward goodness are ultimately futile because they will always be insufficient. Frost concludes:

To the most we can achieve we shall say Vanity of Vanities. How much more is a king than a peasant.

A pope than a pauper. Before these hard words of the Sermon we are all equally nobodies. The sin of seeking our own advantage that we were seduced into!

That alone is enough to destroy us beyond ordinary forgiveness. (23.9r, 10r)

Frost claims that God's impossible ideals and His mercy leave people with no choice but to accept His sacrifice. The forced equality of mercy that Frost imagines forms a contrast with the hierarchy Dante constructs in the *Commedia*. Even in *Paradiso* "the grace of the highest Good / does not rain down in equal measure" (*Paradiso* III.89-90). Nevertheless, every soul finds joy in that their placement in the heavenly hierarchy is in accordance with God's will. Thus Dante aligns mercy with justice.

Though Frost sees justice and mercy as opposing forces, he believes the two can coexist. He presents this as one of many contradictions in his poetry; he thinks that all of life is based on contradictions. He writes, "Life is that which can mix oil and water...It can consist of the inconsistent...It o'er rules the harsh divorce that parts things natural and divine Life is a bursting unity of opposition barely held" (*Notebooks* 8.58r).

Addressing Christianity in particular, Frost says, "All a man's art is a bursting unity of opposites. Christ's message almost tears itself apart with its great contradictions" (8.58v). Frost's poetry relishes these types of contradictions and the irony that they can produce. As demonstrated by the poems previously discussed, such as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Birches," many of the travelers in Frost desire the mystery of the wood, which reflects Frost's own enjoyment of contradiction. Instead of describing a Dantean journey out of the darkness and toward the light of perfected reason, Frost dwells in the moment of becoming lost in poems like "Directive" and "The Wood-Pile." He elevates the tension between concepts like justice and mercy to highlight the messiness of life and the limits of human reason. As witnessed by the content of his poems, Frost does not view this confusion as a thing to avoid. Frost uses his poetry to test and push the limits of reason.

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