

2016

Poetic Labor: Meaning and Matter in Robert Frost's Poetry.

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Recommended Citation

Pan, Lina, "Poetic Labor: Meaning and Matter in Robert Frost's Poetry." (2016). *CMC Senior Theses*. Paper 1401.
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Claremont McKenna College

Poetic Labor: Meaning and Matter in Robert Frost's Poetry.

submitted to
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and
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by
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for
Senior Thesis
Spring 2016
April 25, 2016

Abstract

This thesis examines Frost's conception of poetry as the labor of shaping human value. It investigates how Frost consciously shaped his notions of "sound of sense" and metaphor, which he deemed fundamental elements of poetic labor, in contradistinction to the Modernist poetics of Eliot and Pound. The author closely examines a representative sample of Frost's poetry and prose as critiques of Modernist poetic theory and its implications for what Frost deemed the essential human function of poetry. The thesis will interest scholars studying strains of English poetic thought that developed concurrently with and against Modernist poetic thought. More broadly, it will interest those who seek a serious and thoughtful challenge to Modernist literary trends that prevail even today.

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I. An Overview of Frost's Conception of Poetic Labor.

Poetry is the most profound form of human labor. And labor is man's foremost means of asserting his own terms of worth against the amoral world of matter. These attitudes, which emerge over the course of his writings, are fundamental to Frost's poetics.

Frost does not go so far as Emerson in portraying the universe as "the externization of the soul."¹ Instead, he withholds from the poet-laborer absolute dominion over his materials. Without Emerson's guarantee, nature reverts to indifference and at times hostility towards the poet's attempts to harness it. There nonetheless remains an extent to which he may succeed in shaping that great ruck, chiefly through creative efforts that manipulate perspective. It is to this extent that the poet may use nature as the raw material of his metaphors. This attitude towards creativity is allegorized in "Birches":

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
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—²

Frost recognizes man's instinct to "prefer" nature a certain way, and to labor to realize that preference, though its attainment may prove impossible. He presents this creative tendency as the true driving force of the poet. One's eventual failure to unite meaning with matter, the argument goes, should not discourage one from reaching as far as one can into the ruck of nature and making as much use of it as possible. As Frost writes in "New Hampshire," he would "hate to be a

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson et al. (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 293.

² Robert Frost, "Birches," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 118.

runaway from nature.” He deems poets who succumb to what he calls “Matthew Arnoldism,” who know

too well for any earthly use
The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
And never over-stepped it save in dreams³,

inferior aesthetes for falling back “on words, and [trying] his worst to make words speak/Louder than actions, and sometimes [achieving] it.”⁴

This uneasy relationship between meaning and matter informs both Frost’s conception of metaphor and his understanding of poetic language. To Frost, poems that shy away from authentic experience and only concern themselves with textual experiments are products of a poet who “can’t *do* anything.”⁵ Whether out of fear or pretension, such a poet toys with language without acknowledging its roots in life, and fails to achieve more than the superficial rearrangement of words. But Frost deemed life the true material, concern, and end of poetry—indeed, of creativity itself. He remarked to poet and critic William Braithwaite that

[w]hen Wordsworth said, “Write with your eye on the object” ...he really meant something more. That something carries out what I mean by writing with your ear to the voice. That is what Wordsworth did himself in all his best poetry, proving *that there can be no creative imagination unless there is a summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked....*As language only really exists in the mouths of men, here again Wordsworth was right in trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words—and in their limited range too, actually used in common speech—but their sound.⁶ [emphasis added]

³ Robert Frost, “New Hampshire,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 161.

⁴ Frost, “New Hampshire,” 161.

⁵ Frost, “New Hampshire,” 161.

⁶ Robert Newdick, “Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense,” *American Literature* 9 (3). Duke University Press: 294, doi:10.2307/2919660.

In discussing the nature of poetic language, Frost remains true to his view that creative imagination depends upon the “summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked.” Poetic language must capture the underlying cadences of living speech if the poet is ever to achieve authenticity and originality of expression. The problem with poetry that limits its considerations to those of the text, he argues to Braithwaite, is

not so much that it keeps forever to the same set phrases (though Heaven knows those are bad enough) but that it sounds forever with the same reading tones. We must go out into the vernacular for tones that haven't been brought to book. We must write with the ear on the speaking voice. We must imagine the speaking voice.⁷

The importance of the verbal imagination to Frost cannot be understated. In a letter addressed to literary critic Sidney Cox, he argues for the primary aesthetic importance of the “hearing ear,” stating that poets

value the seeing eye already. Time we said something about the hearing ear--the ear that calls up vivid sentence forms. We write of things we see and we write in accents we hear. Thus we gather both our material and our technique with the imagination from life: and our techniques becomes as much material as material itself.⁸

But it would be untrue to claim that Frost deems visual materials *in themselves* alienated from life and irrelevant to poetry. His challenge is toward a poetry that concerns itself solely with the visual possibilities presented by textual manipulation, rendering secondary or even nonexistent considerations of authentic human expression. To Frost, visual and verbal materials must *both* be gathered by “the imagination from life” to serve their respective ends in the

⁷ Robert Frost, “Letter to William Braithwaite, March 22, 1915,” in *The Letters of Robert Frost, 1886-1920*, ed. Donald Sheehy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.), 265.

⁸ Robert Frost, “Letter to Sidney Cox, Dec 1914,” in *The Letters of Robert Frost, 1886-1920*, ed. Donald Sheehy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.), 234.

creative process. The poet's folly would be to conflate or confuse these ends, for each material can only be used to achieve its particular end. One cannot, in Frost's opinion, generate new, authentic means of accessing human experience solely through the manipulation of text, for the only authentic generation possible in poetic language—and indeed all language—is one that takes place spontaneously in speech. If the great end of poetry is to access some authentic truth of experience, then the poet must gather and write in organic tones of voice so as to best reach the facility in the reader that recognizes all true expressions of its humanity:

In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, "Oh yes I know what you mean." It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize.⁹

To capture the real cadences of living experience, then, the poet must not look to invent better, but perceive deeper; he must gather "sentence sounds" by the ear "fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously."¹⁰

Frost conceives of sentences sounds as fundamental units of meaning upon which "other sounds called words may be strung":

It may take some time to make people see—they are so accustomed to look at the sentence as a grammatical cluster of words. The question is where to begin the assault on their prejudice. For my part I have about decided to begin by demonstrating by examples that the sentence as a sound in itself apart from the word sounds is no mere figure of speech. I shall show the sentence sound saying all the sentence conveys with little or no help from the meaning of the words. I shall show the sentence sound opposing the sense of the words as in irony. And so till I establish the distinction between the grammatical sentence

⁹ Robert Frost, "Letter to John Bartlett, February 22, 1914," in *The Letters of Robert Frost, 1886-1920*, ed. Donald Sheehy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.), 174.

¹⁰ Frost, "Letter to John Bartlett, February 22, 1914," 173.

and the vital sentence.¹¹

In considering the true, vital source of poetic meaning, Frost distinguishes between “sentence sounds” and “word sounds.” He describes the former as organic outgrowths of spoken language that the poet “[summons] from Heaven knows where under excitement with the audile imagination”, and the latter as mere visual markers of the former, with a function akin to that of musical notation. The grammatical sentence, he states, is “merely accessory to [the vital sentence] and chiefly valuable as furnishing a clue to it.”¹² The true source of poetic meaning, then, cannot be *text*, which on its own serves only as notation. Instead, poetic meaning is rooted in sentence sounds that communicate the “sound of sense” “with little or no help from the meaning of the words.”¹³ Moreover, these sentence sounds can only be caught “fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously”¹⁴; the poet cannot invent them. Frost was understandably suspicious of proclaimed innovations in poetic form that depended on experimenting with the text itself:

[Free verse] sometimes succeeds in painting a picture that is very clear and startling. It’s good as something created momentarily for its sudden startling effect. It hasn’t the qualities, however, of something lastingly beautiful. And sometimes my objection to it is that it’s a pose. It’s not honest. When a man sets out consciously to tear up forms and rhythms and measures, then he is not interested in giving you poetry. He just wants to perform; he wants to show you his tricks. He will get an effect; nobody will deny that, but it is not a harmonious effect.¹⁵

To Frost, originality in poetry has nothing to do with manipulating the text to create startling effects. Instead, a poet achieves true originality when he has

¹¹ Frost, “Letter to Sidney Cox, Dec 1914,” 233.

¹² Frost, “Letter to Sidney Cox, Dec 1914,” 234.

¹³ Frost, “Letter to Sidney Cox, Dec 1914,” 233.

¹⁴ Frost, “Letter to John Bartlett, February 22, 1914,” 173.

¹⁵ Newdick, “Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense,” 294.

postured his words with living tones of voice that have not yet been transmuted into poetry. Within Frost's poetics of sound, then, the text itself does not generate meaning or form, but serves as a medium through which the poet may posture the organic inflections of emotion that develop spontaneously in human speech.

Frost conceives of the relation between sound and meaning such that "every meaning has a particular sound-posture, or to put it another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with."¹⁶ His conception of sound as the "posture" of poetic meaning points to a positive view of poetic form: it suggests that the poet can achieve lasting meaning and form by incorporating the sound of sense into his poetic efforts, and that the potential for lasting form and meaning in fact preexists in the raw material of poetry (i.e. sound itself). Frost had a confidence in what the poet could achieve with sound postures that far surpassed his confidence in what the poet could achieve with metaphor:

The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it's more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and, in fact, all effects, can be indicated and obtained.¹⁷

Here, Frost describes the poet as a skillful agent able to manipulate words and sounds into sequences to elicit specific auditory and emotional effects in the reader. This description adds an important nuance to our understanding of Frost's poet: he does not merely record the tones of voice he receives from life,

¹⁶ Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," 292.

¹⁷ Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense, 298.

but exercises his creative will over them. The proof of his creative will and judgment is his ability to bring those tones into form. Hence, there are two tasks for the poet concerned with rendering the sound of sense into language. It is not enough for him to be attuned to the tones of voice from life; he must know how to shape these raw, irregular materials into poetry, chiefly by bringing them into tension with the regular beat of meter. In a letter to John Bartlett, Frost writes:

But remember we are still talking merely of the raw material of poetry. An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic [*sic*] words we call doggerel.¹⁸

And in a letter to Walter Pritchard Eaton, he adds:

[These sounds] are real cave things: they were before words were. And they are as definitely things as any image of sight. The most creative imagination is only their summoner. But summoning them is not all. *They are only lovely* when thrown and drawn and displayed across spaces of the footed line. Everyone knows that except a free-verse.¹⁹ [emphasis added]

Frost's confidence in the poet's skill to bring the sound of sense into form—indeed, to *improve* it with form—stands in sharp contrast to his ambiguous attitude towards the poet's ability to accomplish anything equal with his visual materials. That may have to do with his lack of confidence in his visual materials, as illustrated by this excerpt from his notebooks:

Nature is a chaos. Humanity is a ruck...the ruck is a discouraging medium to work in. Form is only roughly achieved there and at best leaves the mind a dissatisfaction, a fear of impermanence, and

¹⁸ Robert Frost, "Letter to John Bartlett, July 4, 1913," in *The Letters of Robert Frost, 1886-1920*, ed. Donald Sheehy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.), 123.

¹⁹ Robert Frost, "Letter to Walter Pritchard Eaton, September 18, 1914," in *The Letters of Robert Frost, 1886-1920*, ed. Donald Sheehy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.), 335.

a relative confusion. It is always transitional as rolling clouds cohere—a figure never quite takes shape before it begins to be another figure. Contemplation turns from it in mental distress to the physicians. The true revolt from it is not into madness or into a reform. It is outward in the line projected by nature to human nature and so on to individual nature. It is the one man working in a medium of paint words or notes—or wood or iron. Nothing composes the mind like composing. Let a mere man attempt no more than he is meant for.²⁰

Although Frost is confident about the intrinsic value of the tones of voice that comprise his auditory materials, he does not extend the same confidence to his visual materials. The language he describes them with is that of impermanence, disarray, and indefiniteness—of a ruck where figures can “never quite take shape.” The poet’s relationship with his visual materials, then, is much more strained, with the poet’s creative will playing a more complex and troubled role in uniting matter with meaning. In his writings, Frost tends to personify this strain in the figure of the laborer. For him, the figure of the laborer is commensurate with the figure of the poet: both share the struggle of imposing some meaningful form upon large, rough, and undifferentiated masses of matter.

Just as the scythe or the axe is the tool by which the laborer harnesses nature, metaphor is the poet’s means of organizing his materials according to his will. That does not mean the poet may disregard reality or arrange everything arbitrarily. Instead, his metaphors must reflect an inhuman natural reality while simultaneously expressing a stubbornly human interpretation of that reality. These two portraits of reality coexist when the poet understands the limit to which he may bend nature to his will, and incorporates this limit into his metaphors. As Frost remarks,

²⁰ Robert Frost, “4.25r,” in *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Faggen. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.), 46.

A man who makes really good literature is like a fellow who goes into the fields to pull carrots. He keeps on pulling them patiently enough until he finds a carrot that suggests something else to him. It is not shaped like other carrots. He takes out his knife and notches it here and there, until the two pronged roots become legs and the carrot takes on something of the semblance of a man. The real genius takes hold of that bit of life which is suggestive to him and gives it form. But the man who is merely a realist, and not a genius, will leave the carrot just as he finds it. The man who is merely an idealist and not a genius, will try to carve a donkey where no donkey is suggested by the carrot he pulls.²¹

Frost's allegory of metaphor creation depicts the relationship between poet and matter as one highly dependent on the poet's perception of matter. Every poet is presented with the same world of matter, but the poetic genius is one who perceives suggestions of humanity in nature and wills the form and substance of humanity into it. The poet's ability to perceive the trajectory from meaning to matter—not matter to meaning—is key to his success with metaphor. Because poetic meaning is imposed, rather than discovered, it must begin somewhere intrinsic to the mind.

In this way, Frost's attitude towards his auditory materials diverges from that of his visual materials. His conception of sound of sense as definite and inherently meaningful points to a positive conception of a world in which meaning and form are guaranteed. In contrast, his understanding of metaphor as limited and amorphous points to a view of universe that does not yield meaning or form so readily. More often than not, his metaphors remind us of the metaphysical opacity of the natural universe:

*Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,*

²¹ Robert Frost, "Remarks on Form in Poetry (1919)," in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 79.

Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.²²

In “For once, then, something,” what the speaker finds in the depths of the well is not a glimpse of some obscured reality, but the “shining surface picture/[He himself] in the summer heaven godlike/Looking out of a wreath”. His true power is not to discover meaning in nature, but to read his will into it. Hence, whether nature may someday yield deeper truth is of little creative use to him, though perhaps of great speculative concern. The poem’s titular remark, then, is aimed at those who do not perceive the essential opacity of nature, and who thereby seem to discern more in it than “a something white, uncertain,/Something more of the depths.” Where they claim to see absolute meaning, the poet sees at most the suggestion or imposition of meaning.

While this view of meaning seems to undermine the poet’s creative imagination, Frost parses out its nuances in poems such as “The Freedom of the Moon”:

I’ve tried the new moon tilted in the air
 Above a hazy tree-and-farmhouse cluster
 As you might try a jewel in your hair.
 I’ve tried it fine with little breadth of luster,
 Alone, or in one ornament combining
 With one first-water start almost shining.

I put it shining anywhere I please.
 By walking slowly on some evening later,
 I’ve pulled it from a crate of crooked trees,
 And brought it over glossy water, greater,
 And dropped it in, and seen the image wallow,

²² Robert Frost, “For Once, then, Something,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 208.

The color run, all sorts of wonder follow.²³

Frost appears to grant creative control in full to the speaker. However, he actually paints a more nuanced portrait of creative prowess—one whose natural constraints the poet recognizes, yet retains the ability to exercise. This control is achieved through visual rather than physical means. If one looks past the whimsical figures the moon is couched in, it does not relocate in tandem with the speaker's words, but remains fixed in the tableau of the countryside—above the “tree-and-farmhouse cluster,” between a “crate of crooked trees,” and in the reflection of a body of water. Nevertheless, the speaker uses the moon to assert an active and imperative role over his environment. He takes advantage of the moon's appearance of movement to suggest that it is his “walking slowly on some evening later” that changes its position, and that he in fact has the power to “put it shining anywhere [he] [pleases].” By aligning subjective perspective with objective reality, he is able to insinuate his creative will over nature without having to affect impossible changes in it. The poet's ability to manipulate the language of perspective thus grants him more creative control over his materials than would be possible if he simply mimicked objective reality. It is his careful mastery over the tools of subjectivity at his disposal—visual perspective, language, and metaphor—that allows him to say

as you go more than you even hoped you were going to be able to say, and coming with surprise to an end that you foreknew only with some sort of emotion.²⁴

²³ Robert Frost, “The Freedom of the Moon,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 224.

²⁴ Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry; A Meditative Monologue,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 728.

The “emotion” mentioned here is, in Frost’s view, the originator of poetic substance. Whether or not matter is poetic by nature, it is up to the poet to shape it into poetry and have it take on life and meaning independent of matter.

Metaphor is thus not merely an effort to organize matter, but an attempt at combining subjective and objective paradigms so as to *root* poetic emotion and human value in matter. This accounts for the self-consciousness present when Frost uses nature as metaphor: the first-person voice is frequently found hovering over nature, hyperaware of their disunion.

Such persistent self-consciousness might render Frost’s entire creative process ironic if he did not intensely value the very attempt at transmuting poetic emotion into substance:

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed. We stop just short there. *But it is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking, that attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter.* It is wrong to anybody a materialist simply because he tries to say spirit in terms of matter, as if that were a sin. Materialism is not the attempt to say all in terms of matter. The only materialist—be he poet, teacher, scientist, politician, or statesman—is the man who gets lost in his material without a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order. He is the lost soul.²⁵ [emphasis added]

Frost’s vision presents metaphor as the closest point of contact between matter and spirit. We arrive, then, to importance of *substantiation* to Frost’s understanding of poetic labor. It has been said that the subject matter and vocal matter of a poem must be rooted in meaningful human experience. Here, however, Frost goes further, and likens the poetic act of thinking in metaphor to

²⁵ Frost, “Education by Poetry,” 723-724.

an act of substantiation, a bringing of a private, unnamed poetic emotion into the world of form and matter. In the above passage from *Education by Poetry*, the final substantiation never takes place, and matter and spirit remain divorced in reality, though united in vocabulary. Nevertheless, the optimistic tone of the passage points to Frost's view that poetry is something that is "believed into existence, that [begins] in something more felt than known."²⁶ Through the process of "believing into existence," human value and meaning is brought into direct confrontation with the amoral chaos of the material universe, which at times seems to willfully undermine its challenger, and at other times does so without intention or effort.

The latter case emphasizes the material universe's imperviousness to human attempts to find form and purpose in it. The futility and triviality of such attempts is highlighted in poems such as "The Demiurge's Laugh":

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.
 It was just as the light was beginning to fail
 That I suddenly heard—all I needed to hear:
 It has lasted me many and many a year.

The sound was behind me instead of before,
 A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
 As of one who utterly couldn't care.
 The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
 Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;
 And well I knew what the Demon meant.

I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
 I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
 And checked my steps to make pretence
 It was something among the leaves I sought
 (Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).

²⁶ Frost, "Education by Poetry," 726.

Thereafter I sat me against a tree.²⁷

The speaker in “The Demiurge’s Laugh” runs on the Demon’s trail with an ease and freedom similar to that expressed in “The Freedom of the Moon” and “For Once, then, Something.” His is not an ignorant “joy,” but one that recognizes the limitations of the pursuit it is derived from. Nevertheless, the speaker preserves a sense of agency—though he is on the Demon’s trail, it is he who hunts, and so who asserts control over his environment. The awakening of the Demon permanently disrupts his illusion. In revealing the Demon to be behind him instead of before, it exposes his presumptuousness in assuming a position of control over his environment. And while the speaker’s senses are fully captivated by the Demon’s actions, the Demon laughs and goes, utterly unengaged with the speaker. The speaker’s psychic agency is trivial; the Demon’s real thrall over sense and matter is not. Chagrined by his impotence, the speaker abandons all pretense of subjective, creative power, and takes on an even less convincing pretense of discovering some independent principle in nature. The creative freedom so whimsically and willfully exercised in poems such as “The Freedom of the Moon” dissipates here under the oppressive indifference of the material world.

The Demon’s awakening occurs “just as the light was beginning to fail,” an event that corresponds to what is described in Frost’s prose as the “evil days”²⁸ during which creativity becomes impossible:

²⁷ Robert Frost, “The Demiurge’s Laugh,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 33.

²⁸ Robert Frost, “Marion Leroy Burton and Education (1925),” in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 93.

Getting something to say and getting technique are the same thing. The whole of art is getting something to say. Find out what ideas are and start at once to have them before the evil days come when you can't start anything.²⁹

Frost attributes the poet's loss of creativity to his passage into an era of "evil," implicitly recognizing poetic prowess as a regular form of defense against the chaotic malevolence of nature. However, this defense is temporary. One way it fails is through the inevitable advance of old age and its attendant intellectual temptations, which "dry up" one's creativity. The means Frost offers to counter this is simply to get the most substantial of one's poetic ideas out in the world before one runs out of youth.³⁰ Another way it fails is through the natural limitations of figurative language. In "Education by Poetry," Frost points out that

unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere . Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe with science; you are not safe in history.³¹

Frost did not consider language a failsafe means of grasping the universe. As demonstrated in the passage above, he believed that the figurative and ambiguous nature of words inevitably led to the instability of human paradigms and terms of value. Nevertheless, he deemed the pliability of figures its advantage to the poet. For this reason, he found the birch tree an apt figure for human creativity:

The tide of evil rises. Your Ark is sailing and you make me a last-minute allowance of a single plant on board for seed. (It would have to be two if animals, or there would be no seed. Well, let it be

²⁹ Frost, "Marion Leroy Burton," 93.

³⁰ Robert Frost, "Poetry and School (1951)," in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 167.

³¹ Frost, "Education by Poetry," 721-722.

a tree—Birches. Don't ask me why at a time of doom and confusion like this. My reasons might be forced and unreal. But if I must defend my choice, I will say I took it for its vocality and its ulteriority.³²

In the passage above, Frost picks out the birch tree's "vocality" and "ulteriority" as traits he wishes to preserve during the time of "evil," for the reason that they will preserve him against the effects of that evil. As discussed before, he uses phrases such as "evil" and "time of doom and confusion" in his writings to signify or portend some loss of creative prowess. When speaking of creative impotence, he does not refer to a sterile and blank mental space, but situates himself right within the morass of nature. His sense of creativity, in particular the kind that employs metaphor, is that it does not occur within a mental vacuum, but exists in tension with nature. Poetic prowess—prowess in finding a form for one's meaning—must always be considered in relation to nature, if not necessarily in opposition to it. Nature, then, is both a necessary medium and an insurmountable obstacle for poetic labor.

If nature cannot be conquered by metaphor, still all is not lost for the poet. In his *Notebooks*, Frost argues that the act of composing the mind—not nature—is the ultimate outcome of creative labor.³³ In line with his understanding of poetry as an extension of human labor, he applies its compositional nature and effect to all acts—not just the literary—that facilitate creative efforts to use the "ruck" as a medium for expressing human terms of value. His creative labor, like the work of the farm-laborers he portrays,

³² Robert Frost, "Comment on "Birches" (1933)," in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 113.

³³ Frost, "4.25r," 46.

preserves what vestiges of human value and meaning it can amid the chaos of the material world.

That creative labor preserves human value by composing the mind is emphasized in "Birches." In the poem, Frost contrasts his two states as creative laborer: the first, as a skillful "swinger of birches content with swinging "*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,/But dipped its top and set [him] down again," and the second, as a man "weary of considerations," groping about the hostile ruck of nature. The first is a portrait of a youth who has mastered the limits of his craft, sometimes even surpassing them:

He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.³⁴

The second, on the other hand, is a portrait of a man who has lost his hope of achieving anything through creative labor, implicitly because he has tried too hard to get at something beyond the scope of his creative possibilities:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.³⁵

Details such as the pathlessness of the wood and the injury to the eye, the primary organ of perception, ensue from the speaker's unspoken attempt to engage with nature beyond what he is capable of. In this sense, the poem

³⁴ Frost, "Birches," 118.

³⁵ Frost, "Birches," 118.

illustrates the dangers of creative hubris. It is better to master what one can reasonably expect to master, and be pleasantly surprised when one surpasses those expectations, than to try to master things one can never hope to master, and have only one's failures and limitations to look to in the end.

In writing of his own craft, Frost discusses the tension between creative capabilities and limitations in relation to issues of form. The poet, he argues, should achieve small forms "needing nobody's cooperation; a basket, a letter, a garden, a room, an idea, a picture, a poem."³⁶ Otherwise, he will succumb to a self-destructive "dilation" of his mind:

But it is not possible to get outside the age you are in to judge it exactly. Indeed it is as dangerous to try to get outside of anything as large as an age as it would be to engorge a donkey. Witness the many who in the attempt have suffered a dilation from which the tissues and the muscles of the mind have never been able to recover natural shape. They can't pick up anything delicate or small any more. They can't use a pen. They have to use a typewriter. And they gape in agony. They can write huge shapeless novels, huge gobs of raw sincerity bellowing with pain and that's all that they can write.³⁷

In other words, what poets can and should labor to achieve amid the great ruck of nature are small, clear forms that can be considered "for how much more [they are] than nothing," and not "how much less [they are] than everything":

The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so? To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider it, I suppose, for how much less it is than everything.³⁸

³⁶ Robert Frost, "'Letter' to *The Amherst Student* (1935)" in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 115.

³⁷ Frost, "'Letter' to *The Amherst Student*," 114.

³⁸ Frost, "'Letter' to *The Amherst Student*," 115.

While the poet is not able to organize the entire background of hugeness and confusion, the persistence of the ruck is necessary for contrast, and enables him to see and appreciate the smaller forms that he is able to create. For the poet, these smaller forms are his metaphors. Limited though they are in their success as forms, they nevertheless represent the best of the poet's labor, for they allow the poet to reach out with his eye into all of nature before seizing some little suggestion of form to imagine his own.

Frost's various excursions into poetic language's capacities and limitations give us a more nuanced understanding of his poetic labor. His conception of "sound of sense" and metaphor may seem at odds with each other, but one must take into account the emphasis Frost placed on the role of the imagination in the use of both. The poetic imagination is comprised of the "audile imagination" and the visual one—and both, ultimately, must draw from life. And while he does not resolve ambiguities over the longevity of creative labor or the instability of figures, his poetry is proof that these shortcomings do not inhibit a true poet's imagination. Poems, after all, were written in spite of them. As the saying goes: "one could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

II. Imagining Human Value.

Frost deemed metaphor the “whole of thinking.”³⁹ That meant the trajectory of Western intellectual thought was not best described by a linear path of improvement, but by a succession of “metaphors of the hour.” The great metaphors of his age, in his opinion, were those of scientific advancement and mechanical improvement. These he traced to Darwinian and Marxist thinking. Above all, he was alarmed by the outcome of applying the scientific notion of progress to literary thinking. In his opinion, the ethos of inevitable advance—mechanical advance—was anathema to literary creation. It promised an expansion of technical possibilities at the expense of what he deemed the true province of poetry: individuality, creativity, and, above all, life.

In Frost’s opinion, poets who attempt to renew poetry in the scientific spirit make no profound improvement to their craft. Instead, their experimental, amputative methods lead primarily to reductive outcomes:

It may come to the notice of posterity (and then again it may not) that this, our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served. Science put it into our heads that there must be new ways to be new. Those tried were largely by subtraction--elimination. Poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye; and a loud general intoning had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear, those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto constituted the better half of poetry. It was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability...It was tried premature like the delicacy of unborn calf in Asia. It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for

³⁹ Frost, “Education by Poetry,” 720.

small pay in the underworld. These many things was it tried without, and what had we left? Still something. The limits of poetry had been sorely strained, but the hope was that the idea had been somewhat brought out.⁴⁰

The above passage, from Frost's "Introduction to E. A. Robinson's 'King Jasper,'" reflects Frost's view on what he termed the "Pound-Eliot-Richards-Reed school of art."⁴¹ He found the modern eagerness to reduce everything to a matter of inevitable, monolithic advance—whether biological, industrial, or political—reflected in the modernist poets' obsession with encompassing the *geist* of their time. T.S. Eliot captured this obsession with his argument in *The Metaphysical Poets* that the "great variety and complexity" of his civilization necessitated "various and complex results" in poetry—that "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."⁴²

Frost found the modernist aspiration for poets to become what Pound called the "steam-gauges of [their] nation's intellectual life"⁴³ counterproductive to the poet's task of making poetry. Though Eliot and Pound argued for the necessity of adapting the poetic task to the times, especially times so visibly estranged from the past, Frost felt that their view entailed subordinating the poet's creative imagination to the "metaphor of the hour," which the poet himself had no part in forming. The "mind of Europe"⁴⁴ so prominent in Eliot's

⁴⁰ Robert Frost, "Introduction to E.A. Robinson's 'King Jasper,'" in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 741.

⁴¹ Robert Frost, "To Lesley Frost Francis," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 735.

⁴² "T. S. Eliot on "The Metaphysical Poets"," accessed March 2016, http://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/eliot_metaphysical_poets.htm.

⁴³ Ezra Pound, 1934, "The Teacher's Mission". *The English Journal* 23 (8). National Council of Teachers of English: 630–35. doi:10.2307/804596.

⁴⁴ "Tradition and the Individual Talent. T.S. Eliot. 1921. *The Sacred Wood; Essays on Poetry and Criticism*," accessed March 2016, <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>.

considerations of poetic tradition and contemporaneity was, in Frost's opinion, but another metaphor in the succession of metaphors that comprise Western intellectual history. To believe there was something new to uncover in that greater, impersonal mind, and to subordinate one's poetic task to that belief, was ironically to lose oneself in the rhetoric and mood of the age, though one's goal had been to gauge it with objective precision.

Frost's conviction that there is only "one old way to be new" opposes the modernist view that the poet should be an instrument for the synthesis of new, impersonal, and contemporary modes of experience. The danger Frost saw in this aspiration was that it stripped poetry of its authenticity. Eliot's objective correlative, for instance, seems to grant the poet greater expressive agency and accuracy, but makes the problem of expression merely a matter of finding the correct formula to elicit a specific effect in the reader's mind. It removes from consideration what Frost deemed an essential function of poetry: the sincere correspondence of emotion and meaning between the poet and his reader. Eliot's poet would have no need to experience the poetic emotion for himself, for the emotion serves only a static and structural purpose in the poem's construction. Frost recoiled from this reduction of poetic emotion to impersonal formulae, and wrote further in the *King Jasper* introduction that

[m]ind must convince mind that it can uncurl and wave the same filaments of subtlety, soul convince soul that it can give off the same shimmers of eternity. At no point would anyone but a brute fool want to break off this correspondence. It is all there is to satisfaction; and it is salutary to live in the fear of its being broken off.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Frost, "Introduction to 'King Jasper,'" 742.

The modernists' subordination of the poet's individuality to the impersonal "mind of Europe," along with their intense interest in formal experiments that aimed to "dislocate" language into the complex morass of meanings arising from that mind, were all, in Frost's opinion, symptoms of their being lost to the "greater excruciations" of their day and age. Frost's belief in the unchanging nature of the universe, such as its dualism, meant he was skeptical that Western history was progressing along an inevitable march toward improvement, whether that march was to be considered in biological, political, or literary terms. He mocked this belief in his prose and explored its more terrifying implications in his poetry. In the unpublished version of "The Future of Man," for instance, he refers to Marx as "the mystic Karl Marx," and redefines Marx's term "historical necessity" as "passionate preference."⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that Emerson makes a relevant distinction between mystics and poets, characterizing mystics as those who "mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one."⁴⁷ We may infer from Frost's rephrasing of Marx that he deemed the term "historical necessity" a mere metaphor for "passionate preference," which in itself lacks the rhetorical flavor necessary to be a persuasive assertion of inevitability.

We may further infer from Frost's assessment of Eliot's "The Wasteland" in a letter to his daughter Lesley—"Waste Lands—your great grand mother on the grand mother on your mothers side! I doubt if anything was laid waste by war that was not laid waste by peace before"⁴⁸—that he did not think highly of

⁴⁶ Robert Frost, "The Future of Man (unpublished version)" in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 870.

⁴⁷ Emerson, "The Poet," 302.

⁴⁸ Frost, "To Lesley Frost Francis," 736.

poets who lingered on the particular evils of an age without perceiving foremost the permanent condition of evil in the world. In his famous letter to *The Amherst Student*, he states that “all ages of the world are bad--a great deal worse anyway than Heaven.” He argues that it is not the poet’s place to “get outside the age [he is] in to judge it exactly,” for

it is as dangerous as to try to get outside of anything as large as an age as it would be to engorge a donkey. Witness the many who in the attempt have suffered a dilation from which the tissues and the muscles of the mind have never been able to recover natural shape. They can’t pick up anything delicate or small any more. They can’t use a pen. They have to use a typewriter. And they gape in agony. They can write huge shapeless novels, huge gobs of raw sincerity bellowing with pain and that’s all they can write.⁴⁹

Frost’s chief problem with the modernist eagerness to subordinate poetry to the intellectual and cultural forces of the age is the resulting prevalence of a breed of poet who no longer knows how to think and create in *form*. Those lost to the metaphor of their hour lose their ability to create their own metaphors—to dislocate matter into *their* meaning. Though their age fails to provide truly new material for poetry, they preoccupy themselves with the problem of capturing its spirit via reductive experiments in text and language. In doing so they lose what Frost deems the one true way for a poet to be new:

Emotion moves a word from its base for the moment by metaphor, but often in the long run even on to a new base. The institution, the form, the word, have regularly or irregularly to be renewed from the root of the spirit. That is the creed of the true radical.⁵⁰

Such an understanding of poetic renewal is not reductive, but fruitful. It does not subordinate the poet’s creative will and imagination to the domineering

⁴⁹ Frost, “Letter to ‘The Amherst Student,’” 740.

⁵⁰ Frost, “Poetry and School,” 166.

metaphors of his age, of which he had no part in forming. Instead, it calls upon the poet's ability to transmute his *own* emotion into his *own* form--his ability to conjoin his *own* meaning with his *own* metaphor. No alienation of the poet from his labor is required—no depersonalization of poetry is required. The poet's ability to find and mold form for his own meaning—not a private meaning, but a recognizable, human one—is all that matters.

To Frost, the poet's affinity with form was of utmost importance in dealing with the amorphous and amoral world of matter. He saw the poet as standing against a "background [of] hugeness and confusion shading away from where [he stands] into black and utter chaos."⁵¹ The poet is a laborer who proves his will and worth—and confirms those of humanity—when he thrusts "against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration."⁵² This does not guarantee the permanence or stability of the poet's work of labor. But permanence or stability is not the main outcome of his labor, though it may be one of its more troubled and complex aspirations. Instead, the value of a poet's labor lies in his assertion of an individual human perspective over an intractable morass of matter. This is the process by which, to quote Emerson, "thought makes everything fit for use."⁵³

What Frost seeks is a clear differentiation between what the world of matter actually presents and *how* the poet chooses to present it. To achieve this differentiation, the poet must be sober to what he is dealing with. He cannot pretend the ruck is not a ruck. He must have the discernment to pick out the raw shard of matter that conforms most closely to his meaning. And he must have the

⁵¹ Frost, "Letter to 'The Amherst Student,'" 740.

⁵² Frost, "Letter to 'The Amherst Student,'" 740.

⁵³ Emerson, "The Poet," 294.

skill to bring the two into harmony without making light of their essential tension. The tension between the great ruck and the small form cannot ever be lost, for the form derives so much of its vocality and value as metaphor from its relative smallness. Take Frost's poem "Spring Pools:

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods -
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.⁵⁴

That the pools can reflect the sky without defect is of no worth to nature. Their only real purpose within that greater network is to nourish the trees in their monolithic process of growth. To the poet, however, the pools evoke human value. Therein lies their use to him. What distinguishes his use from nature's use is his thought. It is thought that allows for the assertion and recovery of human value. Through thought, the poet has an opportunity to exercise his creative imagination and perception over nature. He begins with an understanding of his own relation to nature in terms of scale: nature as monolithic, and he as small, weak, and unconditionally subject to its demands. Turning to nature nonetheless, he perceives suggestions of similar relations within it. In the case of this poem, it is the one between the spring pools and the trees. Employing his creative perspective, he *redefines* that relation, without denying the fundamental

⁵⁴ Robert Frost, "Spring Pools," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 224.

mismatch in size and power. He does so by urging the trees to “think”—to employ a unique act of human consciousness that Pascal once claimed was man’s only advantage over the universe. With a single word, he brings the dominion of the trees into question. Rather than trying to portray the trees as less overwhelming than they actually are, he juxtaposes human thought and value with the trees’ unquestionable physical dominion. It’s thus he asserts the primary role of human thought and imagination in determining human value where it seems impossible for it to persist.

What makes this poem so emotionally resonant is the aptness of the metaphor. The image of the pools being consumed by the greater mechanisms of nature evokes the helplessness and meaninglessness of human life. In both cases, evolutionary mechanisms seem to be the ultimate end of existence, leaving no room for other kinds of value to take root. Yet the pools’ ability to “reflect/the total sky without defect” despite its position mirrors higher metaphysical inclinations in human beings that persist despite the insurmountable temporality and materiality of existence. The mortal condition of the pools is further emphasized when Frost compares them to the flowers. In doing so, he adds an important layer to the metaphor of frail existence. Why not simply speak of the flowers in relation to the forest, as he does in other poems? The aptness of the spring pools as his central image lies in the suggestiveness of the last line: “From snow that only melted yesterday.” The cyclical change of seasons brings the pools into existence. The budding trees, in turn, consume the pools, so that they may “darken nature and be summer woods.” But Frost perceives in this natural momentum the impossibility of preserving values that are not

evolutionary, instinctive, or “natural.” This corresponds to his rejection of the modernist tendency to diminish the individual and human in favor of the impersonal *geist* of their age. Because of their diminutive position within the greater mechanism of the forest, the spring pools are of great metaphoric value to Frost. The tension he creates between the bare facts of nature and the authenticity of the poetic emotion evokes a powerful feeling in the mind of the reader—an instantaneous recognition of his humanity. Frost’s portrayal of the spring pools is thus a skillful exercise in the union of meaning and matter in poetic form. His success lies in his ability to tease out all the subtle relations within inhuman matter to evoke an essential portrait of humanity. And much of his success has to do with his apt choice and handling of the central image of his metaphor.

“The Oven Bird” is another example of Frost’s ability to exploit the nuances of matter to create a medium where human meaning and value can take hold in an unexpected way:

There is a singer everyone has heard,
 Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
 Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
 He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
 Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
 He says the early petal-fall is past
 When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
 On sunny days a moment overcast;
 And comes that other fall we name the fall.
 He says the highway dust is over all.
 The bird would cease and be as other birds
 But that he knows in singing not to sing.
 The question that he frames in all but words
 Is what to make of a diminished thing.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Robert Frost, “The Oven Bird,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 116.

Frost isolates the traits that make the oven bird suggestive of his intended meaning: that it is loud, that it is a “singer everyone has heard,” and that it is a “mid-summer and a midwood bird.” He introduces the bird as “singer” rather than as bird to call the reader’s attention to its vocality, which is the trait that guides how his metaphor develops. He specifies the bird’s relation to the woods and the seasons to set up what he will make the bird “say” in terms of that relation. The first thing he puts in the bird’s mouth is that the leaves and flowers are in a late period of their “lives,” and are moreover participating in an irreversible progression towards age and death (i.e. “one to ten”). In doing so, he puts the human preoccupation with mortality in tension with the endless cyclicity of nature. The progression from summer to fall is not of particular metaphysical importance to the bird, who, like the phoebes in “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” participates in the renewal of nature without pausing to weep over the necessity of its decay. Nevertheless, Frost uses its trait as a “mid-summer bird” to vocalize a human perspective on the irreversible natural process of decay. Through the bird, he observes that the time of bloom has passed, and that the “other fall we name the fall” will arrive in turn. Whether the bird includes itself in the collective human act of naming is made ambiguous due to the semicolon that precedes the line. But the ambiguity emphasizes the extent to which Frost has made the bird speak for human values not its own. In its final observation about highways, the bird makes a leap from the natural world to the human, industrial one. This is Frost’s boldest act of metaphor. But he has built up to it with so much care and craft that we do not raise our eyebrows so much as we sigh in recognition. The metaphor succeeds because we

are complicit in its existence—we accept that it speaks something fundamentally true to us, and stretch our imaginations to accommodate what the bird has to say of our lives through the mind of the poet.

With that, Frost brings his play with meaning and matter to a close. He draws our attention to the nature of his play: of using the vocality of the bird as an apt frame for human matters. That he attributes to the bird the human trait of knowledge—specifically, knowing “in singing not to sing”—emphasizes the importance of having some frame of knowledge beyond the natural in order to differentiate oneself from mere matter. It is only in doing so that one may not “cease and be as other birds.”

But a human frame does not always guarantee a meaningful differentiation between humanity and nature. In “After Apple-Picking,” Frost describes a persistent “strangeness from [his] sight”

I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.⁵⁶

In this case, the human frame has disintegrated due to its fragility and to the speaker letting it “fall and break.” The question is why he does not seem to protest its disintegration. The answer lies in the mood of the poem: fatigue. Signs of his earlier struggle appear in the outset of the poem, but they are only remnants of an embattered will:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill

⁵⁶ Robert Frost, “After Apple-Picking,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 70).

Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.⁵⁷

The poem opens with a temporary suspension of action. The ladder is stuck in a tree, a barrel remains unfilled, and a few spare apples are scattered through the wreckage, suggesting a ceasefire between the laborer and his materials. But the cessation is not mutual; only the laborer has wearied of his task. His weariness finds form in the close correspondence between the mood and verbal structure of the poem. The utterance “may be two or three” blurs the physical details of the scene, as if the laborer can no longer muster the desire or will to clarify and act upon the task at hand.

The scene then abruptly shifts to a winter night, as if all that came before were only a memory or dream. But the tense does not change; the laborer integrates the timing of the first scene with the next, as if the various shards of his impressions were occurring at once in the present. He drowns off to the “the scent of apples,” evoking the power and invasiveness of sensory memory. Its invasiveness is of particular psychological interest, for it undermines the finality of his previous declaration: that he is “done with apple-picking now.” It suggests that his decision to be done with apple picking was to some degree involuntary, was to some degree provoked by loss of agency over the process.

Another shift occurs. The laborer now considers the general task of perception, careful to preserve the mood of weariness. Here, Frost makes the metaphoric leap and unites problems of labor with those of creative expression. He shows the laborer’s troubles with apple picking to be essentially equivalent to

⁵⁷ Frost, “After Apple-Picking, 70.

problems of *human* perception. It's thus the poem moves away from specific doubts over apple picking to the general doubt over whether humans can successfully use nature's odds and ends for their own purposes. The speaker refers, for instance, to a shard of ice as a "pane of glass," which he holds up and peers through to examine the "world of hoary grass." Perhaps he had intended to see if he could turn it into a makeshift magnifying glass. The act of "skimming" it from a drinking trough—the ease and swiftness of the word "skim"—certainly emphasizes its makeshift character. But the ice melts, and he lets it "fall and break" with the same resignation with which he leaves off the task of apple picking.

The persistent "strangeness" in his sight is twofold: it is the persistent strangeness of the world, despite his attempt to look at it through a different lens, and the persistent impression of its strangeness in his memory. It is not some strangeness inherent in his sight; it is the intractable strangeness of the world. And so Frost subverts Emerson's claim that "thought makes everything fit for use." No concentration of thought can render the shard of ice an instrument through which its user may yield from the world something familiar, verifiable, and understandable. It is a shard of ice; it melts. The speaker understands this. That is why he lets it fall.

The scene shifts to a dream, in which

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Frost, "After Apple-Picking," 70.

That the shift occurs before the “pane of glass” falls blurs the distinction between memory and dream, for the forlorn mood and subject matter of the former is preserved in the latter. The dream hints at general problems of human perception in its focus on how the apples appear to the laborer, as if under a magnifying glass. That the apples appear clarified and magnified in the dream seems to contradict with the persistent strangeness the laborer remembers of the world. The implication is that the clarity and definition the laborer fails to yield from nature can only be achieved in the strangeness of a human dream.

The laborer then attributes problems with achieving clarity to difficulties intrinsic to the process. The memory of his frustrated labor continues to plague him, even though harvest season has long passed:

My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.⁵⁹

Here, Frost uses the power and invasiveness of sensory memory to evoke the tormented futility of wishful labor. In describing specific physical aches and pressures, he conveys the greater emotional ones at hand. For instance, the laborer’s feeling of the ladder “[swaying] as the boughs bend” creates and reinforces a mood of uncertainty and instability. His persistent awareness of the rumbling sound of “load on load of apples coming in” contrasts in mood and form with his earlier statement that “there may be two or three/apples [he] didn’t pick upon some bough.” But it is consistent with the sense of impotence and loss

⁵⁹ Frost, “After Apple-Picking,” 70.

of agency that has been developing through the course of the poem, and continues to develop:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.⁶⁰

The laborer at last confesses the true origin of his weariness: the “great harvest [he himself] desired.” He—not nature. Nature remains strange and intractable as the raw material of his vision; it has never been more or less so. But as if mocking the futility of human labor, it continues to provide the laborer with “ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,/cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.” That he cannot do so for each individual fruit points to the fundamental issue with creating human purpose and value in nature. The problem may simply be the difficulty of imposing a lasting, objective term of human value—even with a science as impersonal as taxonomy. In large part, however, the possibility for human value depends on our ability to know, cherish, and “not let fall” the million individual shards of matter that comprise nature. It is only then that we have the opportunity to assert and recognize the value of the individual *in itself*. Absent this opportunity, humanity has no chance to prove to *itself* that meaning can reside in individual human existence, and that all of humanity taken together is not merely a heap of evolutionary waste. One can see why this will trouble the

⁶⁰ Frost, “After Apple-Picking,” 70-71.

laborer's "human" sleep. His failure to differentiate the human from the merely natural seems to reflect the greater failure of human value to take root in matter:

Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.⁶¹

This final question is more foregone conclusion than genuine inquiry. One senses a persistent undercurrent of human despair that finds no release or resolution outside of itself. In the final analysis, the laborer's failure is the failure of humanity, and the failure of metaphor—the failure to create a lasting frame to set off human value against the inhuman ruck of nature. For a moment, the woodchuck and his hibernating patterns seem to offer a chance for some real and non-arbitrary purpose to take hold. But his "long sleep" is invariably a part of nature, answering to nature's own strange, interminable ends. And those ends are precisely why he is not present to answer the human question. The failure of the laborer's efforts means that the fundamental estrangement between matter and spirit remains unresolved.

Frost elaborates on the troubled relationship between human labor and value in "The Wood-Pile." Though the speaker seems to make an active, assertive choice to "go on farther" in the frozen swamp, he does not have a particular destination in mind, leaving what he finds up to nature. His journey into the woods thus begins with a sense of compromised agency. The trees do not suggest anything to his imagination, looking "too much alike to mark or name a place by." When he encounters the bird, he tries to makes the bird think and speak as if it were quite naturally a form for his mind. As if to mock the

⁶¹ Frost, "After Apple-Picking," 71.

flimsiness of his effort, however, he sabotages his metaphor, and points out that it is not a true act of creative labor, but merely a habit of taking “everything said as personal to himself.” His use of the bird as metaphor employs no process of critical, conscious, and creative selection; it does not discriminate between mere raw material and suitable raw material that can be shaped and twisted to conform to his meaning. The forced vocality of the bird is thus more an act of self-deception of than true creative labor:

A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather—
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.⁶²

Note that Frost does not have the bird “say” anything outright. There is no profound correspondence between his creative imagination and the figure of the bird. He makes no earnest attempt to repurpose the bird as metaphor, for their encounter was incidental rather than intentional. Instead, he “undeceives” himself, lets the bird’s “little fear/Carry him off the way [he] might have gone,” and turns to the next object that has entered his field of vision:

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 gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.⁶³

⁶² Robert Frost, “The Wood-Pile,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 100-101.

⁶³ Frost, “The Wood-Pile,” 101.

The cord of wood introduces unnatural clarity to the scene. Though the woods the speaker walks through seem to him an unremarkable and indistinct mass of trees, the woodpile he encounters is so precisely conceived and constructed that he cannot help but take note of its appearance. Its place in the wintry wasteland is jarring, for its design points explicitly to the purposive work of an organizing mind. In contrast, most other figures that appear in nature, including bird he encountered beforehand, do not speak so directly to his purpose-seeking mind.

At one point, the woodpile was meant to serve as firewood. But Frost notes that it can no longer fulfill its intended purpose; it is already disintegrating from being left out for too long in nature. He notes also that it is being held up on one side by “a tree/still growing, and on one a stake and prop,/ these latter about to fall.” This juxtaposition illustrates the fundamental difference between products of nature and those of human labor: the importance of use. Nature does not serve any clear use beyond its own self-perpetuation. Yet it outgrows, outmakes, and outlasts any product of human labor, and seems all the more superior for it. The still-growing tree supporting the woodpile will keep growing, even though it serves no greater purpose than the perpetuation of the ecosystem. The abandoned woodpile, in contrast, is a monument to the short-lived nature of human purpose. Though it was created with a careful exertion of labor, it cannot last forever: nature has already begun in it the process of decay.

Frost tries to save the woodpile from its fate by imagining a new use for it:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,

And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.⁶⁴

In the literal sense, the new use he imagines cannot truly replace the old, abandoned one. Part of it has to do with the “burning” he speaks of. In envisioning the woodpile warming the frozen swamp, he remains attached to its unfulfilled human use of burning and warming things. Essentially, he remains attached to its un-fulfillment—to its state as dead, decaying matter in the absence of human use. Unlike the birds in “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” that are able to repurpose the ruins of the house as simply another component of their natural habitat, he cannot recycle the decaying woodpile *as it is* for new human ends. The most he can do with it in its current state is to imagine for it a tangential purpose of warming the swamp with the “slow smokeless burning of decay.” Indeed, this metaphoric burning is where the real *human* ache of the poem lies. But it calls attention to an important aspect of Frost’s conception of creative labor: that it is subject to an irreversible state of decay, and so must constantly be replaced by new acts of labor.

That Frost cannot and does not do so in the poem points to the nature of creative paralysis. He sets apart two kinds of laborer; the first takes “everything as personal to himself,” and the second lives in “turning to fresh tasks.” Notably, the individual Frost attributes the second to has long abandoned the product of his labor, but not in the same way he abandoned the bird as a flimsy attempt at metaphor. As the first type of laborer, he is too conscious of the entropy of his labor, and is moreover too conscious that the fact of his consciousness makes

⁶⁴ Frost, “The Wood-Pile,” 101.

him an inferior laborer to the one who could “so forget his handiwork on which/he spent himself, the labor of his ax, /and leave it there far from a useful fireplace.” By fixating so much on the impermanence of labor, he becomes too disheartened to create true new expressions of his humanity. All he can do is prolong his mourning of the slow, drawn out process of decay.

In that sense, “The Wood-Pile” seems to hint at the “Matthew Arnoldism” that Frost rails against in “New Hampshire”:

I know a man who took a double ax
 And went alone against a grove of trees;
 But his heart failing him, he dropped the ax
 And ran for shelter quoting Matthew Arnold:
 "Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood":
 There's been enough shed without shedding mine.
 Remember Birnam Wood! The wood's in flux!"

He had a special terror of the flux
 That showed itself in dendrophobia.
 The only decent tree had been to mill
 And educated into boards, he said.
 He knew too well for any earthly use
 The line where man leaves off and nature starts.
 And never overstepped it save in dreams.⁶⁵

Unlike the man who runs from the trees, the self that Frost presents in “The Wood-Pile” decides to continue into the woods. However, he is not armed with an axe, and can only marvel at and mourn a woodpile tamed in the past by another’s axe. Without an axe of his own, he cannot enact for himself the eternal confrontation between man and nature. He cannot *do* anything with the raw material of nature except weakly grasp onto some small bird as a fleeting symbol of his mood. He has alienated himself from his labor.

⁶⁵ Robert Frost, “New Hampshire,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 161.

Labor allows one to assert one's individuality and humanity in a tangible form, no matter how temporary and amorphous it may be. The proof of one's self in some tangible outline of matter provides a psychological "stay" against existential woes:

We people are thrust forward out of the suggestions of form in the rolling clouds of nature. In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself. When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations. I think it must stroke faith the right way. The artist, the poet might be expected to be the most aware of such assurance. But it is really everybody's sanity to feel it and live by it. Fortunately, too, no forms are more engrossing, gratifying, comforting, staying than those lesser ones we throw off, like vortex rings of smoke, *all our individual enterprise and needing nobody's cooperation*; a basket, a letter, a garden, a room, an idea, a picture, a poem.⁶⁶ [emphasis added]

The laborer in "Wood-Pile" cannot feel and live by the assurance Frost speaks of above because he has not achieved a form for his own, on his own. The bird is too fleeting a form for his meaning; it requires no exertion on his part, no true concentration to shape it to his individual will and mind. The woodpile is not his work of labor at all—he can only marvel at its disintegrating outline. Without a means of exerting his mind against the great ruck of nature, he is left to mourn the creative human spirit that once animated dead matter.

If all products of human labor are doomed to decay, how can one find and root lasting human value in matter? How can *labor* be the ultimate assertion of humanity? It must be that the human value comes from the act of labor itself, not from the products of labor. The renewal of labor is thus essential to the preservation of humanity. This is what Frost means by the "one old way to be new": the continual reassertion of one's individuality and humanity in the forms

⁶⁶ Frost, "Letter to 'The Amherst Student,'" 740.

that one creates. Contrast this view with the continual extinction of personality encouraged by the modernist poets. To Frost, the creative process is the source and end of human meaning *because* it is an individual effort. Only the conscious confrontation between the individual and his raw materials can bring human use and value in inhuman things.

The importance of individual labor to the preservation of human value informs Frost's view of poetic language:

What I have chiefly in mind is a figurative fetching of fresh words to your use. The word lies in our everyday speech, practical, hard, and unliterary; and that's the way I like the word--there's where my fun with it begins. I don't care for the word already made figurative. I haven't done anything to it.⁶⁷

True renewal in poetry takes place when the one "fetches" fresh words from the colloquial as one's raw materials and labors over them until they are transmuted into poetic language. The "fun" one has with it is key. It is not enough to copy the way other poets have fetched their words, for those words have already been "made figurative." To find form for one's own meaning, one must fetch fresh words and make them one's own, such that others who try to reuse those words in the same way cannot duplicate the same first astonishment of recognition. Frost gives the example of the effect Keats achieved in his "Ode to the Nightingale" by fetching and placing two common words, "alien" and "corn," next to each other. "All poets are now using "alien,"" remarks Frost wryly; "I've heard of "alien bean."⁶⁸

In fetching fresh "unliterary" words for new figurative ends, the poet shapes an idiom distinct from the colloquial. Likewise, the poet sets off his values

⁶⁷ Robert Frost, "The Unmade Word, or Fetching and Far-Fetching," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 696.

⁶⁸ Frost, "The Unmade Word," 697.

against nature when he shapes nature to imply the human. The difficulty of shaping these raw materials into metaphor makes the laborer an apt figure for the poet. But this difficulty is less a problem than a necessary condition for the existence of human value. Frost tends to portray nature as something eternal and remote, abundant and wasteful, reusing its waste with ease, but without consciousness of its doing so. There is no sense of targeted purpose; no real progression is guaranteed. Nature's condition is, in this sense, permanent. The human condition seems far more provisional. Moreover, it cannot escape the natural process of decay. Yet humanity is able to recover itself in the small, temporary acts of defiance, chiefly when the self sets off its voice and value against the silent background of eternal waste. In absence of these vocal gestures, a positive conception of humanity is no longer possible, as illustrated in the silence of "Desert Places":

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

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars - on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.⁶⁹

What frightens Frost is not the silence of the natural world but the silencing of the self. When the self has been awed or cowed into speechlessness, it can no longer advocate for its humanity. It is reduced to mere matter. The possibility that human value might be negated or emptied entirely is far more disturbing to Frost than the physical knowledge of "empty spaces/between stars - on stars

⁶⁹ Robert Frost, "Desert Places," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 269).

where no human race is.” To him, the value of the self does not reside in biology, but in the labor of individual expression. The poet’s labor is his idiom and his metaphor, both of which must derive from a life not merely biological. The labor of poetry is thus inextricably linked to two aspects of human value: the preservation of human value as something distinct from biological *fact*, and the preservation of the individual as something distinct from his species.

In “Birches,” Frost illustrates poetry’s complex relationship with fact. In his view, the poet must not subjugate his imagination to fact, but use fact to harness it. The facts that comprise the subject matter of a poem limit the liberties a poet may take with his materials. But the poet should not cower under these limitations. He should not see facts as static, rigid boundaries that protect him from dangerous and unstable fantasies. He might find himself pressured to copy them with exactitude, which would severely curtail his creative imagination. His manifold meanings would yield to the rigidity of fact; his metaphors would limit his creativity, and not exercise it. This is how poetry loses its power and human value.

To avoid this outcome, the poet must understand the fact to be dynamic. He must understand the curve and motion of the fact to express the curve and motion of his mind. As Frost puts it, he should “adjust [himself]” to the *motion* of the thing itself’:

When one looks back over his own poetry, his only criticism is whether he had form or not. Did he worry it out or pour it out? You can’t go back to a tennis game and play it over—except with alibis. You can go back over a poem and touch it up—but never unless you are in the same form again. Yet the great pleasure in writing poetry is in having been carried off. It is as if you stood astride of the subject that lay on the ground, and they cut the cord, and the

subject gets up under you and you ride it. You adjust yourself to the motion of the thing itself. That is the poem.⁷⁰

The labor of metaphor is pleasurable to the poet because it carries him off where a strict adherence to matter would never have borne him. Should the poet strictly adhere to the fact of the matter, he would be less enthused about the prospect of confronting and shaping his raw materials, and more apt to run away from the monolithic difficulty of the task. For him to be carried away and not flung away by his subject matter, however, he must exert control and form. The pleasure of being carried away is not the undisciplined license of fancy, but the freedom of riding the curve and motion of fact further than one thought possible. Only when one allows for the interplay of internal imagination and external reality can fact become “the sweetest dream that labor knows.”⁷¹

“Birches” dramatizes the differences between the static and dynamic ways of dealing with fact. The first half of the poem seems to be a recreation of a startling image from the world of matter. Upon closer examination, however, it is a criticism of poetry that emphasizes clear images over all else. Contrast how Frost introduces “heaven” in the first and second halves of the poem. In the first half, heaven is hinted at in the ice crystals weighing down the birches:

Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.⁷²

⁷⁰ Robert Frost, “The Poet’s Next of Kin in College,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 771.

⁷¹ Robert Frost, “Mowing,” in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 26.

⁷² Frost, “Birches,” 117.

Frost builds up to the “inner dome of heaven” by weaving together images of glass and ice in the previous lines. With the phrase “you’d think,” he makes the final leap, and fetches a fresh, unexpected suggestion of heaven to complete his startling image. But the hesitancy of the phrase “you’d think” weakens the poetic leap from matter to metaphor. The whole line becomes instead a concession of the poet’s manifold meanings to the state of matter. Qualifying the image of heaven with “you’d think” allows the poet to avoid admitting to heaven outright. Thus qualified, the line’s syntactical structure puts the sincerity of the poet’s metaphoric reach in question. The modal verb “would,” submerged under the colloquial shrug of the phrase “you’d think,” dismisses the notion of heaven as soon as it is introduced. The poet no longer needs to do the hard work of shaping matter to his meaning; he only need fetch and carve images to produce the astonishment of implication. The astonishment of recognition, let alone of correspondence, is no longer pertinent to poetic inquiry. Any sincere expression of human value is submerged under the startling clarity of the image.

The technique of pure implication is uncharacteristic of Frost’s work. He employs it in the first half of “Birches” to criticize and undermine what seemed to him an alarming aspect of Eliot and Pound’s poetic vision. In a letter to his daughter Lesley, Frost wrote that the modernist

aspiration toward brevity and undersaying rather than oversaying has led to the poetry of intimation implication insinuation and innuendo as an object in itself. All poetry has always said something and implied the rest. Well then why have it say anything? Why not have it imply everything?⁷³

⁷³ Frost, “To Lesley Frost Francis,” 735.

Frost employed what he deemed the reductive technique of implication to demonstrate the weaknesses of the modernist approach that prioritized static, material images over the dynamic interplay of meaning and matter. In the first half of "Birches," he creates an image so startling and precise that the human voice must be suppressed to avoid muddying it. The possibility of human meaning comes in at most as a shrug or hint at something beyond inquiry. In the second half of "Birches," however, Frost reintroduces the possibility of human belief in the world of matter. Consider how Frost brings in heaven the second time:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.⁷⁴

Heaven is not merely an insinuation, but a sincere belief in something greater than matter the poet can forever reach towards. It is this continual process of reaching that constitutes the renewal of creative labor. The poet is one who does not stop at the facts, but uses them to make fresh metaphors of his own. Only then can he cease perceiving the fact as insurmountable; only then will he see the distinction between fact and metaphor as presumptive. The modernists took the metaphor of their age for fact, and reduced their imagination to it; Frost saw it for the metaphor it was, and reclaimed it for poetry. In the unpublished version of "The Future of Man," he writes of the pervasive spirit of science and its true nature:

I am in danger of making all this sound as if science were all. It is not all. But it is much. It comes into our lives as domestic science

⁷⁴ Frost, "Birches," 118.

for our hold on the planet, into our deaths with its deadly weapons, bombs and airplanes, for war, and into our souls as pure science for nothing but glory; in which last respect it may be likened unto pure poetry and mysticism. It is man's greatest enterprise. It is the charge of the ethereal into the material. It is our substantiation of our meaning. It can't go too far or deep for me. Still it is not a law unto itself...Science is a property...The passing science of the moment may contribute its psychological bit to the book like one of the fleeting elements recently added to the chemical list.⁷⁵

To Frost, science is not an end in itself, but a means of exerting human curiosity and imagination on the material world. In the final analysis, it derives its value from the "substantiation of our meaning," and resembles poetry more than to any form of scientific dogmatism. Pure science, being closest to "pure poetry," does not try to reduce human value to a matter of evolution, instinct, or other such theories of mechanical development. It knows that all theories are subject to revision, and that human value is preserved not by any one theory, but the continual revision of theories. Science, correctly imagined, does not make the "downward comparisons" that Frost warns against in "The White-Tailed Hornet":

...As long on earth
 As our comparisons were stoutly upward
 With gods and angels, we were men at least,
 But little lower than the gods and angels.
 But once comparisons were yielded downward,
 Once we began to see our images
 Reflected in the mud and even dust,
 'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.
 We were lost piecemeal to the animals,
 Like people thrown out to delay the wolves.
 Nothing but fallibility was left us,
 And this day's work made even that seem doubtful.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Frost, "The Future of Man," 870-871.

⁷⁶ Robert Frost, "The White-Tailed Hornet," in *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995, 254.

Like the first half of "Birches," "The White-Tailed Hornet" demonstrates the reductive effect of making "downward comparisons" between humanity and nature. The hornet seems at first to be a powerful creature of purpose, whose instinct allows him surpass the accuracy of a bullet and "penetrate [the speaker's] best defense." But its "insect certainty" is revealed to be an "execrable judge of motives"; its best attempts are unable to reproduce human terms and associations of value:

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 skeptic.⁷⁷

The speaker finds that his attempt to validate human value in the hornet's behavior makes him "dangerously skeptic" of his humanity altogether. He warns against the enthusiasm of conflating the human with the merely instinctive: one who falls prey to this enthusiasm is persuaded that "stoutly upward comparisons" are no longer possible, and so is trapped in a downward spiral of "disillusion upon disillusion." No form of creative labor can redeem the man who believes himself a mere constellation of instincts.

Likewise, the first half of "Birches" demonstrates the diminishment of human agency that occurs when the poet gives up the full range of his imagination for startling and precise recreations of matter:

But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
 As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain. They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored

⁷⁷ Frost, "The White-Tailed Hornet," 254.

As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
 Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
 Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
 Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.⁷⁸

As discussed earlier, Frost differed from the modernist poets in thinking ear-images far more important than eye-images. In the lines above, he weaves a complex tapestry of alliterations and consonances to create a clear aural image of birches swinging and clicking in the breeze while the ice bearing down on them shatters. He rounds off his ear-image with an eye-image, which likens the bent birches to girls drying their hair in the sun:

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
 And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
 So low for long, they never right themselves:
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
 Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
 Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.⁷⁹

The image of the girls evokes the same brief astonishment as the first reference to the “inner dome of heaven” did. Likewise, it stops just short of redeeming the poet’s subject matter with meaning. The trees seem humanlike in the dejected arch of their trunks, but that sense of humanity is not the life affirming one earned and validated by human labor. It is a diminished one that prevails when one’s creative imagination is limited to the recreation of images from the world of matter. One’s humanity is compromised when one does not permit oneself the audacity and pleasure of reading one’s *meaning* and *value* into the materials of one’s labor. In going no further in asserting human value than comparing the shape of the trees to the silhouettes of human bodies, Frost shows the weakness

⁷⁸ Frost, “Birches,” 117.

⁷⁹ Frost, “Birches,” 117.

of the poetic approach that undermines meaning in favor of clear images of matter. Though the sound-image he carves is startling and beautiful, it recovers nothing of humanity. The poetic will is unable to perform to its fullest potential, for it has conceded its imaginative power to the mere state of matter. It has silenced itself, and we hear only its faintest echo in the cracks and crazes of the birch trees.

The first half of "Birches" takes nature for fact, exercising only a limited range of poetic imagination; the second half takes nature for play, allowing room for human value and belief to take root in the suggestive gaps the poet teases out between what he sees and what he *imagines* he sees. Thus the birches are bent not by ice storms, but by a boy who has tamed them with his careful play; thus the hope for heaven is sincerely admitted to, and not merely an image fetched with cunning. And so is "Birches" Frost's testament to the inseparability of life and art. Art must not only mirror life; it must reaffirm it. Those who reject the essential interplay of meaning and matter in pursuit of some dogmatic theory of art will one day find themselves lost in a "pathless wood," unable to access their individuality, humanity, and creativity.

III. Concluding Remarks

We humans recover ourselves in the imaginative gaps where meaning and matter meet. There we create and renew our forms to preserve our sense of self and value. We compose ourselves in the act of composition.⁸⁰ And so poetry gains its urgency and necessity. It cannot be divorced from its essential human function. All a poem can be judged on is whether it has clarified life—whether it has made an irrefutable case for humanity. Say nothing of the precision of images, or the dislocation of language into our meaning; at its core, poetry is an affirmation of life.

So we accept if we fully and sincerely enter into Frost's imagination. It is perhaps untrue that all poetry teaches us how to live; the poetic landscape is too various and contentious to permit such "dogmatism." Frost's poetry will survive so long as we deem human life necessary.

⁸⁰ Frost, "4.25r," 46.

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