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THE FEAR MOTIF IN THE POETRY  
OF ROBERT FROST

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BY  
ROBERT EARLE ANDREWS

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A THESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

Historians of the future may well take their cue from W. H. Auden and refer to the first six decades of the Twentieth Century as the "Age of Anxiety."<sup>1</sup> In these sixty years the world has seldom, if ever, known a time that could be considered as one completely devoid of fears and anxieties. For the most part the years have provided a succession of alarming crises and apprehensive situations. The world has faced and survived, among its other stringent tests, two great global conflicts, a shattering economic depression, and the discovery of an awesome power for possible self-destruction.

Perhaps the true keynote of this century was struck by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his inaugural address in 1933 with his pronouncement "that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."<sup>2</sup> These words did more than catch the emotional state of man in the depths of the Great Depression; they trumpeted forth the warning that anxiety, the fear of fear, had become a force

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<sup>1</sup>W. H. Auden, The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue (New York: Random House, Inc., 1947). This long narrative poem represents Auden's poetic interpretation of the current century.

<sup>2</sup>The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Random House, Inc., 1938), II, 11.

to be reckoned with in the modern world. A generation of men had grown up in the climate of war and had attained maturity in the artificial atmosphere of the "Roaring Twenties." The man of this generation, taken either singularly or collectively, had weathered his traumatic experiences, driven always by that force which Kierkegaard called Angst.<sup>3</sup> He was, as Jean Wahl observes in his presentation of the Kierkegaardian figure, "essentially anxious and infinitely interested in respect to his existence."<sup>4</sup> In the opinion of Basil King, the man of the Twentieth Century "was born into fear in that he was born into a world of which most of the energies were set against him."<sup>5</sup>

But what is fear? And what is anxiety? Can the two be equated with each other and with fright? If one is to reach any degree of understanding regarding the potency of these instrumental forces, he must seek definitions of greater range than those supplied by the average dictionary. He must turn instead to the

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<sup>3</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Wahl, A Short History of Existentialism, trans. Forrest Williams and Stanley Maron (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Basil King, The Conquest of Fear (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1924), p. 20.

psychologists for their opinions. Sigmund Freud states:

I shall not enter upon a discussion whether the words anxiety, fear, fright, mean the same thing in common usage. In my opinion, anxiety relates to the condition and ignores the object, whereas in the word fear attention is directed to the object; fright does actually seem to possess a special meaning--namely, it relates specifically to the condition induced when danger is unexpectedly encountered without previous anxious readiness. It might be said then that anxiety is a protection against fright.<sup>6</sup>

Karen Horney tends to accept the arbitrary Freudian divisions of fear, anxiety, and fright; but she is more concerned with stressing the neurotic qualities of anxiety. "Anything may provoke anxiety," she observes, "which is likely to jeopardize the individual's specific protective pursuits, his specific neurotic trends."<sup>7</sup> More recently, support for Horney's views has come from Theresa Muller, who concludes that

anxiety reactions are characterized by painful uneasiness of mind, by an apprehensive expectation of impending disaster which is apparently indiscriminately attached to any thought or situation.<sup>8</sup>

Muller, following in the tradition of Freud, further separates anxiety and fear by referring to the latter as

<sup>6</sup>Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1953), p. 403.

<sup>7</sup>Karen Horney, The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1937), p. 199.

<sup>8</sup>Theresa Grace Muller, The Foundations of Human Behavior (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1956), p. 164.

"a reaction to actual danger."<sup>9</sup> C. G. Jung, who, according to Dr. Rollo May, "never systematized his views of anxiety,"<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the importance of the individual's "secret fear of the unknown 'perils of the soul.'"<sup>11</sup>

Leaving anxiety and moving into the specific area of fear, one finds that psychologists tend to share the common opinion that "fear is a normal reaction to physical and psychological hazards."<sup>12</sup> Freud discusses this reaction as a bipartite event, a logical combination of "the fear-affect and the defensive action,"<sup>13</sup> a theory which is also basically compatible with Karen Horney's later findings. One qualifying factor is present, however, in Horney's endorsement; and that is her prime interest in relating all fears to neurotic

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Rollo May, The Meaning of Anxiety (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1950), p. 136.

<sup>11</sup>C. G. Jung, Psychology and Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>Muller, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>13</sup>Freud, op. cit., p. 402. Freud offers here as an example for further clarification of his theory: "the frightened animal is afraid and flees, but the expedient element in this is the 'flight,' not the 'being afraid.'"

compulsions.<sup>14</sup> In Rollo May's opinion, Horney "equates Freud's 'instinctual drives' with her 'neurotic trends'"<sup>15</sup> to arrive at an evaluation of fear.

Aside from their normal manifestations in mankind, fears may develop into any number of abnormal situations. In her studies of human behavior, Muller has pointed out that "fears become abnormal when they are maintained beyond the period . . . which caused them."<sup>16</sup> She further supports the Freudian thesis that a disproportionate fear may erase the thin dividing line between rational and irrational behavior.<sup>17</sup> What may first appear as a small, completely normal apprehension can, if unduly magnified by the person involved, result in a neurotic drive or in a phobia. Freud, however, had previously cautioned the lay reader and the psychiatrist alike to remember that "the most intense general apprehensiveness does not necessarily lead to a phobia."<sup>18</sup> He concluded that there must be other contributing factors present, such as the failure to eradicate or, at least, to alleviate the related anxieties. Karen Horney,

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<sup>14</sup>Karen Horney, Our Inner Conflicts, A Constructive Theory of Neuroses (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1945), pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup>May, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>16</sup>Muller, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>18</sup>Freud, op. cit., p. 407.

building upon the results of her work with neurotic trends, tends to consider the force of the abnormal fear to be a derivative of repressions and hostilities.<sup>19</sup>

The consensus of opinion would appear to be that fear, once it has attained the abnormal state, constitutes a serious threat to the individual. As long as it remains solely a normal reaction to a hazardous situation, there are no far-reaching consequences. Rollo May, in his summation of fear, observes that if the individual "cannot cope with dangers in their specific forms, he will be threatened on the deeper level . . . of personality."<sup>20</sup> By recognizing a danger for what it is (its "specific form") and by exhibiting the expected fear response, the individual is reacting normally. Whenever he fails to make an accurate judgment of the danger, he impairs his ability to react in a normal manner and, at the same time, courts a possible deep-seated anxiety. It is from just such anxieties that neurotic and irrational fears are born. As Freud points out, "The available anxiety is here used . . . to exaggerate the aversions which are implanted instinctively in everyone."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Horney, Neurotic Personality of Our Time, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup>May, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>21</sup>Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers, ed. Ernest Jones (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959), I, 83.

Since the majority of psychologists accept the presence of fear as a commonplace element in life situations, the reader should, therefore, recognize that this force possesses a true universality. It does not limit itself to any one people or to any one time. Neither race, color, nor creed provides a sufficient barrier against its encroachments. Fear can manifest itself in varying degrees in an individual or in a segment of society. The world has the man who is afraid; it has also the social group which is afraid. As Basil King observes:

We are not sick all the time; we are not sinning all the time; but all the time all of us--or practically all of us--are afraid of someone or something.<sup>22</sup>

No poet of modern America has treated this ever-present subject of fear more deftly, more succinctly, or more dramatically than has Robert Frost in his poetic interpretations of the New England countryside and its various inhabitants. With a purposeful deliberateness he has ripped away the curtain from those fears that have beset mankind throughout history and has exposed them to the bright light of everyday reasoning. No fear, regardless of its size or its specific connotation, has

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<sup>22</sup>King, op. cit., p. 3.

escaped his careful scrutiny. Frost has accorded each of them the same skillful probing and handling, from the vague, almost nebulous, fear of the darkness to the nameless, terrifying dread of the wrath of an omnipotent God.

In his own mind Frost regards fear as an integral portion of man's very existence, a force that is as much a part of man as is life itself. In his Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson's King Jasper, he states:

. . . two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is the fear of Man--the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them.<sup>23</sup>

By dichotomizing fear into these two arbitrary categories, Frost provides for a similar division of his poetry dealing with this subject. There are poems which portray man frightened by his contemplation of the power of a Divine force; there are poems which portray man frightened by his estrangement from his fellow men. In these striking portrayals Frost runs the total range of fears, from the private and personal ones that affect only one man as he passes a dark wood at night to the shared and widespread ones that trouble all men as they move

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<sup>23</sup>Robert Frost, "Introduction" to King Jasper by Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), p. vi.

through a world that has outgrown their minuscule abilities. As a man and as a poet, "Frost has been swinging from delight to wisdom beset by those two fears all his life."<sup>24</sup>

In these poems devoted to the study of fear, a unifying theme of the failure to apply reason is consistently present. This needed reason is supplied by the poet and "is often represented as order, law, sanity,"<sup>25</sup> those qualities which Frost finds so essential to his scheme of life. One of the poet's deepest concerns stems from his realization that man must, by necessity, work through reason to overcome all those fears that confront him. It is this concern with fears and with the reason necessary to defeat them that produces a recognizable motif in Frost's poetry, one that recurs frequently throughout his works. The reader is able to trace the chronological development of this preoccupation from the poet's earliest published volume, A Boy's Will (1913), through the eight volumes of poetry that culminate in Steeple Bush in 1947.<sup>26</sup> What appear as

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<sup>24</sup>Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. 39.

<sup>25</sup>Rosemary F. Deen, "The Voices of Robert Frost," The Commonweal, LXIX (February 20, 1959), 543.

<sup>26</sup>This study will consider only the volumes of poems published by Frost. Although his two verse dramas, The Masque of Reason (1945) and The Masque of Mercy (1947), contain elements of the fear motif, it is not the principal theme in either.

outlines, hints, and suggestions in his first publication become fully developed conceptions of fear in the later volumes. Frost is always an astute observer of mankind; and, as such, he cannot fail to have cognizance of such a powerful life force as fear. His duty as poet lies in his accurate and faithful depictions of what he has observed. He has seen "fear"; he has seen it begin and grow and spread. He recounts these observations in his poetry. Sidney Cox attests to the veracity of the poet's vision by saying that Frost "didn't see anything that wasn't there; he was too genuine and clear-eyed to be fooled."<sup>27</sup>

The above is not meant to suggest that fear is the only, or even the primary, theme of Frost's poetry; but certainly an analysis of his treatment of the subject is a justifiable approach to his poetry, for it seems to elucidate many of his major works. In the opinion of Reginald Cook, there are seven major themes in Frost: concern with the world of man, the tragic sense, the non-human world of nature, retreat (which is never to be construed as escape), fatefulness, trust, and Yankee comedy.<sup>28</sup> Inclusive as it is, the fear motif

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<sup>27</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>28</sup>Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1958), pp. 119-57 passim.

may be present in conjunction with any one or all of these areas.

Of the seven themes in Frost identified by Cook, only the one of "retreat" requires discussion at this time. To Rosemary F. Deen these retreats are frequently "backward steps to gain a point of vantage,"<sup>29</sup> a means whereby the character can grasp a new perspective of his existence. She further supports her explanation by pointing out that "these retreats are sometimes allied with fear ('scare' is a word that recurs almost obsessively in the poems)."<sup>30</sup> Frost's preoccupation with this particular word is reflected in a number of different levels of interpretation. In "The Bonfire," which deals with the poet's retreat from the danger of a threatened war, the word has a peculiar childlike quality reminiscent of past Halloween celebrations:

Oh, let's go up the hill and scare ourselves,  
As reckless as the best of them tonight,  
By setting fire to all the brush we piled  
With pitchy hands to wait for rain and snow.  
(p. 163).<sup>31</sup>

At the opposite end of this scale of fright is the terse,

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<sup>29</sup>Deen, op. cit., 543.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>All quotations from Frost's poetry are taken from Robert Frost, Complete Poems (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1949). Page location of the quoted poems is indicated in parentheses.

evocative announcement of the poet's retreat into himself that is expressed in the final stanza of "Desert Places":

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. (p. 386).

By examining these frequent, almost compulsive, references to fears and their related symbols, this study proposes to isolate and to discuss a new facet of Frost's poetry. This facet is that of a recognizable fear motif that enlarges and deepens as it runs its course through the poet's works. In many instances one who investigates the works of Frost must offer his own views and his own personal interpretations as to what the poet has actually said because he is, to a degree, dealing with Symbolism; for

Frost's world is the world of Joyce and Yeats, of Eliot and Pound, . . . a world that does not, as it were, automatically provide one with a viable set of values and the images for expressing it.<sup>32</sup>

Modern poetry must be considered at least partially a subjective thing; for as Ezra Pound so candidly observed in 1913,

To say that such and such combination of sound and tempo are not proper, is as foolish as to say that

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<sup>32</sup>George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry in Robert Frost (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 167.

a painter should not use red in the upper left hand corner of his pictures. The movement of poetry is limited only by the nature of syllables and of articulate sound.<sup>33</sup>

If these latter qualities be the hallmarks of modern poetry, then Frost's poetry with its definitive sound and sense of the current century is undeniably modern. As to its subjective nature, Alfred Kreyborg points out that Frost

is too subtle an artist to define anything or anybody conclusively. He leaves something to the reader, something the reader can add to out of his own experience.<sup>34</sup>

And Frost himself says,

If I must be classified as a poet, I might be called a Synecdochist; for I prefer the synecdoche in poetry--that figure of speech in which we use a part for the whole.<sup>35</sup>

By considering the poems themselves, their various critical appraisals, and the poet's specific views on life and on his art, this study hopes to supplement the already-existing body of scholarship on Frost with the concept that fear, as a recurring motif, provides a key to much of his poetry.

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<sup>33</sup>Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1954), p. 93. This essay first appeared in Poetry, III (December, 1913).

<sup>34</sup>Alfred Kreyborg, Our Singing Strength (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929), p. 328.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted by Louis Untermeyer, "Man and Poet," Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937), p. 177.

## CHAPTER I

### A BOY'S WILL: THE SEEDS OF FEAR

Robert Frost has prefaced his ever-increasing body of poetry with an invitation to the reader to join with him in a private exploration of the various facets of the world around them. In the one line, "I shan't be gone long.--You come too" (p. 1),<sup>1</sup> the reader is invited to share all that the poet encounters in his journey, be it joy, beauty, love, or hate. Frost notes all these things in life; but more often than not, he sees beyond them to the lurking fears that lie always just behind man's actions and man's way of life. He reproduces these fears in stanzaic forms, sometimes as a clear-cut representation, other times as a symbol "which is larger or deeper than itself."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>As Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant observes in her study, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 129, the poem "The Pasture" was originally written by Frost to bridge between his first two volumes. In 1923 the poet used the poem as the signature for his first published collection, Selected Poems; and since that time, it has always been used as such for all published collections.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Van Doren, "The Permanence of Robert Frost," Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937), p. 9.

In A Boy's Will Frost serves notice that his poetic delineations will include the use of fear as subject matter. He exhibits an avid interest in the fear which strikes at the individual as an individual--the one which comes upon the single man and has meaning for only him. In examining the poems in A Boy's Will, one finds the genesis of Frost's later, fully wrought appraisals of these individual fears. The poet here has chosen the proper settings and has catalogued the contingent symbols. What he has not done is to integrate the two forces to produce the total effect of a trapped, fear-stricken individual, such as he does later with his "Hill Wife." In "Ghost House" (pp. 6-7), for example, he places his narrator in a situation that is logically conducive to the fear of loneliness. The darkness, the bats, the whippoorwill, and the gravestones--all call up images of fright. In the final lines, however, the narrator indicates that such surroundings are far from reprehensible. The symbols of fear are present, but he rises above them.

Much the same scene is reproduced in the dusk-filled hayfield of "Waiting" (p. 20).<sup>3</sup> The essential

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<sup>3</sup>Although "Waiting" appears later in the volume, I prefer to discuss the poem in conjunction with "Ghost House" because of the similarities in setting, theme, and emotional attitude.

difference seems to lie in this narrator's momentary concern about the rustle at his back, or as he describes it, "the abyss of sound and rustle at my back." His apprehension is short-lived, and he soon dismisses the slight noise as that of an insect. But the instant of fear, the moment of apprehension, has made itself so sharply felt that the lonely man is impelled to express it before he turns again to his pleasant reminiscences. He conquers fear in much the same manner as the man who finds such joy in his "Ghost House," by rising above it.

In "Love and a Question" Frost approaches the pattern for his complete delineation of the individual's fear that is to be such a marked characteristic of his later volumes. The opening lines, with their heavy overtones of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," suggest to the reader that the mysterious Stranger truly represents something, as yet unnamed, for the bridegroom to fear. The identity of this something is implied in the second stanza in the bridegroom's words:

. . . 'Let us look at the sky,  
And question what of the night to be,  
Stranger, you and I.' (p. 9).

The implication is that the Stranger represents the "fear of death," which has suddenly confronted the groom in the midst of his greatest happiness. This particular concept is strengthened by Frost's reliance upon natural

symbolism in the description of the scene:

The woodbine leaves littered the yard,  
 The woodbine berries were blue,  
 Autumn, yes, winter was in the wind. (p. 9).

As the woodbine here may be interpreted as the symbol of the binding power of the marriage contract, its withering (the leaves littering the yard) suggests the dissolution of the marriage by some means. By referring to winter in the third quoted line, Frost fixes both the identity of the Stranger and of the possible threat to the marriage. In a time when the bridegroom should know only unbounded happiness, he is brought face to face with a fear from which he cannot escape. He visualizes the death of his bride as the complete destruction of his joy:

The bridegroom looked at the weary road,  
 Yet saw but her within,  
 And wished her heart in a case of gold  
 And pinned with a silver pin. (p. 9).<sup>4</sup>

The "weary road" of the bridegroom's vision is explainable upon two levels of meaning. The primary level is concerned with the present and is representative of the lonely journey that the Stranger must make; the secondary level, the one which is more attuned to the note of fear in the poem, is concerned with the future

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<sup>4</sup>These lines suggest, in Freudian terms, the defloration of the bride and its related fear of death. This fear has been prevalent in many world cultures and tends to conform with Jung's idea of the archetypal pattern.

and is symbolic of the life journey of the groom after the death of his bride.

In the closing stanza, the groom lists those things which he feels are right and proper for a course of action: to practice charity, to pray for the poor, to curse the rich. He can perform these acts because they are expected of him. But he can only wonder if he should permit the disturbing "fear of death" to enter his house and lessen the joys of his wedding night. The closing lines leave him in his hopeless quandry:

But whether or not a man was asked  
 To mar the love of two  
 By harboring woe in the bridal house,  
 The bridegroom wished he knew. (p. 10).

Although "Ghost House," "Waiting," and "Love and a Question" deal with some of the aspects of fear, Frost's most obvious statement of his concern with this subject comes in "Storm Fear." In this poem he utilizes the pronoun us to represent mankind at odds with the forces of nature:

When the wind works against us in the dark,  
 And pelts with snow  
 The lower chamber window on the east,  
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,  
 The beast,  
 'Come out! Come out!'--  
 It costs no inward struggle not to go. (p. 13).

There is darkness, which is frightening enough in itself; but the presence of that other force in the night, the wind in its temporary character of a beast, awakens

the dormant fear of doom that underlies the thoughts of man. By concentrating on the air of apprehension that pervades the soul of man in the face of the onslaught of a storm, Frost captures the dramatic quality of the struggle, which is both physical and emotional. The lines echo the raving shrieks of the night wind as a terrifying New England blizzard sweeps inward across the land, imprisoning the inhabitants in their homes. Man is safe temporarily, and his shelter deadens the shrieks to whispers and stifled barks. The mounting intensity of the sweeping, white holocaust outside, however, rekindles the ever-present spark of fear.

Continuing his soliloquy, the narrator states, "I count our strength, / Two and a child." (p. 13). Mankind is here represented symbolically in its three basic forms: man, woman, and child. These three are facing the wrath of nature, and they are frightened of what lies outside the thin walls of security that they have built for themselves. The "moment of truth" comes in the closing lines when the narrator reaches the final realization that against the might of natural forces he is powerless to save himself:

And my heart owns a doubt  
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day  
And save ourselves unaided. (p. 13).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>By viewing the storm as a manifestation of the wrath of an all-powerful God, one can equate the

He is afraid--crouched to his knees by the fearful knowledge that man is far from being self-sufficient in times of great stress. Seeming to run beneath these final lines is a plea for assistance from some quarter, or perhaps a prayer for Divine intervention on his behalf.

Contributing to the over-all effectiveness of the poem as an expression of fear is the poet's selective choice of related symbols to intensify his purported meaning. Austin Warren and Donald Stauffer in their separate studies in literature have expounded upon this particular facet of Frost's art. Warren proposes the theory that a natural symbolism underlies Frost's poetic methods. By this he means that the poet treats of a symbol that is designed to call up a second, or natural, symbol. For example, darkness suggests the possibility of a fear, as well as the possibility of something unknown in that darkness that may also be frightening.<sup>6</sup> Stauffer includes Frost in his list of poets whose reputations rest "upon their unerring taste, their accurate

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narrator's fear of the storm with man's fear of the potency of God. Such an equation gives additional substance to the closing lines and admits the possibility of their being interpreted as a prayer for aid.

<sup>6</sup>Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), pp. 194-95. A note in the preface, p. vi, indicates Warren's authorship of the chapter entitled "Image, Metaphor, Symbol, Myth."

selection of the proper words to support and strengthen each other."<sup>7</sup>

With these two views in mind, the reader needs to make a second examination of "Storm Fear." In the initial line Frost identifies the setting as one of darkness, which is the first obvious fear symbol. He goes beyond this level of fear, however, and brings an east wind into the scene. The choice of an east wind suggests an additional manifestation of fear; this is the wind that the New Englanders have come to dread most, as it not infrequently is the harbinger of savage storms from the Atlantic. Inherently savage and brutal, this wind earns the appellation of "beast" from both the poet and the farmer. Between the narrator's first awareness of the storm and his final fear of being destroyed, there comes a sharply realistic portrayal of his isolation:

Those of us not asleep subdued to mark  
 How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,--  
 How drifts are piled,  
 Dooryard and road ungraded,  
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away.  
(p. 13).

The natural result of his realized isolation is his concern for survival, his fear that the darkness, the wind, and the storm will destroy them all unless God

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<sup>7</sup>Donald A. Stauffer, The Nature of Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1946), p. 50.

intervenes.<sup>8</sup> The New England farmer becomes mankind in the "epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."<sup>9</sup>

Less vocal and less emotional is the expression of fear in "Now Close the Windows." Here the poet wants to shut himself up in the security of his house from which location he can only see, not feel, the force of the wind. It is possible to view this particular poem as describing the antecedent actions of those discussed in "Storm Fear." The wind is rising, and the man does not know how savage it may become. By isolating himself from the wrath of nature, he hopes to defeat that fear which mounts in his breast. His method of escape is to "close the windows and not hear the wind,/But see all wind-stirred." (p. 36). The poet has chosen a barren landscape for his scene, one that has been deserted by the farm animals and by the birds. The fields and marshes lie quiet, awaiting the wind and whatever it brings. Man, however, guided partly by the instinct for survival and partly by the apprehension of a storm, chooses to shut himself away behind walls and windows that offer security. By nightfall

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<sup>8</sup>Supra. pp. 19-20, footnote 5.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol," Atlantic Monthly. CLXXVIII (October, 1946), 50.

he may find to his consternation that the wind he shut out has come to work "against us in the dark." (p. 13).

"Storm Fear" and "Now Close the Windows" are primarily expressions of concern for the fears of man when he is represented as a segment of society. In both of them there is present the underlying concept that the fear of a storm is a universal fear, one common to all men. From this concept may be drawn the correlative: a man afraid of a storm is mankind afraid of the forceful wrath of God.<sup>10</sup> Although Frost does not name his fear as such in either poem, the implication is plainly there. One can accept the fact that God has dominion over the winds that buffet at man-made security; and he can accept the fact that mankind has cause to fear this power. Beneath this acceptance lies the understanding that there is a more potent force at work in the universe than mere blind chance.

Frost's first published volume of poetry, coming as it did on the eve of a great world conflict, anticipates the near half-century of fear that the poet and his world have been heir to. The pastoral quality of the poems in A Boy's Will has long been extolled by the critics; but "not all of his poems are pastorals."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Supra, pp. 19-20, footnote 5.

<sup>11</sup>John Fairbanks Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 7.

Of the five which were examined above, only "Waiting" has any claim to this classification. The other four deal with subjects which fail to reflect any bucolic charms. What Frost has done in these five poems is to project fear as a subject matter with which he will concern himself in his poetry. He promises his readers that those things which he writes of in this first volume will be explored more thoroughly and more deeply as his wisdom and understanding grow. In years to come, he states, readers "would not find me changed from him they knew--/Only more sure of all I thought was true." (p. 5).

## CHAPTER II

### NORTH OF BOSTON: STUDIES OF FEAR

With the publication of North of Boston in April of 1914, Frost truly gained the critical acclaim that had been presaged by his previous volume. Edward Thomas, Lascelles Abercrombie, and Ezra Pound led the parade of poets and critics who joined, almost without a single dissenting voice, to herald the advent of a great poet.<sup>1</sup> What Frost had promised in A Boy's Will, he produced in this second volume. Among these poems are included some of those which have become the best known and most read of all of Frost's creations, such as "The Death of the Hired Man," "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," and "The Wood-Pile." But in addition to the popularity, there should be noted the development of more poems concerned with the subject of fear. Eight of the poems in his second volume deal, either directly or indirectly, with fears. None of them, however, is concerned with the fears of a social group. These poems are dedicated to an exploration of the realm of individual fears and, for the most part, approximate case studies of specific

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 129.

fear-stricken men and women of the New England scene.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," for example, Frost weaves his plot around the fear that men will not understand each other, an idea which he was to state even more explicitly three decades later in his introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson's King Jasper.<sup>2</sup> This fear is an implied one, manifested in some form or to some degree in each of the three characters, Mary, Warren, and Silas, the hired man. Mary's fear, which is actually no more than an apprehension, is expressed in her concern about Warren's lack of understanding in his dealings with Silas. Warren, less sensitive about other people's feelings, is afraid of "being taken in" by Silas, afraid of being shown as soft-hearted in his exchanges with a fellow man. The strongest fear of the three, however, is harbored by the off-stage character, Silas. His is a two-edged fear--that his self-respect will be shattered by Warren's refusal to accept the offer that "he'd come to ditch the meadow" (p. 50), and that he will be exposed to his successful brother's censure by being forced to go there to die. Except for Mary, Silas has been cut off from the world by his fears; and Frost intensifies this separation of man from

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<sup>2</sup>Supra, p. 8.

man by having Mary and Warren bring these fears to light in their conversation. George W. Nitchie feels that Silas, by dying at the time of his homecoming, stays Mary's fear and brings the couple to a fuller understanding of themselves and of each other.<sup>3</sup> They now comprise a tight basic family unit--one that has grown out of shared love and respect.

Frost, however, does not always handle the subject of fear in a serious manner. At times he takes a whimsical approach to the topic as is indicated in "A Hundred Collars." In this poem Frost produces his most humorously drawn character in the rabbitry Doctor Magoon, an erudite college professor. Magoon has his fear, and to him it is a serious matter. It is only the poet who has the insight to view it as bordering on the ridiculous. Magoon's fear stems largely from his loss of the ability to communicate with the common people, even "old friends he somehow can't get near." (p. 61). He realizes the extent of his separation from the people around him when he is forced to share a hotel room in a small New Hampshire town with a drunken stranger. Upon seeing the brutish Lafe, his companion for the night, Doctor Magoon is filled with fearful imaginings

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<sup>3</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 123.

of possible harm. His nervous apprehension is conveyed to Lafe, who tries to reassure him:

You act as if you wished you hadn't come.  
 Sit down or lie down, friend; you make me nervous.  
(p. 64).

But the fear, intensified by Magoon's realization of the physical disparity between himself and Lafe, is not allayed. Not even Lafe's generous offer of "more than a hundred collars, size fourteen" (p. 63) has had any effect. The fear remains constant and undiminished as the situation in the poem develops. As Lafe is preparing to leave the room for a time, he attempts once more to put Magoon at ease by telling him in a burst of confidence, "There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people" (p. 67). This attempt, too, fails; and the professor, still frightened as much as ever, can only sigh in relief as he is temporarily left alone.

The situation in "A Hundred Collars," as Frost has presented it, is a hopeless one. If the poem were concerned with a more serious subject, and if the presentation of Magoon were less of a caricature, this hopelessness would deepen the dramatic quality of the conclusion. But as it is, one is more inclined to laugh with Frost as together they view the timid-souled Magoon, handicapped by his intellectual snobbery, struggling with his fear in the confines of the hotel room.

A second humorous treatment of fear appears in "The Wood-Pile,"<sup>4</sup> the next to the last poem in North of Boston. The fear presented here is that exhibited by a small bird when man invades its natural habitat. Freud explains that in such a situation "the frightened animal is afraid and flees."<sup>5</sup> Treating of this fear as only an incidental part of the nature scene that he is describing, Frost gives it almost the same whimsical quality that he injected into his interpretation of Doctor Magoon's fear in "A Hundred Collars." In speaking of the bird, the poet says:

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. (p. 126).

To Frost the actions of the frightened bird symbolically represent those of the man "who takes/Everything said as personal to himself" (p. 126). As the poet continues his walk into the frozen swamp, he dismisses all thoughts of the bird and its fears. Turning to other interests, he says of the bird:

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<sup>4</sup>Although "The Wood-Pile" appears near the end of North of Boston, I prefer to treat it in conjunction with "A Hundred Collars" because of the similarity of the whimsical tone used by Frost in both poems.

<sup>5</sup>Freud, A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis, p. 402.

I forgot him and let his little fear  
Carry him off the way I might have gone. (p. 126).

A far more serious portrayal of the power of fear in the life of an individual is found in "Home Burial," the poignant account of a woman, grief-stricken by the recent death of her child. In this poem Frost sketches the outline of the problem of the emotional estrangement of a husband and wife, a problem that he was to treat more fully and more completely in his later poems. Fears are frequently born of such an estrangement as this, because the two partners in the marriage have lost the ability to share. All they have left is a mutual distrust of each other's actions and motives. Essentially they have become two distinct and separate entities, each frightened of life and of each other. Divided and lonely as they are, they view their domestic crisis with alarm.

The conversational tone employed by Frost in "Home Burial" contributes to the personal quality of the domestic crisis as well as intrinsically heightening the sense of torment being experienced by the woman:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs  
Before she saw him. She was starting down,  
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear. (p. 69).

As Freud points out, "the first phobias of situations in children concern darkness and loneliness."<sup>6</sup> This theory

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 414.

is equally applicable to Amy, the woman in the poem, who has come to know a black and lonely world. The fear which always haunts her is a combination of grief and loneliness, with all of the dreaded qualities of the two magnified and distorted into overpowering proportions. In his study Reginald Cook points out that

the interior of the house in which husband and wife stand is comparatively dark. Standing in the darkness of psychological conflict, they are isolated from the sunlit landscape toward which both look.<sup>7</sup>

For Amy fear has assumed the shape of the family burying-ground, framed by the small window on the stairs. The older graves, with "their three stones of slate and one of marble" (p. 69), do not bring any emotional stress to bear upon her; she has grown used to the sight of them through the years. It is the mound of fresh earth that marks her child's resting-place which quickens the fear at her shoulder. This fear, however, is only the product of her grief and loneliness, stemming from her realization "that human nature is limited and cannot sacrifice everything to sorrow."<sup>8</sup> So upset

<sup>7</sup>Cook, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>8</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 114. The lines from "Home Burial" which prompt this observation read:

. . . The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far short  
They might as well not try to go at all.  
No, from the time when one is sick to death,  
One is alone, and he dies more alone.  
(Frost, Complete Poems, p. 72.)

by what she has just seen of death, Amy enlarges her fear of it to include a fear of her husband and what she feels is his callousness. She shrieks at him:

If you had any feelings, you that dug  
With your own hand--how could you?--his little  
grave;  
I saw you from that very window there,  
Making the gravel leap and leap in air. (p. 71).

And later, still fighting her fear of him, she says:

I can repeat the very words you were saying.  
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'  
Think of it, talk like that at such a time! (p. 72).

When the burden of her grief becomes too great for Amy to support alone, she turns, in terror of her husband, to a neighbor for the much-needed sympathy that she feels he is incapable of supplying. In his summation of the poem, Reginald Cook points to this separation as proof that "the core of the tragic situation is . . . fundamentally human and inward--a failure in intra-familial communication."<sup>9</sup>

The dramatic dialogue form, used so effectively by Frost in "Home Burial," results in the poem's evolving as "a single and complete action"<sup>10</sup> in the tradition of Aristotelian drama. The poet departs from this form, however, in his "A Servant to Servants," choosing to

<sup>9</sup>Cook, op. cit., p. 130.

<sup>10</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 112.

present this pathetic tale as a monologue. Lynen considers this latter form to be a rare one for Frost and classes only one other poem, "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," as a true dramatic monologue.<sup>11</sup> This particular form is well-suited to the purpose and subject matter of "A Servant to Servants," as the principal character is a distraught, over-worked farmwife, fighting the rising fear of a return to insanity. By having her relate her own story, Frost is able to deepen the loneliness that imprisons the woman as well as to isolate her completely from an unfeeling world. In pleading her case to the gypsy who is camping on the farm, the woman spits out the confession:

It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--  
 From cooking meals for hungry hired men  
 And washing dishes after them--from doing  
 Things over and over that just won't stay done.  
(p. 83).

But underlying all her concern with her demanding daily routine is the fear that she will be once more caught up in the torturous net of insanity. She discusses the hired men for whom she must toil so many hours in terms of "I'm not afraid of them, though, if they're not/Afraid of me." (p. 84). This perceptive summarizing of her situation, which amounts to the

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-15.

woman's self-realization, points up the prevailing attitude of people toward those who have been incarcerated in a mental institution--the tendency to regard all such people as objects to be feared. The woman admits to the vagrant gypsy that she once had been a patient in the State Asylum, and she expresses the fear that she may be returned there once again. Her troubled mind has come to accept the possibility of such a return, as the recurring references to the hereditary quality of her insanity indicate. Sprinkled throughout her monologue are such statements as: "I have my fancies: it runs in the family"; "My father's brother wasn't right"; "My father's brother, he went mad quite young." (pp. 84-85).

As Archibald MacLeish observes, "Frost . . . has looked as long and deeply into the darkness of the world as a man well can."<sup>12</sup> In this particular poem Frost is looking into the complex and darkened world of a lonely, fear-ridden woman who may slip the traces of sanity at any moment. Aside from the constant, almost paralyzing, fear of insanity, the woman is driven by a morbid fear of loneliness. She wants human companionship for a few hours. She pleads with the gypsy woman not to go; she begs her to keep her from the compelling duties of one

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<sup>12</sup>Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p. 101.

who is forced to be a servant to a group of coarse, unfeeling hired men. In her anguish the farmwife cries out:

Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work,  
 But the thing of it is, I need to be kept.  
 There's work enough to do--there's always that;  
 But behind's behind. The worst that you can do  
 Is set me back a little more behind.  
 I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway.  
 I'd rather you'd not go unless you must. (p. 87).

These final lines catch the pathos of this lonely woman who has been so irrevocably alienated from her own world by her fears and apprehensions of the muddled world of insanity.

Another farmwife who is cut off from the world by her encroaching fears is the one revealed by Frost in "The Housekeeper" and in "The Fear."<sup>13</sup> Although the poet does not identify the missing Estelle of the first poem with the unnamed woman in the second, he invites a comparison of the two by placing the poems one after the other, almost as if they were successive chapters in a novel. One can see "The Housekeeper," with its underlying theme of the common-law marriage, as a companion piece to the following poem, "The Fear." In the first poem Frost sketches the background situation from which Estelle fled; in the second he presents the fears inherent

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<sup>13</sup>I prefer to treat "The Housekeeper" and "The Fear" as related poems dealing with the marriages of the same woman.

in the situation to which she ran. By tying the two poems together in this manner, the reader is able to visualize what the opposing sides of such an unnatural situation might be.

"The Housekeeper," for example, which is related almost solely from the point of view of the mother of the runaway Estelle, supplies enough of the background details to make the dissolution of the common-law marriage understandable. Estelle, "hurt by the careless insensitivity of the man who could never quite make up his mind to marry her,"<sup>14</sup> has decided that "if it was bad to live with him/It must be right to leave him" (p. 105). Her abrupt departure proves to John Hall, the deserted husband, that his years of insisting that "better than married ought to be as good/As married" (p. 106) were in error. By developing these two characters through the eyes of the old housekeeper, Frost keeps them so undefined that they might very well be the ones who people "The Fear." John Hall may be regarded as the mysterious "he" who is so strongly feared by the woman in the succeeding poem; and that woman, unidentified as she is, could be the missing Estelle. The housekeeper unwittingly builds John Hall into a possible

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<sup>14</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 125.

fear symbol by her answer to one of the narrator's questions. When he asks her if she is afraid of John, she coolly replies:

John Hall touch me! Not if he knows his friends.  
I'll say that for him, John's no threatener  
Like some menfolk. No one's afraid of him;  
All is, he's made up his mind not to stand  
What he has got to stand. (p. 105).

Although the housekeeper has no fear of any violence at the hands of the deserted John Hall, her reference to his decision "not to stand/What he has got to stand" suggests that he is capable of seeking vengeance against Estelle, or whoever it was who enticed her away.

It is the fear of just such a vengeance that persistently haunts the woman in "The Fear." This poem, dealing in part with the guilt motif of a common-law marriage,<sup>15</sup> presents the psychological study of a woman who has, by virtue of a previous choice, alienated herself from her own world. As the title would seem to indicate, this poem represents Frost's most complete study of fear in North of Boston. The unnamed woman has come to know, in its fullest measure, the fear that is the spawn of a guilt-ridden conscience.

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<sup>15</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., pp. 124 and 200. Nitchie feels that the guilt motif of the common-law marriage makes "contact with others . . . a source of perpetual dread" (p. 124) to the woman.

She is afraid of an unnamed, unidentified man<sup>16</sup> who seems always to be lurking on the periphery of her solitude. To her troubled mind he is waiting in the shadows, ready to punish her for the way of life she has chosen.

Frost deliberately keeps the major share of the scene in darkness so as to intensify the apprehensions being experienced by the woman. The small circle of light emanating from the flame of a common kerosene lantern cannot disperse the encroaching blackness of the country night. While standing in this feeble light, however, the woman finds the strength to voice her surface fears to her husband:

I always have felt strange when we came home  
To the dark house after so long an absence,  
And the key rattled loudly into place  
Seemed to warn someone to be getting out  
At one door as we entered at another. (p. 112).

He sees beyond the immediacy of her expressed fears and surmises correctly that her real fear lies rooted in the person of her former husband and whatever act he may commit against them. The woman discloses the depth of her feeling for Joel, her new husband, by

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<sup>16</sup>Frost never positively identifies the man. The reader may interpret him to be the former husband, the father, or a son of the woman. I prefer to view him as a former husband, as that deepens the fear concept by bringing in the possibility of revenge on the part of the deserted man.

demonstrating her willingness to protect him from any violence at the hands of the mysterious "he."

'You're not to come,' she said. 'This is my business  
If the time's come to face it, I'm the one  
To put it the right way. . . .' (p. 113).

Although the woman is afraid for her own safety, she is far more afraid for Joel's. She is willing to face the man in the shadows to protect her new husband; she is confident, or so she tells Joel, that the man from her past would never dare to do her harm.<sup>17</sup>

George Nitchie correlates the position of the woman in "The Fear" with that of Amy in "Home Burial" by pointing out the likenesses between their ordeals of shared solitude.<sup>18</sup> Despite the presence of her husband, Amy is alone because of the emotional estrangement precipitated by the death of the child. In Reginald Cook's opinion, "She is attempting to escape, her husband to face, reality."<sup>19</sup> The woman in "The Fear" is also estranged from her husband, but here the separating wedge is guilt rather than the death of a child. In both instances, however, that which separates the husband and

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<sup>17</sup>The woman's show of confidence is implied in the broken sentence, "He'd never dare--". (Frost, Complete Poems, p. 113).

<sup>18</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>19</sup>Cook, op. cit., p. 130.

wife engenders fear. These two situations seem to be similar to the one which Wallace Stevens describes in the lines:

A man and a woman  
 Are one.  
 A man and a woman and a blackbird  
 Are one.<sup>20</sup>

Although the specific incident which Frost discusses in "The Fear" happens to be unrelated to the woman's apprehensions, this fact does not permanently allay her trepidations. After her brief encounter with the man on the late walk with his son, the woman once again returns to her dark realm of fear. In the closing lines Frost portrays her as caught by terror in a scene of complete blackness:

. . . She spoke as if she couldn't turn.  
 The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,  
 It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.  
 (p. 116).

She has risen to meet the challenge of her fear only to be confronted by the realization that she lives in "a very, very lonely place" (p. 116). The idea of a lonely place suddenly means more to her than a mere geographical designation; it represents a state of mind, her final understanding that her way of life is conducive to little other than fear and darkness. Her hopes for

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<sup>20</sup>Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Poems by Wallace Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 12.

escape have "clattered" to earth and gone out.

Every bit as alienated from his world as the woman in "The Fear" is from hers is the maimed young man in "The Self-Seeker." Neither one has the power necessary to exert any control whatsoever over what is left of life; both of them must merely face what is to come, accepting the concomitant fears as the price of existence. The young man has suffered grave injuries to his legs and feet in some ill-defined industrial accident. He has seen one of the nebulous fears of his childhood, the fear of being mutilated,<sup>21</sup> suddenly translated into actuality; but his moment of realization is blurred into the terrifying knowledge that never again can he seek out the wild orchids of the countryside. He momentarily stifles the fears of what will become of him, of what he will do "for the next forty summers" (p. 119), so that he can decide what course to follow in the negotiations with his company's lawyer. Ironically he has no choice. He can do nothing more than resign himself to his fate and accept what little payment the company deigns to offer him. The Broken One, as Frost chooses to call him in lieu of giving him

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<sup>21</sup>Muller, op. cit., p. 169. Miss Muller here states that "some fears generated in childhood persist throughout life and among these are fears of losing love, of being deserted, or of being mutilated."

a name, cannot escape his fears, however, in the final, climactic scene. After his acceptance of the company's terms, to which his friend Will so violently objects, he makes a gropingly inadequate explanation to the lawyer. His concluding words are

' . . . Don't mind Will: he's savage.  
He thinks you ought to pay me for my flowers.  
You don't know what I mean about the flowers.  
Don't stop to try to now. You'll miss your train.  
Good-by.' (p. 125).

The remainder of the last line of the poem is given over to a description of a physical action, "he flung his arms around his face." (p. 125). By this final gesture of despair the Broken One indicates his fear of facing the future without the comfort of his beloved wild flowers. In his panic he flings his arms over his face to shut out the horrifying vision which suddenly rises to confront him.

Building upon both the general subject matter and this final gesture, George Nitchie cites "The Self-Seeker" as one of the four poems in North of Boston which deal honestly with the dreadful qualities of a given life. He also includes in this classification: "Home Burial," "A Servant to Servants," and "The Fear."<sup>22</sup> By pointing out the relationships of these four poems

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<sup>22</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 99.

to the single theme of the dreadfulness in certain lives, Nitchie provides support for the contention that much of Frost's second volume is devoted to an examination of individual fears. In fact, one might well regard these four poems as the poetic equivalents of a clinician's case studies of fears. In each instance the central figure is subjected to some cataclysmic experience from which springs a fear that drives him or her farther and farther from the sought-for understanding. All four characters fail in their monumental struggles with fear because they cannot break what Overstreet calls "the vicious circle of smiting and being smitten."<sup>23</sup> They all strike out aimlessly at their fears and are dealt crippling blows in return. They may survive their struggles; but they never win them. The fears remain with the characters, still exerting the same forces and continuing to produce new challenges and trials for the persecuted.

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<sup>23</sup>H. A. Overstreet, The Mature Mind (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1949), p. 104.

### CHAPTER III

#### MOUNTAIN INTERVAL: A MOMENTARY RETREAT

Upon their return from England in February of 1915, Robert and Elinor Frost purchased a farm in the uplands near Franconia, New Hampshire, "where they could . . . raise vegetables and draw off for a period to think over what they had done."<sup>1</sup> Out of this retreat from a world at war came Frost's third book of poetry, Mountain Interval,<sup>2</sup> which takes its title from this hillside farm above the intervale. Published in November, 1916, the volume begins where Frost left off two years before in North of Boston--with the character who fears that he has made an improper choice. In the preceding work the wandering narrator of "The Wood-Pile" refers briefly to "the way I might have gone" (p. 126); and the narrator in "Good Hours" announces:

I turned and repented, but coming back  
I saw no window but that was black. (p. 128).

In "The Road Not Taken," the introductory poem

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 148-49.

<sup>2</sup>Mountain Interval (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1916) appeared just one year after the publication of the American editions of A Boy's Will and North of Boston.

in Mountain Interval, the speaker continues with the same discussion. Also a wanderer, he prophetically addresses his listeners by stating:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference. (p. 131).

Revealed in this act of choosing, as in the two poems in North of Boston, is the man's elemental fear that he has made a wrong choice, "since neither self-interest, moral obligation, nor even curiosity provides a real basis for preferring one road to the other."<sup>3</sup> Yvor Winters characterizes the man as a "spiritual drifter,"<sup>4</sup> and accuses him of "mistaking whimsical impulse for moral choice."<sup>5</sup> He supports this accusation by pointing out that the man's

. . . blunder obscures his understanding and even leaves his mood uncertain with regard to the value of the whole business. He is vaguely afraid that he may be neither wrong nor right.<sup>6</sup>

To Winters, then, Frost's frequent references to the making of crucial choices, by any of his characters, are manifestations of a fear, a fear of having acted injudiciously.

<sup>3</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: or, The Spiritual Drifter as Poet," On Modern Poets (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959), p. 195.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

One other important aspect of the matter of choice is intricately woven through the fear motif that is present in Mountain Interval. This particular aspect is that concept of the Frostian world which Cook identifies as the theme of retreat.<sup>7</sup> Mountain Interval, appearing as it did at the time when the world was chiefly inflamed by a global war, represents not an escape from the besetting fears of existence but rather a temporary withdrawal from reality for the purpose of remarshalling one's combative forces. Frost's use of the word interval in the title suggests that this volume will, in truth, be but a momentary retreat into the mountains of New Hampshire,<sup>8</sup> or as Deen would have it, "backward steps to gain a point of vantage."<sup>9</sup>

Of the dozen or so poems in Frost's third volume of verse which treat of the subject of fear, all contain some elements of this idea of a temporary retreat from reality. In "An Old Man's Winter Night," for example, it is the man's attempted retreat from the

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<sup>7</sup>Supra, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>The Pocket Book of Robert Frost's Poems, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1946), p. 10. Untermeyer points out that Frost bought a farm "near Franconia, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire" upon his return from England in 1915.

<sup>9</sup>Deen, op. cit., 543.

reality and from the fears of old age that enhances the pathetic quality of the poem. In a bitter and frightening loneliness, he

. . . scared the cellar under him  
 In clomping here, he scared it once again  
 In clomping off;--and scared the outer night,  
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar  
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,  
 But nothing so like beating on a box. (p. 135).

The element of retreat from his fears is expressed in the last quoted line--the idea, primitive as it may be, that a noisy diversion will act as a successful counter-agent in coping with fears. The old man's realization that "a light he was to no one but himself" (p. 135) sets the impulses of the fear of loneliness coursing through his mind; and he sees a horrifying vision, the "destruction of man's essential humanity,"<sup>10</sup> reflected in his own situation. His sleep, tantamount to a "death in life,"<sup>11</sup> is his momentary retreat from the fearful knowledge that his is a purposeless old age--"one aged man--one man--can't keep a house,/A farm, a countryside" (p. 135).

A similar retreat from the fears of existence is present in "In the Home Stretch," one of the three narrative poems found in Mountain Interval.<sup>12</sup> Here Frost

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<sup>10</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>11</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>12</sup>Kreymborg, op. cit., pp. 326-27. Kreymborg considers this poem to be an example of Frost's distinguished work with the narrative form.

captures "a couple on the downgrade in years"<sup>13</sup> as they try to seek out a haven far removed from the fears of encroaching age. One can visualize the two in this poem as an older and more mature version of the newly-wedded couple in "Love and a Question."<sup>14</sup> The man, no longer a young bridegroom, is still haunted by the fear of death; but now, however, his fear has expanded to include his own death or fate as well. He voices his fearful concerns about the future in almost the same terms as Freud discusses his concept of expectant dread.<sup>15</sup> The aging husband says reflectively to his wife:

The meals we've had no one can take from us.  
I wish that everything on earth were just  
As certain as the meals we've had. I wish  
The meals we haven't had were, anyway. (p. 144).

The woman, however, presents the realistic view of their existence together in her summation of their situation:

. . . You're searching, Joe,  
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.  
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.  
There are only middles. (p. 145).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>14</sup>Supra, pp. 16-18.

<sup>15</sup>Freud, A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis, p. 405. Freud states that people who are tormented with expectant dread "always anticipate the worst of all possible outcomes, interpret every chance happening as an evil omen, and exploit every uncertainty to mean the worst."

<sup>16</sup>Readers may see a kinship with the situation of Dante, who says:

Although she is painfully aware of the threat that death poses, she attempts to dismiss it from both their lives. She cautions her husband to remember that "end is a gloomy word" (p. 146), one that they must banish from their vocabularies if their retreat from fear is to be a success. Frost suggests that their retreat was successful in his almost idyllic conclusion to the poem:

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen,  
 The fire got out through crannies in the stove  
 And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,  
 As much at home as if they'd always danced there.  
(p. 146).

The opening lines of the later "Bond and Free,"

Love has earth to which she clings  
 With hills and circling arms about--  
 Wall within wall to shut fear out (p. 151),

identify the force that makes the couple capable of achieving success in their attempted retreat. It is Love, here expressed as that of a man for a woman and conversely, that insures success; for as Frost stoutly maintains, "Love by being thrall/And simply staying possesses all" (p. 151). In the succeeding poem, "Birches," Frost reaffirms his belief in the efficacy

Midway upon the journey of our life  
 I found that I was in a dusky wood. . . .  
 The very thought of which brings back my fear!  
 So bitter was it, death is little more so.  
 (Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Lawrence  
 Grant White [New York: Pantheon Books, 1948], p. 1.

of a love on earth in words reminiscent of Andrew Marvell's Seventeenth Century pronouncement that

The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.<sup>17</sup>

Frost's contemporary version of Marvell's idea, expressed as

. . . Earth's the right place for love:  
I don't know where it's likely to go better  
(p. 153),

is closely allied with the poet's concern with a momentary retreat from the fears of everyday existence. Earlier in the poem, Frost has admitted in a self-searching soliloquy:

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<sup>18</sup>  
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
Broken across it. (p. 153).

The poet does not want a permanent escape from life; his wish is "to get away from earth awhile/And then come back to it" (p. 153). His hope of a retreat, however, is thwarted by his fear that such an act will cost him the loss of an earthly love.

<sup>17</sup>Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," The Viking Book of Poetry of the English-Speaking World, ed. Richard Aldington (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), I, 457.

<sup>18</sup>Frost's use of "a pathless wood" here has a definite kinship with Dante's concept of "a dusky wood" (Supra, p. 49) insofar as the fear motif in "Birches" is concerned.

But the power of love is not always a successful deterrent to tragedy. In "The Hill Wife," for instance, the principal character, who does have the love of a husband, becomes a victim of her tangled web of fears, a web so complex and so restrictive that her sanity is unquestionably impaired. This poem, in which "the tragic course of human relations is traced through the . . . cycle"<sup>19</sup> of five songs, begins with the wife's own evaluation of her loneliness. Seemingly trapped in "a place where much living has been and is no longer there,"<sup>20</sup> she displays her fear of this encroaching loneliness by remarking:

One ought not to have to care  
 So much as you and I  
 Care when the birds come round the house  
 To seem to say good-bye. (p. 160).

Although the birds do counteract her loneliness to a degree, she lessens their effectiveness by voicing her knowledge that they "fill their breasts/But with each other and themselves" (p. 160). This realization is but the first skein in the torturous web of fear that begins to weave itself about the woman.

Gradually her fear becomes greater and more

<sup>19</sup>Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 328.

<sup>20</sup>Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938), p. 23.

encompassing, finally manifesting itself in the belief that the house is being invaded by strangers.

Always at night when they returned  
 To the lonely house from far away  
 To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,  
 They learned to rattle the lock and key  
 To give whatever might chance to be  
 Warning and time to be off in flight. (p. 160).

She and her husband<sup>21</sup> seem to have reached the same state of emotional agitation as that exhibited by the woman in "The Fear," when she said:

I always have felt strange when we came home  
 To the dark house after so long an absence,  
 And the key rattled loudly into place  
 Seemed to warn someone to be getting out  
 At one door as we entered at another. (p. 112).

The fear, now cancerous, continues its festering growth in the mind of "The Hill Wife." A wandering tramp, fed only a little bread, becomes a threat to her existence; and she feels him to be "watching from the woods as like as not" (p. 161), ready to do some harm to either her or her husband. Inevitably her fear shifts to inanimate objects. A pine tree beside her bedroom window becomes a bestial thing that is "forever trying the window-latch" (p. 161). To her troubled mind, the tree is seeking to break into her dreams, and eventually

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<sup>21</sup>By using the pronoun "they," Frost suggests that the husband shared some of his wife's fear of the house being invaded. This same sharing strengthens the idea that the woman did have her husband's love and understanding.

to creep into the room itself. She is forced to bear this fear alone; for

. . . only one of the two  
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream  
Of what the tree might do. (p. 161).

When the weight of her fears becomes so great and its tangled web so constrictive that life is unbearable, the woman disappears in a valiant, but abortive, effort to escape the dread that haunts her existence. Whatever became of her remains a mystery; and the husband, after his long and fruitless search, knows only that there are "finalities/Besides the grave" (p. 162).

"The Bonfire," with its pagan note of irresponsibility,<sup>22</sup> follows immediately after "The Hill Wife" and seems, at first glance, to be some type of comic relief from the tragic account of the fear-ridden woman of the previous poem. A second glance, however, brings to light Frost's personal conception of a retreat from the harsh realities of war, or what Nitchie interprets to be recommendations for

irresponsible and unintelligent measures as a kind of conditioning process against the irresponsible and unintelligent circumstances that may develop if war should come.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with "let's go up the hill and scare ourselves" (p. 163), Frost moves through a series of fire images

<sup>22</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., pp. 86 and 198.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

that are all related to the concept of wasteful destruction. As Lynen observes, what Frost presents "quite casually as an image, opens outward upon a vista of meaning."<sup>24</sup> And what he presents in "The Bonfire" is, in the final analysis, a total picture of what is to be feared most in war--the heedless destruction of life and property. Frost cites his own baleful experience with a grass fire that got out of control and burned over much of his farm (pp. 163-65), then correlates that experience with the spread of war. He warns the children who comprise his audience that "war is for everyone, for children too" (p. 166). He offers them an alternative, however, that of frightening themselves a little now so that they will never be overwhelmed by fear in the event of a war.<sup>25</sup> His advice, essentially a scheme of retreat, is "to come up hill with me/And have our fire and laugh and be afraid" (p. 166).

The idea of retreat as a defense against fear, which emerges as Frost's message in "The Bonfire," receives a slightly different treatment in "'Out, Out--.'"

<sup>24</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>25</sup>An interesting corollary may be drawn here between Frost's poem and Edgar Arlington Robinson's "Cliff Klingenhagen." Klingenhagen drinks daily draughts of bitterness to escape the threat of a final overwhelming blow of bitterness. Frost's advice about war seems to follow the same pattern. Cf. also A. E. Housman's "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff."

This latter poem, which takes its title from a line in a Macbeth soliloquy--"Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow,"<sup>26</sup> deals with a tragic accident to, and the subsequent death of, a young New England farm boy. The accident, which costs him a hand, occurs amidst the pleasant surroundings of sawdust and cut lengths of stove wood when "the saw . . . leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap" (p. 171). In the wake of the accident the boy's first fear is that of death,

As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The life from spilling. (p. 171).

His first rush of fear, however, dissolves into one more terrifying, more paralyzing. Like the Broken One of "The Self-Seeker," he sees himself, crippled and incapacitated, condemned to struggle through a bleak and fearful future. His realization of the particular fate that has been so capriciously allotted to him is keyed to the lines: "the boy saw all-- . . . He saw all spoiled" (p. 171). Lynen interprets this "all" that the boy has seen as "the complete and irretrievable ruin of . . . life,"<sup>27</sup> a concept which is readily compatible with Macbeth's pronouncement that life "is a

<sup>26</sup>William Shakespeare, Macbeth. V, v, 23-24.

<sup>27</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 32.

tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."<sup>28</sup>

Insofar as the boy in "'Out, Out--'" is concerned, life, that is, a life wherein he is minus a hand, does signify nothing. Unlike Macbeth, however, the boy does not struggle to continue living; he prefers, instead, to seek out the retreat from fear that death offers. Lynen's study summarizes the boy's situation by pointing out that

in his world a man's livelihood, even at an early age, depends upon hard physical labor. For him, then, the loss of the hand means not only a painful abnormality, but perhaps even the loss of his ability to survive.<sup>29</sup>

With this realization clear in his mind, the boy is convinced that death is preferable to a life that is a "walking shadow." He has lost the will to live. He is committed; he must die.

An additional aspect of the boy's situation is the sexual symbolism of the hand. In Freudian terms the hand is a symbol for masculinity; and the loss of it is tantamount to a symbolic castration, or emasculation.<sup>30</sup> The loss of a foot or leg, as in the case

<sup>28</sup>Macbeth. V, v, 26-28.

<sup>29</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>30</sup>Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, II, 338.

of the Broken One in "The Self-Seeker," is related to Muller's "fear of mutilation";<sup>31</sup> the loss of an arm or hand, because of the sexual symbolism involved, is related to Freud's much-discussed fear of castration.<sup>32</sup> According to Lynen,

the boy sees that in losing his hand he has lost the possibility of ever becoming fully a man, not only in the sense of being masculine, but in the sense of achieving the completeness of his nature.<sup>33</sup>

By accepting the sexual implications of the accident, one can read more into the horror which the boy faced and can understand how his fear reached beyond the particular moment of injury. In this light his death becomes less of a tragedy and more of a retreat. To Frost it is a simple end--"Little--less--nothing!--and that ended it./No more to build on there" (p. 172).

Whereas the death of the boy in "'Out, Out--'" came of his own volition, the death of the Red Man in "The Vanishing Red" is a case of willful murder. The Miller kills the Red Man by pushing him into the wheel-pit of the mill. Behind the Miller's crime is a deep-seated fear of the alleged savagery of the American Indian. Although the Red Man "disgusted the Miller

<sup>31</sup>Supra, pp. 41-42.

<sup>32</sup>Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, V, 229-33.

<sup>33</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 33.

physically" (p. 179), it stands to reason that murder would not be done on those grounds alone. A greater cause would have to be given. Essentially the Miller kills to "keep the wildness down,"<sup>34</sup> to destroy "the last Red Man/In Acton" (p. 179) before he can revert to his former savage state. By his action and by his prejudice, the Miller ironically becomes a far greater threat to the people of Acton than the Red Man had ever been. He may again decide, sometime in the future, to rid the community of one whom he has classified as dangerous; and his explanation then will be the same, "'Whose business,--if I take it on myself.'" (p. 179).

Placed immediately after "The Vanishing Red" is the long narrative poem, "Snow,"<sup>35</sup> in which Frost returns to the theme of man at odds with the forces of nature, a theme which had been such an integral part of his first two volumes. Meserve, who has been forced by a blizzard to take temporary shelter with the Coles, does not seem to have the fear of a storm that the narrator of "Storm Fear" possessed. The Coles, on the other hand, are both frightened by the storm and by what they

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<sup>34</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>35</sup>Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 327, considers "Snow" as one of Frost's more important poems, insisting that it "belongs . . . to the noble tradition of Bryant, Emerson, and Whittier."

imagine that it is capable of doing. In a combined effort, they try to induce Meserve to stay the rest of the night rather than to attempt the hazardous last three miles to his home. Meserve counters their warnings of possible danger with the statement that "snowstorms as a rule/Aren't looked on as man-killers." (p. 188).

Despite all the arguments that the Coles can offer, Meserve sets out once more "because the storm wants him to,"<sup>36</sup> determined to win his private battle with nature's elements. He silences the Coles with

'Well, there's--the storm. That says I must go on.

That wants me as a war might if it came.  
Ask any man.' (p. 189).

He possesses a strong faith in himself and in his abilities; and because of this faith, he seems destined to succeed "in needlessly bucking blizzards after dark."<sup>37</sup> The Coles, on the other hand, lack faith in themselves and in God, which Mrs. Cole calls "the dreaded word." (p. 188). They live their lives in a shell of self-concern, frightened by anything that seems to touch upon their beings. Meserve's midnight stop, a momentary retreat from the blizzard, provides them with the

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<sup>36</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid... p. 163.

opportunity to go beyond the limits of each other and offer some concern for another of the human race.

"Snow," which deals with both the matter of crucial choice and the concept of strategic retreat, provides a clue to the direction that the fear motif has taken in Mountain Interval. In this volume Frost presents a world in which man is forced "to come to grips directly with ultimate problems of choice."<sup>38</sup> From this act of choosing may come the fear of having chosen unwisely--a fear that may, in turn, lead to a momentary retreat. The retreat, however, is not to be interpreted as blind flight; it is intended rather to be viewed as a sort of "time-out" in the struggle for existence. More keenly aware of the problems of choice than he had been in A Boy's Will and in North of Boston, Frost has interwoven the theme with that of retreat to give an added dimension to the fear motif in Mountain Interval.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

## CHAPTER IV

### NEW HAMPSHIRE: NEW REALMS OF FEAR

In 1923, after a silence of seven years, Robert Frost brought out his fourth volume of poetry, New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes.<sup>1</sup> To Lawrance Thompson this volume constitutes an essential shift in Frost's basic method of attack; he classifies it as "a venture into the humorous, witty, relaxed realm of gentle social satire."<sup>2</sup> Thompson's concluding evaluation is that this satire is "aimed at the American glorification of big business, commercialism, [and] materialism,"<sup>3</sup> elements which Frost found in ever-increasing volume in post-war America. To the poet these three areas represented the spawning grounds for a new generation of fears to intimidate the American populace.

The theme of momentary retreat that determined the positioning and the flow of the poems in Mountain

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<sup>1</sup>The fourth volume of Frost's poetry will, hereafter, be referred to by the abbreviated title: New Hampshire.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Interval is continued in New Hampshire. The lengthy title poem of this fourth volume celebrates the state of New Hampshire as "a safe retreat or pleasant contrast to the mercenary drift of other regions."<sup>4</sup> The underlying fear concept for this poem stems from Frost's sharpened awareness that the United States had plotted a course in the direction of materialism--a materialism that would become as a festering sore to ensuing generations. To Frost the state of New Hampshire is the embodiment of the symbol of constancy; it represents the one area of the nation that has successfully resisted the sweeping changes engendered by the years in the wake of World War I.

Although the approach elected by Frost for this long poem may appear to be witty and humorous, beneath this facetious exterior lie the anxieties and concerns which dictated the poet's thematic pattern.

New Hampshire used to have at Salem  
 A company we called the White Corpuscles,  
 Whose duty was at any hour of night  
 To rush in sheets and fools' caps where they  
     smelled  
 A thing the least bit doubtfully perscented  
 And give someone the Skipper Ireson's Ride. (p. 203).

Reminiscent of the Vigilantes and the Ku Klux Klan though this group may be, the White Corpuscles came into existence because they recognized their inherent fear

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

of the influence of outside forces. They performed their duties as a counter-agent to these forces, confident that they did so with a holy dedication. Frost wisely does not espouse either side of the cause; he merely points out the existence of such a citizens' group. From his vantage point as an observer of the scene, the poet is able to conceptualize for his readers those manifestations of fear which were encroaching upon the people of New Hampshire. He sees the ramifications of those fears that extend beyond the moment; for as Sidney Cox states, Frost "knows too much of the good that comes from evil and of the evil that worsens with efforts to destroy it."<sup>5</sup>

Another fear--that of making a wrong choice--which figured so prominently in Mountain Interval re-emerges in the title poem in the dialogue between Frost and the New Yorker, the disciple of the "school of the pseudo-phallic." Countering the New Yorker's demand that he choose to be either "a prude, or puke," Frost answers: "'Me for the hills where I don't have to choose.'" (p. 210). In this particular instance Frost succeeds in correlating the fear of making a wrong choice with the frequently used theme of retreat. Rather than make any choice, and particularly, a wrong

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<sup>5</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 172.

one, he prefers to resort to a momentary flight from the exigencies of life, a flight that will take him to the hills of New Hampshire or Vermont, "the two best states in the Union." (p. 204). If, however, the choice is forced upon him, Frost will reject the epithet of "prude"; for such a classification, to his mind, is equatable with the man who is afraid of nature. There is too much of nature at the core of Frost's being, with "his feeling for the soil and for growing things,"<sup>6</sup> for him ever to condone man's displaying any fear of it. As Robert Langbaum states, "Nature in Frost never is so dangerous that his speakers cannot protect themselves against it."<sup>7</sup>

Still pursuing the theme of the matter of a choice, Frost goes on in "New Hampshire" to observe that

Nothing not built with hands of course is sacred.  
 But here is not a question of what's sacred;  
 Rather of what to face or run away from.  
 I'd hate to be a runaway from nature. (p. 211).

In these four lines Frost brings into a single focus four of the major thematic concepts of the long title poem: the threat of a growing materialism, the matter of a choice, the idea of a strategic retreat, and the

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<sup>6</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Langbaum, "The New Nature Poetry," American Scholar, XXVIII (Summer 1959), 327.

over-riding fears that have descended or arisen, as the case may be, in the America of the early Twenties. The poet's final evaluation of the times comes but a few lines later when he states that "it seems a narrow choice the age insists on." (p. 211).

Frost continues with his examination of choice as it is influenced by the age in "A Star in a Stone-Boat," the second poem in the volume. Dedicated to Lincoln MacVeagh, this "lovely chain of tercets"<sup>8</sup> projects the narrator's doubt as to the wisdom of the choice that his contemporaries have made. This doubt, a deep anxiety that approximates fear, causes him to say:

Some may know what they seek in school and church,  
And why they seek it there; for what I search  
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch.  
(p. 214).

In these lines Frost unites his theme of choice with the fear of isolation, the fear that through an act or through a lack of understanding one man will be isolated from his fellow men.

The same fear of isolation is present in "The Star-Splitter," the story of Brad McLaughlin, who burned his house so that he could buy a telescope with the insurance money. Guilty of a crime, McLaughlin

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<sup>8</sup>Louis Untermeyer, "Robert Frost's New Hampshire," Bookman, LVIII (January 1924), 580.

merits rejection by the townspeople; and they fully intend to isolate him from their group. A bit of reflection the following morning, however, leads them to conclude that

If one by one we counted people out  
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long  
To get so we had no one left to live with. (p. 219).

The threat of isolation becomes a two-edged force capable of cutting away at a community, man by man, until each is an isolated individual driven by the fear engendered by loneliness. To Frost, however, there is a protective amulet in the unwritten law that "to be social is to be forgiving." (p. 219).

A variation on the theme of isolation is presented in "Paul's Wife," which seems to be a pleasant combination of the legends of Pygmalion and Paul Bunyan.<sup>9</sup> In this poem Frost offers two aspects of a fear situation. One aspect is that Paul clearly possesses the strength to strike terror in the hearts of those who bait him about his wife; the second aspect deals with the isolation of Paul from his fellow-workers. His sheer physical strength is evidenced in the lines: "He never stopped to murder anyone/Who asked the question" (p. 235) and "Paul could do wonders." (p. 236).

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<sup>9</sup>Nitchie, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-78, interprets this poem as a "lumberjack version of the creation and marriage of Eve."

Despite his strength and physical prowess Paul's only answer to the taunts of the lumberjacks with whom he worked was simply to disappear. He preferred to allow himself to be cut off from his fellowmen and to accept as his share of life a small portion of a dream world. He cannot invite these men into his world outside of the lumber camp for fear of ridicule, for "Paul sawed his wife/Out of a white-pine log." (p. 236). He chooses to isolate himself with his Galatea (Eve, as Nitchie would have it) away from "those great ruffians" with whom he worked daily. Murphy, one of the lumbermen, provides the explanation for Paul's self-imposed isolation with the idea that Paul

Wouldn't be spoken to about a wife  
In any way the world knew how to speak. (p. 239).

The complicating force in "Paul's Wife" stems directly from the inability of the other lumberjacks to understand Paul. They expect, in fact, they actually half-wish, him to explode into physical violence in response to their taunts. They could understand a reaction such as this; but they, with the possible exception of Murphy, are incapable of understanding anyone's voluntary withdrawal into a world that possesses little of reality. To them, therefore, Paul represents an object to be feared, not because he is possessed of a superior physical strength but because he is different

from them. When the lumberjacks, after a night of drinking, came upon Paul and his "wife" living in a niche in the side of a cliff, they "put their throats together, / And let out a loud yell, and threw a bottle." (p. 239). In their fear, the lumberjacks respond in much the same manner as did the "White Corpuscles" of Salem;<sup>10</sup> what they cannot understand, they must attack.

For "Wild Grapes," which is "a girl's version of 'Birches,'"<sup>11</sup> Frost moves from the lumber camps of "Paul's Wife" to a New Hampshire countryside that is marked by birch trees supporting great masses of scuppernong vines. Concerned with "the three ages of man,"<sup>12</sup> the poem encompasses the wonder of youth, the vision of maturity, and the reflection of age. The narrator,<sup>13</sup> musing over the experiences of her life, recalls an incident from her girlhood when a bent-over birch tree pulled her skyward because her weight was too slight to hold it down. The young girl was terrified, not so much by her unexpected sky-ride as by her sudden initiation into knowledge. The woman, years

<sup>10</sup>Supra, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 266.      <sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 266-67. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant here identifies the narrator of "Wild Grapes" as Susan Ward, the editor of the very early poetry of Robert Frost.

later, admits:

I had not taken the first step in knowledge;  
I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
As still I have not learned to with the heart,  
And have no wish to with the heart--nor need,  
That I can see. (p. 243).

The frightening thing to the young girl, however, is her inability to let go with the hands, her inability to let herself be plunged into an experience of life. The mature woman, on the other hand, has learned to let go with the hands but clings tenaciously with the mind. Only with the reflective qualities of age comes the distinct separation of mind and heart. To the old woman the fear is that she will let go with the heart before her life is finished. She wants the serenity that comes when the hands and the mind have let go; but she fears that time when the heart lets go, the time when there is no longer any love.

In "Two Witches" Frost returns to the form of the character analysis that so dominated North of Boston. The first of these analyses, entitled "The Witch of Coos," follows the established format of the Frostian dramatic dialogue. Although a third character, the narrator, is present, he serves only to introduce the macabre tale, to be a patient listener, and to supply a kind of verification in the closing lines. It is

the witch and her mentally retarded son<sup>14</sup> who do the talking, bringing to light a dark deed from out of the past that has haunted them for forty years. The witch-mother, whose alleged occult powers stem from a "neurotic projection of sexual guilt,"<sup>15</sup> reveals for the first time what it is that she has feared all these years. Goaded by the remarks of her son, she identifies the bones nailed away in the attic behind the headboard of her bed as those of a former lover:

They were a man's his father killed for me.  
I mean a man he killed instead of me. (p. 251).

Driven by guilt, the woman imagines that on a winter's night forty years ago the bones left their shallow grave in the cellar and came upstairs seeking vengeance. Only the woman hears the steps on the stairs; her husband, Toffile, does not hear them. In the grip of fear, she forces him to "nail the door shut/And push the headboard of the bed against it." (p. 251). In telling the "Puritan murder-ghost story"<sup>16</sup> to an outsider, the witch gains a degree of freedom from the fear that has haunted her for such a long time.

In "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," the second

<sup>14</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 116, points out that the speech of the son labels him as mentally retarded.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-16.

<sup>16</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 422.

of the "bizarre, soul-chilling characterizations"<sup>17</sup> that make up "Two Witches," there is no such fortuitous release. This poem, done as a dramatic monologue with the same intensity of the earlier "A Servant to Servants,"<sup>18</sup> treats of the fears of an individual who has been irrevocably isolated from the surrounding society. The witch of Grafton, the widow of Arthur Amy, relates a tale in which "love and cruelty do coexist."<sup>19</sup> She gloats that her husband had "liked everything [she] made him do" (p. 255), even to the point of gathering wet snowberries for her from the slippery rocks beside a nearby waterfall. Now, however, alone and penniless, the frightened witch offers a pathetic regret for an error in choice that she had made when young:

You can come down from everything to nothing.  
 All is, if I'd a-known when I was young  
 And full of it, that this would be the end,  
 It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage  
 To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.  
 I might have, but it doesn't seem as if. (p. 255).

Like her sister witch from Coos, her witchcraft has its roots in sexuality.<sup>20</sup> She admits to having

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<sup>17</sup>M. L. Rosenthal, "The Robert Frost Controversy," Nation. CLXXXVIII (June 20, 1959), 560.

<sup>18</sup>Lynen, op. cit... pp. 114-15.

<sup>19</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 101.

<sup>20</sup>Lynen, op. cit... p. 115.

"bewitched" the hapless Arthur Amy; and her "kiting," as she labels her activities, can best be defined as promiscuity. In short, the witch of Grafton is a succubus no longer capable of attracting men. She is, therefore, doomed to live out her days struggling vainly against a terrifying loneliness.

In his portraits of these two witches, Frost utilizes more than just the obvious fear symbols inherent in the word "witch." Although both of the women are feared by the inhabitants of their respective communities, the personal fears of the witches themselves provide a far more interesting denouement. It is their fears which drive them to make their revelations, bringing surcease to the witch of Coos and only regret to the witch of Grafton.

Following "Two Witches" are two poems which deal with the fear of the destruction of the world: "I Will Sing You One-O" and "Fire and Ice." In the first of these poems Frost presents his narrator lying in bed, waiting to hear the tower clock strike the hour. Outside, a storm is raging, piling high the snow in the village streets.<sup>21</sup> As the man waits for the hour to

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<sup>21</sup>The mood and setting of "I Will Sing You One-O" are reminiscent of Frost's earlier "Storm Fear," which was included in A Boy's Will. In both poems the narrator is caught in the fear of the violent storm raging outside.

be tolled, a fear comes over him that time has stopped, that, except for himself, the earth has become cold and lifeless. He lies there, fearing that

. . . the cold  
 Had checked the pace  
 Of the tower clock  
 By tying together  
 Its hands of gold  
 Before its face. (p. 264).

When the tower clock does strike "One," however, then is answered by the steeple clock, the sounds beat against his snow-encrusted window to mitigate the fear that has been tearing at his heart. "In that grave One" (p. 265) lies the proof, insofar as the narrator is concerned, that the universe still exists and that God, is still in complete control.<sup>22</sup> The constancy of God, of Time, and of the Universe is transmitted to "the utmost star" (p. 265) through the resounding echoes of the clocks; and all things remain as they have been--

Since man began  
 To drag down man  
 And nation nation. (p. 266).

Retaining the destruction concepts of the closing lines of "I Will Sing You One-O," Frost presents a cryptic forecast of Divine destruction in "Fire and

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<sup>22</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 71, treats this poem as "an almost Platonic conception of the true, the good, and the beautiful seen as a unity." An undisturbed universe, therefore, is the most efficacious antidote for fear.

Ice." Although the two possible methods of ending the world are reserved for a Power higher than man, the poet correlates these forces with the emotions of man, making them the expression of "the consciousness of experience acutely felt."<sup>23</sup> To the poet, and, therefore, also to mankind, fire is equatable with desire; and ice, with hate. John Lynen views these equations as philosophical paradoxes, pointing out that the poem revolves around

the idea that the intensity of man's passions, the very thing which makes him human, creates the inhuman forces of cataclysm.<sup>24</sup>

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, on the other hand, evaluates "Fire and Ice" as a "dramatic confrontation of opposite passions," intended primarily to illustrate "Frost's aesthetic creed that a poem must create situation."<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Sergeant takes the reader one step farther in her analysis and identifies the germ of Frost's concept as a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Uriel": "Evil will bless and ice will burn."<sup>26</sup> Returning to "Fire and Ice" itself, however, one notes the presence of a fear of destruction, a destruction that the poet seems to accept as inevitable.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. pp. 264-65.

The inevitability of the destruction of the world that the poet fearfully accepts in "Fire and Ice" is restated in "Nothing Gold Can Stay" as the inevitable loss of what Nature has produced. Essentially the poem is the tragedy of mutability, paralleling "the loss of beauty in the leaf . . . [with] the loss of innocence in Eden."<sup>27</sup> With a poet's vision Frost offers a correlation between the paradise of Adam and the modern world:

So Eden sank to grief.  
So dawn goes down to day,  
Nothing gold can stay. (p. 272).

To the poet the fear of impending destruction is no longer confined to the physical world of "Fire and Ice"; it has now impinged upon the ethical and moral world. What is thereby endangered is the set of values that his world has come to accept. Whether worth, that which is "gold," lies in nature, a paradise, man, or the modern world is immaterial; the poet faces its destruction with a mixture of sadness and trepidation. He sees more than the inevitability of change; he sees "the corruption which seems to be a necessary part of maturing."<sup>28</sup>

The closing lines of "The Runaway," which immediately follows "Nothing Gold Can Stay," exemplify

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<sup>27</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

Frost's concern with those fears that had their original antecedents in the fall of Man or a loss of Eden. Ostensibly the subject of the poem is a frightened Morgan colt:

'Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,  
When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,  
Ought to be told to come and take him in.' (p. 273).

When the image of the colt, however, becomes that of man facing the exigencies of life, the lines take on a deeper meaning. Here is

. . . a complete reminder of a universe full of young, lost things, of a universe in which every creature, indeed, lives touchingly and amusingly alone.<sup>29</sup>

Man, like the colt, has met with the struggles of life and has become frightened; and in this moment of blind running, he needs the care and protection of whatever force controls the universe. As of yet, the colt is not "winter-broken"; and he is frightened by his baptism of snow, his introduction to the problems of existence. Symbolically he is the uninitiated man, driven to a state of near panic by a fear of life that comes with his encountering the first problem.

The initiated man, the one who has survived or risen above the early trials of life, is not immune either from the besetting fears of existence. As Erich

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<sup>29</sup>Van Doren, op. cit... p. 10.

Fromm observes, life demands that man continue to "give up certainty and defenses and take the jump into the act of commitment."<sup>30</sup> Such a situation forms the basis of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which "is probably the best known and the most misunderstood of Frost's poems."<sup>31</sup> Standing at the edge of the woods, the narrator is fascinated by "the dark deep loveliness that offers nothing sure and seems to prophesy only danger."<sup>32</sup> Although "the woods are lovely, dark and deep" (p. 275) and promise respite from the perplexities of life, the narrator refuses their obvious invitation, saying:

But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep. (p. 275).

Tempted by the restful, quiet woods to give up the struggle for life and submit to the alleged ease of death, he realizes, in time, that

it will not do to give up to the dark woods and "come in" until, bearing it out to the edge of doom, he has traversed the miles to go and keep these promises. . . . Then his sleep will be the final one, the one that is neither premeditated nor entered into by volition against nature;

<sup>30</sup>Erich Fromm, "Man Is Not a Thing," Cross Currents, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 328.

<sup>31</sup>Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver, Colo.: Alan Swallow, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid... p. 113.

though the dark lovely depths do seem to promise more at the moment than the eventual long journey home.<sup>33</sup>

However tempted he may be to succumb to the blandishments of death, there is a fear of the unknown that forces him to recall those promises he has yet to keep, promises that require life not death.

Retaining the basic images of the dark wood and the falling snow that figured so predominantly in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost transforms his scene for "The Onset" from one of serenity to one of violence. The narrator, here caught by the fury of a lashing winter storm, is forced to admit:

I almost stumble looking up and round  
As one who overtaken by the end  
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend  
Upon him where he is . . . . (p. 278).

Equally as frightened as were his predecessors in "Storm Fear" and "I Will Sing You One-O," the speaker turns to a different quarter for his heartening message. He takes comfort in the fact that precedent is in his favor, that winter's snows have never been able to imprison the world indefinitely. The man in "Storm Fear," on the other hand, has his belief in Divine assistance to sustain him; and his counterpart in "I Will Sing You One-O" has his knowledge of a well-

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

ordered universe to lift him above his debilitating fear impulses. In all three instances man has been reduced "to a fearful sense of his own smallness, his own lostness, in a seemingly indifferent or even malicious universe";<sup>34</sup> but in each case there is the one element that allows mankind to rise above the forces that come against it. There is, therefore, in Frost a recognition that in hope lies a possible defense against fear.

The fear of death that provides one of the principal themes in both "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Onset" receives a different handling in "Not to Keep." With its wartime setting and theme, this poem presents the study of a wife whose husband has been wounded in battle, yet is not willing to leave the fighting to the more fortunate. The fear of death, here a death in wartime, is recognized by the wife only; the husband is depicted as eager to be engaged actively in battle once more. The husband is the romanticist, drunk with the adventure that he has thus far survived; the wife is the realist, knowing that there is

. . . The same  
 Grim giving to do over for them both.  
 She dared no more than ask him with her eyes

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<sup>34</sup>Thompson, op. cit... p. 19.

How was it with him for a second trial.  
 And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.  
 They had given him back to her, but not to keep.  
 (p. 284).

Embodied in the final line is a sense of prophecy, a realization for the wife that hers is a justified fear. Noting the final "not to keep," one can expect only death for the husband, who seems to celebrate the recommended irresponsibility of "The Bonfire."<sup>35</sup> Although Frost may appear to extend his sympathies to the wife, he admits to liking "a world where bravery is called for."<sup>36</sup> With such a view as this, Frost can be expected to applaud the husband's final decision. He sees in this willed action a force that transcends a momentary fear of death. The personal philosophy of Robert Frost, as stated by Sidney Cox, is that in

. . . facing tragedy we achieve a meaning. And the possibility of being all but impossibly brave cannot be spared from life, even if man should become too mature for total wars.<sup>37</sup>

After plumbing some of the deeper and more gripping fears that beset mankind, Frost turns to a lighter representation of fear in "A Boundless Moment," presenting what amounts to a near "comic relief." Although the poem is not devoid of more substantial meanings, the reader's attention is caught primarily by the

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<sup>35</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 198.

<sup>36</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

mistaken ghost imagery of the opening stanza:

He halted in the wind, and--what was that  
Far in the maples, pale, but not a ghost?  
He stood there bringing March against his thought,  
And yet too ready to believe the most. (p. 288).

The man's seeing of the ghost in the woods most assuredly cannot be treated on the same level as Banquo's appearance in Macbeth or the governess's hallucinations in The Turn of the Screw; Frost's approach is too limited by the value of the first, quick impression to permit the "ghost" to be more than a passing fancy. When confronted by reasoning (truth, as the poet would have it), the ghost becomes only "a young beech clinging to its last year's leaves" (p. 288). When exposed to such truth, most of the fears of man are proved to be without foundation. The poem provides three basic images, one for each stanza, from which deeper symbolic interpretations may be drawn. In stanza one is the "ghost," a representation of the thing to be feared--the unknown; in stanza two is the "Paradise-in-bloom," the substitution for the thing feared--the illusion; and in stanza three is the "young beech tree," an evaluation of truth--the known. It is truth, therefore, which succeeds, overcoming first illusion, and then fear. In the eyes of John Lynen

the speaker's refusal to accept anything but the truth, even when the truth is disappointing,

demonstrates the courage of man's intellect.<sup>38</sup>

Such courage of intellect, however, is notably absent in "The Lockless Door," Frost's final treatment of fear in New Hampshire. Classified by George W. Nitchie as one of the "poems that have . . . acts of choice as their dynamic center,"<sup>39</sup> this group of five quatrains depicts the frightened man forced to choose between reality and retreat. He can answer the knock at the door or he can escape through his open window. Choosing the latter, the narrator admits:

So at a knock  
I emptied my cage  
To hide in the world  
And alter with age. (p. 299).

He never discovers what "the knock/At the door may have been" (p. 299); the knock remains an "unknown," an agent capable, nevertheless, of instilling fear in the man even in its unresolved state.

If one accepts the narrator of "The Lockless Door" as a representation of Frost the poet, it is possible to see the poem as a further manifestation of the "puke or prude" choice outlined in the title poem. As Frost said then, his motto for life is "'Me for the hills where I don't have to choose.'" (p. 210). The

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<sup>38</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>39</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 157.

departure without responding to the knock, therefore, is clearly consistent with the poet's often-stated concept of strategic retreat. By correlating ideas in "New Hampshire" with those in "The Lockless Door," one brings a valuable interpretative link to the closing stanza of the latter poem:

So at a knock  
I emptied my cage  
To hide in the world  
And alter with age. (p. 299).

The reference to the "emptied cage" suggests that Frost has broken out of the granite walls of New Hampshire and has emerged into the world once more, possessing more wisdom and a clearer vision than ever before. The last two lines seem to offer the promise that the poet will forsake his static positions of the past and will transmit his growing wisdom to his audiences of readers.

## CHAPTER V

### WEST-RUNNING BROOK: POSSIBILITIES FOR TERROR

West-Running Brook, which appeared in 1928, marks a decided change in the poetry of Robert Frost. This slim volume brings to full fruition the poet's tendency to be a philosopher that was merely hinted at in New Hampshire,<sup>1</sup> as Frost moves to the level of a truly national poet. Gone is the intense regionalism that characterized his first two volumes of poetry and reappeared in only slightly mitigated forms in his third and fourth volumes. With this move away from the regional concept, Frost shifts his attention "from characters and events to ideas,"<sup>2</sup> which heightens the philosophic tone of West-Running Brook. Such a decisive turn on the part of the poet seems to be his first attempt to adhere to the promise made in the closing stanza of "The Lockless Door," the promise that he would "alter with age."

Frost begins his fifth volume of poetry with "Spring Pools," a twelve-line lyric with definite Emersonian overtones.<sup>3</sup> The first six lines are devoted to

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<sup>1</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 278.

the description of a peaceful woodland scene in the spring; the second six lines, however, are used to develop a fear image:

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 (p. 303).

In these lines is expressed the fear that the normal processes of growth, maturation, or aging will lead to death or destruction. John Lynen sees "something sinister about the way the poem turns out."<sup>4</sup> Also noting this sinister quality is Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, who speaks of

an implication of a darksome anthropomorphic plot in which he and the trees are involved. . . . This tree fear is deep in Robert Frost . . . the converse of his love of trees and yet part of it, for he loves too the scare he invokes.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally spring has represented innocence and has been treated as a season of delight. Frost, however, brings a grim inversion to this concept by delivering an admonition to the trees as they are about to change from budded boughs to fully leaved ones. He sees in the cycle of the leaves a danger to the present from the "treacherous forces . . . breaking through the

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<sup>4</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>5</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 279.

pleasant surface of the landscape."<sup>6</sup> He sees the danger in the passage of time.

Much the same fear is voiced by Frost in "On Going Unnoticed," an expression of "man's minute dimension in a world of nature."<sup>7</sup> The first of the four quatrains deals with the contrast of the minuscule figure of man set against the enormity of nature:

As vain to raise a voice as a sigh  
 In the tumult of free leaves on high.  
 What are you in the shadow of trees  
 Engaged up there with the light and breeze?  
(p. 309).

Man comes to know fear, therefore, only when he realizes that he is a mere speck in the universe when contrasted with the omnipotence of nature. An intensification of this fear is presented in the acknowledgment on his part that life, at best, is a transitory thing, which idea underlies the earlier "Spring Pools." Reminiscent of The Rubaiyat, the final stanza of "On Going Unnoticed" brings into focus the poet's thesis that fear is the end-product of man's recognition of the power of nature:

You linger your little hour and are gone,  
 And still the woods sweep leafily on,  
 Not even missing the coral-root flower  
 You took as a trophy of the hour. (p. 309).

<sup>6</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 270.

A third poem which treats of man's ever-present fear of the force of nature is "The Birthplace."<sup>8</sup> The sinister note detected by John Lynen in "Spring Pools" is present here also in the lines:

The mountain seemed to like the stir,  
And made of us a little while--  
With always something in her smile. (p. 339).

The enigmatic quality of both the mountain and its "smile" is achieved through Frost's personification of his setting. It is almost as if the mountain is a malevolent spirit lying in wait to repossess what man has laboriously hewn out of the wilderness. The closing couplet,

The mountain pushed us off her knees.  
And now her lap is full of trees. (p. 339),

comes as irrefutable testimony that nature has the inherent power to overcome man and his efforts. From this subconscious knowledge on the part of man stems whatever fear of nature he possesses. As George Nitchie interprets "The Birthplace," there is always present the threat that when "humanity has gone . . . the weeds and the wilderness come back."<sup>9</sup>

In "The Cocoon" Frost substitutes loneliness

<sup>8</sup>Although "The Birthplace" is placed later in the volume, I prefer to discuss it in connection with "Spring Pools" and "On Going Unnoticed" because of the similarities in the principal themes.

<sup>9</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 24.

for nature as the author of man's fears. What the poet at first thought to be autumn haze turns out to be "smoke from one poor house alone," a house whose "in-mates may be lonely women-folk." (p. 310). The symbolism of the title, therefore, lies in the poet's seeing the smoke as the protective cocoon-like coverings chosen by the lonely women to isolate themselves from the world. The poet-narrator says:

I want to tell them that with all this smoke  
They prudently are spinning their cocoon  
And anchoring it to an earth and moon. (p. 310).

A marked similarity may be noted between the underlying theme of "The Cocoon" and that of "An Old Man's Winter Night," as both poems are concerned with fears rising out of loneliness. In "The Cocoon," however, there is a decided lessening of the fears of the lonely women through a deliberate action on their part. They refuse to follow the example of the old man of the earlier poem and allow the frightening loneliness to engulf them; they feel impelled to give to the outside world some visible sign of their presence within the solitary farmhouse. The smoke, thereby, serves a dual purpose; on one level it represents the women's notice to any passersby that there is life in the house and, on a second level, appears to the narrator as a shield protecting these women from the world of reality. In

"spinning their own cocoon" (p. 310), the women are achieving a degree of security by shutting out the world and its attendant fears.

"Acceptance," which also deals with isolation from the fears of the world, clearly anticipates the heightened fear images of "Once by the Pacific." The central figure in "Acceptance" is a small woodland bird, which becomes another symbol for man when Frost has it vocalize its thoughts about the darkness that comes over the land

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud  
And goes down burning into the gulf below. (p. 313).

Frightened by the uncertainty of the future, the bird asks that the night be dark to shield him from the fears that may lie ahead:

"Now let the night be dark for all of me.  
Let the night be too dark for me to see  
Into the future. Let what will be, be." (p. 313).

The bird, here symbolizing man in much the same manner as did the Morgan colt in "The Runaway," prefers to have his future "sprung on him" without the foreknowledge of what it has to offer. To him the future, however bleak it may turn out to be, is much less frightening if accepted on these terms.

A clue as to what the future may possibly have in store for mankind is provided in "Once by the Pacific," the poem immediately following "Acceptance."

This sonnet, with its "portentous wind of doom and darkness,"<sup>10</sup> stands as Frost's strongest expression of the fear of destruction of the physical world, a fear that has its genesis in the acknowledgment of the power of God's wrath. Clearly drawing upon the symbols used in previous poems, such as "Fire and Ice" and "Storm Fear," the poet delivers a prophecy of impending doom:

It looked as if a night of dark intent  
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.  
 Someone had better be prepared for rage.  
 There would be more than ocean-water broken  
 Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.  
(p. 314).

The prophecy having been made, Frost leaves the problem for mankind to cope with in whatever manner seems feasible; he offers little more than the fearful realization that when considering man's chances for survival the "odds may be less than even."<sup>11</sup>

The rhetorical question that opens "Bereft" picks up the image of the "wind of doom" and transfers it to the situation of a lonely individual:

Where had I heard this wind before  
 Change like this to a deeper roar?

The sense of fear evoked in this couplet is comparable to that known by "The Hill Wife"; but its intensity is kept at a lower level through the introduction of a

<sup>10</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 26.

statement of faith in the closing lines. Speaking in much the same vein as Emily Dickinson wrote, the narrator partially erases the concept of fear conjured up in the opening lines of the poem:

Word I was in the house alone  
 Somehow must have gotten abroad;  
 Word I was in my life alone;  
 Word I had no one left but God. (p. 317).

That there is faith on the part of the narrator is evident; but what is more important is his understanding of his situation. He is actively and "rebelliously fighting the dark side of life and of his own nature, . . . awed by what he must work out with God."<sup>12</sup>

The same note of struggle with his nature is struck again in "Tree at My Window," when "Frost sees his own mind as similar to the vague dream-head of the tree."<sup>13</sup> Living in a world that places a high premium upon the acceptance of reality, the poet finds himself unable to fulfill his "melancholy longing to share the dream-like experience more fully."<sup>14</sup> Beset by worries, anxieties, and fears, he correlates his own position with that of the tree in the midst of a storm:

But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,  
 And if you have seen me when I slept,  
 You have seen me when I was taken and swept  
 And all but lost. (p. 318).

<sup>12</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>13</sup>Winters, op. cit., p. 211.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

This poem, which is ranked by Lawrance Thompson as one of Frost's finest lyrics,<sup>15</sup> is another in the long line of poetic explorations of what Elizabeth Sergeant calls "tree fear."<sup>16</sup> J. McBride Dabbs, who has made a study of the tree and woods images in Frost's poetry, finds it difficult, however, to prove conclusively that the poet's "fascination for . . . woods and trees ever becomes a distinct fear of them,"<sup>17</sup> or of what they may represent.

Leaving the world of nature momentarily, Frost writes of the fear of violence in the sonnet, "The Flood." To the poet the fear of violence is one of man's oldest fears, one that has led him to impose stringent restrictions upon self and society. But danger remains, always lurking just beneath the veneer of civilization, waiting to burst forth when least expected.

Blood has been harder to dam back than water.  
 Just when we think we have it impounded safe  
 Behind new barrier walls (and let it chafe!),  
 It breaks away in some new kind of slaughter.  
 We choose to say it is let loose by the devil;  
 But power of blood itself releases blood. (p. 323).

Originally entitled "Blood" when it appeared in The

<sup>15</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 279.

<sup>17</sup>J. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, XXIII (Spring 1934), 518.

Nation in February, 1928,<sup>18</sup> the poem reveals Frost's deep and abiding concern for a world that exists under the constant threat of violence, by either an individual or a nation. In the final line--"Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained." (p. 323)--he expresses his disillusionment with mankind, resigning himself and his world to a future haunted by the fear that some form of violence may strike at any time.

Another poem that touches upon the dark side of the human condition is the sonnet, "Acquainted with the Night," which Yvor Winters considers to be "one of the two or three best poems that Frost has written."<sup>19</sup> Equally enthusiastic is the appraisal of Randall Jarrell, who calls it "a poem in Dante's own form and with some of Dante's own qualities."<sup>20</sup> On the first level of interpretation the poem seems to be a brief summary of a lifetime of night-walks:

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (p. 324).

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<sup>18</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 297. The title was changed to "The Flood" for the 1949 edition of Complete Poems.

<sup>19</sup>Winters, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>20</sup>Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1955), p. 53.

The poet's use of words and images that suggest night, rain, darkness, and sadness gives the poem meaning on a second level--that of a journey through the blackest areas of human existence, "a quest for some kind of meaningful epiphany in such a world."<sup>21</sup> Whether one accepts the poem as the personal experience of the narrator or as the product of his observations is immaterial; the point to be considered is that the narrator has taken full cognizance of the sorrows and the fears of the world in which he finds himself. The repetition of the opening line of the poem as a closing line heightens the intensity of the experiences through which the narrator has passed by giving them a unity as a single episode in the life he has known.

"The Lovely Shall be Choosers," which is associated in theme with "Acquainted with the Night," was added to West-Running Brook in the Collected Poems of 1930.<sup>22</sup> "A terrible parody of the Seven Joys of the Virgin,"<sup>23</sup> this sole excursion into free verse by Frost<sup>24</sup> seems to have had its genesis in the pitiful tale of "The Pauper Witch of Grafton."<sup>25</sup> Although the

<sup>21</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>22</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>23</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>24</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>25</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 102.

title clearly indicates that a choice on the part of the woman is involved, the poem does not depend solely upon this act of choosing for the derivation of its fear concepts. In the background is a Voice (which here is comparable to the Erinnyes of the ancient Greeks) that shouts vindictively:

She would refuse love safe with wealth and honor!  
The lovely shall be choosers, shall they?  
Then let them choose! (p. 325).

The woman in question, here represented as "the lovely," comes to know fear through desolation as she watches her love "transformed into a kind of stony isolation from husband, children, friends, and potential lover."<sup>26</sup>

The title poem, which Lawrance Thompson feels guarantees the importance of the volume,<sup>27</sup> presents the opposite view of a love between man and woman. As the couple views the brook, the woman testifies to the strength and scope of their love:

We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.  
As you and I are married to each other,  
We'll both be married to the brook. (p. 327).

The man (who is identified by the poet as Fred) sees in the same brook the complete cycle of human existence, life portrayed in the Lucretian perspective "as a river or stream or flux of everything that runs away to spend

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 12.

itself in death and nothingness. . . ."28 He remarks to his bride:

'It flows between us, over us, and with us.  
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and  
love--  
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;  
The universal cataract of death  
That spends to nothingness. . . .' (p. 329).

The philosophy of the man, therefore, brings the two of them to a victory over the fear of death, which must be considered to be present, at least symbolically, in the many references to "west." John Lynen summarizes the impact of this dramatic dialogue in the following manner:

While the philosophic motif holds the center of interest throughout, the dramatic framework of the poem is of some importance. The action, like the setting, symbolizes the central idea. The conversation is an argument between lovers, and the poet so arranges it as to suggest that disagreement of a sort is fundamental to their love, . . . a dispute and a love-making in which endearment takes the form of playful banter.<sup>29</sup>

The fear of death is conquered, as also are all other fears that shadow the marriage, by the depth of the understanding which the husband demonstrates. That the marriage is safe from the many fears of the world is revealed in the closing line, which is spoken by the wife:

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>29</sup>Lynen, op. cit., pp. 123-24.

'Today will be the day of what we both said.'  
(p. 329).

Frost presents still another view of love and marriage in the sonnet, "The Investment." The fear that drove the young couple into buying a piano that they assuredly could not afford is that of being lost in a struggle for mere existence. The two of them are both fully aware that choosing the "piano and new paint" may present financial problems; but they have vowed to themselves

Not to sink under being man and wife,  
But get some color and music out of life. (p. 337).

To gain the objectives of their vow, they are willing to subsist upon a diet of potatoes for the majority of their winter meals. As far as the young couple is concerned, there is more to be feared in a drab, meaningless struggle to live than in a season or two of forced economy. The piano and the paint are, in truth, an investment; they represent insurance against the kind of life that the couple fears most.

Life at its best, however, can be viewed as an object of fear Frost reveals in "Riders." Couched in heroic couplets, this poem utilizes the "bold image of the infant alone, clinging for dear life to the bushy hide of a rugged world."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 432.

We can just see the infant up astride,  
His small fist buried in the bushy hide. (p. 345).

But the world that man must contend with is a world without reason, the world that the poet calls "our wildest mount--a headless horse." (p. 345). Standing between man and all-consuming fear, however, is the knowledge that there exists a backlog of ideas "we haven't tried." (p. 345). From these ideas may come the force that spikes "the explosives of the twentieth [century]"<sup>31</sup> and that permits man to achieve a small degree of security.

Frost makes clear in "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" that this sought-after security is one of the most elusive elements of the present century. He completely negates the concept that security can be rooted in permanence alone by observing that

It is true the longest drouth will end in rain,  
The longest peace in China will end in strife.  
(p. 346).

In the constellations, however, mankind can find a set of practical rules for getting by with the world one must live in, a world that seems to be constantly in a state of flux. The Divine scheme of the well-ordered universe that momentarily stayed the fears of the narrator in "I Will Sing You One-O" is presented once again in the poet's assurance that the calm of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 421.

the heavens "seems certainly safe to last tonight." (p. 346). The fear of an eventual holocaust of universal magnitude is not eradicated, only the time and the date of its coming has been postponed.

In "The Bear," however, even the universe is shown to have its limitations in the eyes of the man trapped in the modern world, the man who cries out that

The world has room to make a bear feel free;  
The universe seems cramped to you and me. (p. 347).

The first ten lines of this poem are devoted to brief comparative portraits of an uncaged and a caged bear, handled in much the same fashion as was the Morgan colt in the earlier "The Runaway." In the eleventh line, however, Frost commits himself to a larger theme by shifting his frame of reference from the figure of the bear to the figure of modern man. To the poet

Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage  
That all day fights a nervous inward rage,  
His mood rejecting all his mind suggests. (p. 347).

The triumph of mood over mind (emotionalism over rationalism) brings the fears and the pressures of the world to bear upon man, giving him a "remote affinity with Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman."<sup>32</sup> By implication this affinity with Loman, however remote it may be, would lead man to a self-destruction as an escape

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<sup>32</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 62.

from the fears of the world, which would be more in keeping with the extreme pessimism of Edwin Arlington Robinson.<sup>33</sup> Frost, on the other hand, offers "a darkness of doubt as well as a radiance of hope in his vision of America."<sup>34</sup> Cognizant of man's perverted vision, Frost dwells upon its microscopic and its telescopic qualities, both of which fail to give an accurate perspective of life. Although his characterization is done in somber tones, he never permits his figure to become completely mired in a morass of despair. There is a faint glimmer of hope, dim though it may well be, that points toward an avenue of escape from the "two metaphysical extremes." (p. 347). This escape lies primarily in a readjustment of man's vision, which may entail at least a partial rejection of the scientific impulse of the age. It is precisely upon this point of rejection that Yvor Winters bases his attack upon the poet, accusing Frost of "satirizing the intelligent man from the point of view of the unintelligent."<sup>35</sup> For Winters the uncaged bear is the same figure as the unreflective cave-man, escaping the

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<sup>33</sup>Robinson's theme is developed in "Luke Havergal," "Mr. Flood's Party," and "Richard Cory," among other poems.

<sup>34</sup>John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: American Bard," Saturday Review (March 24, 1962), 53.

<sup>35</sup>Winters, op. cit., p. 199.

fears of the world only because he takes no notice of the world.<sup>36</sup>

George Nitchie, too, notes the decided tone of anti-intellectualism in "The Bear" and relates it to a similar theme in "The Egg and the Machine," which immediately follows "The Bear" and completes the volume. As Nitchie points out, both poems are concerned with a "developing anti-intellectualism and sympathy for motiveless hatred of complex machinery."<sup>37</sup> In these two poems Frost is speaking out for his New Englander, stating the fear of what further encroachments of science may do to the world he knows and loves.

What recourse does Frost's New Englander, or any man, have in the face of such a dilemma? Like the caged bear he may sit ". . . back on his fundamental butt/With lifted snout and eyes (if any) shut." (p. 347). Progress will not stop; science will not cease to be; and his fears will not be conquered. All that he will have gained will be a momentary respite from the imagined ravages of all three. Or like the man of "The Egg and the Machine," he may arm himself with a clutch of turtle eggs and shout defiantly after a

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid... pp. 198-99.

<sup>37</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 199.

passing locomotive:

. . . 'I am armed for war.  
The next machine that has the power to pass  
Will get this plasm in its goggle glass.' (p. 349).

Whichever of these courses man chooses, the result will be very much the same. His fears will persist as strongly if he foolishly ignores their presence as if he foolishly lashes out against them. In either case, emotionalism will triumph over rationalism; and Frost seems to imply that fear feeds best upon man's emotions.

By closing West-Running Brook with these two views of man frightened by the enormity of the modern world, Frost completes a study of fear that depicts man as a minuscule figure always at the mercy of some frightening, more powerful, force. This force may be identified in the various poems as nature, death, the constellations, or a world of complex machines; but in each of them Frost finds the raw material for a contrast with man, utilizing "recurrent elements of theme involving fear, isolation, lostness, not-knowing, and discontinuity."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Lionel Trilling was recalling these themes generally, and West-Running Brook specifically, when in 1959 he classed Frost as

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<sup>38</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 29.

"a poet who terrifies."<sup>39</sup> Such a poet is, in Trilling's opinion, frequently loved by his people because he makes "plain to them the terrible things of human life."<sup>40</sup> The twenty-odd poems in West-Running Brook that deal with some aspect of the fear motif do reveal to their readers the possibilities for terror in the everyday existence, not because Frost is intent upon bringing fear into the lives of people but because he is dedicated to the task of clarifying the fear already present. In essence he is the embodiment of Trilling's concept "that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could possibly give . . . comfort."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," Partisan Review, XXVI (Summer, 1959), 452.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER VI

### A FURTHER RANGE: FEAR IN THE DEPRESSION YEARS

When A Further Range appeared in 1936 as Frost's sixth volume of poetry, he was already firmly established among the ranks of major American poets. He had twice been the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize-- for his New Hampshire in 1924 and for his Collected Poems in 1931.<sup>1</sup> His work had been "discovered" by the scholars and the critics; and a few preliminary studies were being circulated, among which were works by Sidney Cox, Caroline Ford, and Gorham Munson.<sup>2</sup> More important yet, the death of Edwin Arlington Robinson in 1935 had shifted the mantle of "America's greatest living poet" to the shoulders of Robert Frost.<sup>3</sup>

For most of the critics, therefore, A Further Range represented a distinct disappointment. They had expected a fuller treatment of the ideas and themes that had given direction to New Hampshire and West-Running Brook; but they received, instead, a volume

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>2</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>3</sup>John Wheelwright, "Back to the Old Farm," Poetry, XLIX (October 1936), 45-46.

"too heavily padded with relatively unimpressive and inartistic 'editorials' which provide some pointed satirical thrusts at the American scene."<sup>4</sup> The evaluation put forth by George W. Nitchie, however, is even more damning. For him "A Further Range is, on the whole, Frost's first bad book,"<sup>5</sup> an assessment hinted at earlier by Dudley Fitts in his first review of the work. Fitts points out that

the voice is still the voice of Frost, . . . but the diction is faded, the expression imprecise, and the tone extraordinarily tired and uneasy.<sup>6</sup>

One note in defense of A Further Range was struck by William Rose Benet in his article for The Saturday Review of Literature. Considering the volume as one of merit, he states:

When we find a man who can look out far and look in deep, and at the same time express himself clearly, to say that we should be grateful is understatement.<sup>7</sup>

Although less given to accolades than Benet, Elizabeth S. Sergeant, too, sees the work as a worthy addition to the increasing body of Frost's poetry. In

<sup>4</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>6</sup>Dudley Fitts, Untitled review, New England Quarterly, IX (September 1936), 520.

<sup>7</sup>William Rose Benet, "Wise Old Woodchuck," The Saturday Review of Literature, XIV (May 30, 1936), 6.

her estimation the poems included in A Further Range represent the perfecting of Frost's art, the labor to which the poet had dedicated himself in the years from 1928 to 1934.<sup>8</sup>

Although Frost may have failed to develop the ideas and themes expected of him by the majority of the critics, the volume does, however, offer a number of poems that deal with variations on the fear motif. Ranging in subject matter from the problems of labor and management to the pastoral topic of man in a nature setting, the poems explore whatever fears were prevalent in the decade of the Thirties.

"A Lone Striker," the first poem in A Further Range, touches lightly upon the often-used Frostian theme of retreat, as it depicts a mill-worker who chooses the peaceful world of nature over the bustling world of the factory system.<sup>9</sup> Fearful of the ever-increasing power of the mill in his life, the worker decides upon an individual revolt, a one-man strike against the restrictive forces of time clocks and production quotas.

<sup>8</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 310.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 38-39. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant sees an autobiographical connection with the poem, relating it to an experience of Frost's in the spring of 1894.

He knew a path that wanted walking;  
 He knew a spring that wanted drinking;  
 A thought that wanted further thinking;  
 A love that wanted renewing. (p. 356).

Although the poem is essentially the discussion of a rebellion against industry, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a declaration that Frost "has not been taken in by gloom mongers, collectivists, bureaucrats, or 'greedy good-doers.'"<sup>10</sup> For the rebellious mill-worker nature is still the best antidote for the poisonous fears seemingly inherent in the complex society. In much the same fashion as "A Drumlin Woodchuck" (which follows later in the same volume), the worker "selects . . . his own patterns of meaning in the generally indifferent world he inhabits."<sup>11</sup> His revolt, however, is not to be interpreted as a complete disavowal of the world of industry; he has left the way open for a possible return if the need, on the part of industry, should ever arise. In the closing lines he dictates the terms of his return, terms intended to free him from his long-held fear that the factory is de-humanizing him:

If there should ever come a day  
 When industry seemed like to die  
 Because he left it in the lurch,

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<sup>10</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 111. The term, "greedy good-doers," is Frost's own, appearing in "A Roadside Stand."

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

Or even merely seemed to pine  
 For want of his approval, why,  
 Come get him--they knew where to search. (p. 356).

The whimsical note struck by Frost in stating the mill-worker's terms is broadened and intensified in his handling of a minor fear in "The White-Tailed Hornet." Taking his cue from Ralph Waldo Emerson,<sup>12</sup> Frost discusses "downward comparisons," man's over-extended practice of comparing himself with a lower form of animal life. Ostensibly the poet is concerned with society's tendency to glorify pure animal instinct:

To err is human, not to, animal.  
 Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,  
 Only too liberal of our compliment  
 That really takes away instead of gives. (p. 361).

Beneath this apparent concern with instinct is a half-playful, half-serious treatment of Frost's fear of what "de-humanization" can do to those of his own species.

As

. . . 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. (p. 362).

Frost's anxiety over the de-humanization of mankind, as revealed in "The White-Tailed Hornet,"

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<sup>12</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 349.

receives a different handling in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury." This poem utilizes the figure of a prize-winning chicken as an index to the human race, or perhaps a super race. (Frost never quite makes clear the distinction.) Her owner, a New England farmer, equally enamored of his success in a poultry show and of his prize pullet,

. . . has half a mind to start,  
 With her for Mother Eve, a race  
 That shall all living things displace.  
 (pp. 303-304).

Leaning against a building, observing his "blue-ribbon winner," he notes all the facets of her alleged superiority, confident that she is the embodiment of perfection. From this "wool-gathering" springs the hint of fear that is revealed in the closing quatrain:

The lowly pen is yet a hold  
 Against the dark and wind and cold  
 To give a prospect to a plan  
 And warrant prudence in a man. (p. 364).

In the face of the coming cold and stormy night, the breeder's choice for a new Eve degenerates before his eyes into "just another hen." Like her less-gifted "sisters," she seeks only the comfort and security of the rough shelter that man has provided. A warning bell sounds dimly within the mind of the man; he has crossed the demarcation line that separates the world of man from that of the beast. Frightened by the

direction of his thinking, he recognizes the need for prudence--even in day-dreams. "Downward comparisons" must cease.

"A Drumlin Woodchuck,"<sup>13</sup> Frost's adaptation of the apologue, depicts the animal (or, by extension of meaning, the man) "whose coexistence with the world is no more than a shrewd pretense of sociability."<sup>14</sup> As the woodchuck reveals his thoughts and concerns, he becomes the figure of man in the depression-ridden Thirties. Whatever man has to fall back on determines, for the most part, how effectively he can cope with, and rise above, the fears that come to haunt his everyday existence. He must have his retreats, his escapes, his private methods of getting away from the world that confronts him. Like the woodchuck, who has his "two-door burrow" at his back, man can then

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<sup>13</sup>William Rose Benet, in his review of A Further Range ("Wise Old Woodchuck," Saturday Review of Literature, XIV, May 30, 1936, p. 6), identifies the "drumlin woodchuck" as the true "raisonneur" of the volume. Benet states:

Frost, as woodchuck, has been 'instinctively thorough' about his burrow. Perhaps that is all it was from the first. Yet he has not only burrowed deeply but sat often at the burrow-mouth to watch the great drift of the constellations. Wise old woodchuck! And if he has not got the whole 'United States stated,' he has got a good deal of life stated in original analogy and phrase.

<sup>14</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 114.

. . . sit forth exposed to attack  
 As one who shrewdly pretends  
 That he and the world are friends. (p. 365).

But what have the two of them, man and woodchuck, gained? No actual fears have been conquered; no nebulous ones, expunged. The life that flows past the "two-door burrow" has all its problems unsolved, all its injustices unchanged. For man, as well as for woodchuck, the

. . . real achievement is a matter of the slickness with which he has fitted himself into the chinks and crannies of a generally inimical environment.<sup>15</sup>

That this achievement has suggestions of a retreat is no departure from a basic philosophy of Robert Frost.<sup>16</sup> He has classed "A Drumlin Woodchuck" as his "most Vermontly poem,"<sup>17</sup> which immediately places it in the same category as the ones in Mountain Interval and New Hampshire which deal with concepts of retreat.

Like those earlier poems, "A Drumlin Woodchuck" offers the retreat as "backward steps to gain a point of vantage."<sup>18</sup> The speaker wants to be around "after the hunt goes past" (p. 365), and he can accomplish this feat only if he temporarily quits the scene. He

<sup>15</sup>Ibid... p. 133.

<sup>16</sup>Supra. p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Sergeant, op. cit... p. 326.

<sup>18</sup>Deen, op. cit... 543.

summarizes his retreat, and the reasons for it, by stating:

If I can with confidence say  
That still for another day,  
Or even another year,  
I will be there for you, my dear,

It will be because, though small  
As measured against the All,  
I have been so instinctively thorough  
About my crevice and burrow. (pp. 365-66).

His justification for retreat lies in the fact that endurance is worth all the compromises that one must make in life to insure that existence. If he survives, that act alone is highly significant. He may not have conquered the fears that he faced; but, at least, he has gained another day in which to face them, and, perhaps, another way in which to combat them. Whether he be man or woodchuck, he can now view his life in a new perspective.

With "In Time of Cloudburst" Frost leaves the world of animals and returns to the theme of the fear of destruction by nature's forces that he first developed in "Storm Fear."<sup>19</sup> Establishing a kinship with Deucalion and Noah, the poet sees beyond his immediate fear of destruction by water to a world of hope "on tracts laid new to the sun." (p. 369). He recognizes the awesome power of nature in the torrential

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<sup>19</sup>Supra, pp. 18-22.

downpour; and a fear sweeps over him that

. . . summits shall be immersed,  
The bottom of seas raised dry--  
The slope of the earth reversed. (p. 369).

This fear of destruction is countered, however, by his belief in the world that is to come after the flood. The contention of Radcliffe Squires that "Frost accepts the vision of doom and simultaneously rejects it . . . as a harmful way of thinking"<sup>20</sup> seems to apply to this poem, particularly when one notes that the conflicting views are expressed in successive stanzas. The poet has created a striking fear image; but he has weakened its effect by failing to accord it the rounded development that the blizzard received in the earlier "Storm Fear." The insertion of the "hope" figure in the fifth stanza,

Then all I need do is run  
To the other end of the slope,  
And on tracts laid new to the sun,  
Begin all over to hope. (p. 369),

makes the cloudburst a form of baptism rather than a form of earthly destruction. The possibilities for good in a rejuvenated world far outweigh any manifestations of fear.

"A Roadside Stand" and "Departmental," the two

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<sup>20</sup>Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 43.

poems which follow "In Time of Cloudburst," are basically poetic editorials, which derive their fear images from satiric thrusts at the social and political precepts of the New Deal. "Departmental," which is Frost's most open attack upon "bureaucracy, socialism, [and] mass education, . . . with all their little subdivisions of stupidity,"<sup>21</sup> is primarily concerned with the age-old fear that too much government will lead to a de-humanization of the citizenry. He is looking into the future and seeing an America "where creative Promethean man is lost in the welter of adding machines, official communiques, and reports."<sup>22</sup>

Frost's account of the death and burial of the ant, "Jerry McCormic," as revealed in "Departmental," is but a thinly veiled description of what the death and burial of a man may become in the age of bureaucracy:

It couldn't be called ungentle.  
But how thoroughly departmental. (p. 373).

The proclamation of the queen of the ant colony,

Go bring him home to his people.  
Lay him in state on a sepal.  
Wrap him for shroud in a petal.  
Embalm him with ichor of nettle. (p. 372),

provides for all the traditional trappings of a death and a funeral; but there is no element of human

<sup>21</sup>Isaacs, op. cit., p. 147.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

compassion present. It is specifically this absence of feeling which the poet bemoans. Elizabeth Isaacs summarizes the principal theme of the poem by stating:

To departmentalize death, Frost is saying, in part, is to ignore it; to departmentalize life is also to ignore it. All values are lost in such indignity.<sup>23</sup>

The majority of Americans have developed rigid concepts regarding the sanctity of death and burial; and to reduce these events to a series of reports, communique, and proclamations destroys their essential dignity. The fear of de-humanization in death and burial that Frost outlines in this poem of the mid-Thirties<sup>24</sup> receives a fuller treatment in Jessica Mitford's study, The American Way of Death, published in 1963. In reviewing this later work, David Cort supplies evidence that Frost's earlier concern was warranted by pointing out that

The funeral director has . . . made himself a part of the governmental, police, and public health arm, on the grounds that the corpse's family may make an antisocial disposition of it. . . . the church, the traditional custodian of the dead, has somehow been elbowed out of this section of the Public Health Law.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 338, sets the time of the composition of "Departmental" as January, 1935.

<sup>25</sup>David Cort, "Ambush on the Styx," Saturday Review, XLVI (August 31, 1963), 21, a review of Jessica Mitford, The American Way of Death (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

Temporarily abandoning his satires on the New Deal, Frost presents in "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" a situation reminiscent of his earlier "The Investment." He describes a bleak scene of despair as he sees it from the window of a train crossing the desert of Utah in the night:

The earth had a single light afar,  
 A flickering, human pathetic light,  
 That was maintained against the night,  
 It seemed to me, by the people there,  
 With a God-forsaken brute despair. (p. 376).

Admitting that his heart was beginning to cloud his mind, that emotion was beginning to conquer reason, the viewer asks himself for an explanation of the flickering. Is it the trees that stand between him and the far light? Or is it that those who tend the light are tired of the barren existence that they know? He imagines them as a couple, being faced with a choice of life or death;

They can keep it burning as long as they please;  
 They can put it out whenever they please. (p. 376).

As the viewer ponders the situation, seeing only a fraction of a human existence and imagining the rest, an answer seems to come to him from out of the night:

Life is not so sinister-grave.  
 Matter of fact has made them brave.  
 He is husband, she is wife.  
 She fears not him, they fear not life. (p. 377).

In these lines Frost sets up an almost direct antithesis

to the situation developed by Edwin Arlington Robinson in his "Eros Turannos." In the Robinson poem the man and wife lack the shared life of pleasure and pain that Frost gives to his imagined couple as they keep the "single light afar" burning in the night. Although the basic situations in the two poems are very similar, Robinson chooses a pessimistic approach to his characters and their life together:

She fears him, and will always ask  
 What fated her to choose him;  
 She meets in his engaging mask  
 All reasons to refuse him;  
 But what she meets and what she fears  
 Are less than are the downward years,  
 Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs  
 Of age, were she to lose him.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Frost, on the other hand, by allowing his heart to cloud his mind, can produce the portrait of a man and wife cushioned against whatever shocks and fears their life together may incur.

The second section of A Further Range, which is entitled "Taken Singly," opens with a pair of poems on the contemplative view of loneliness. The first poem, "Lost in Heaven," provides somewhat of an introduction to the second, "Desert Places," by developing the concept of "heavenly lostness." In the last stanza

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<sup>26</sup>Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Eros Turannos," Poems from Six Centuries, ed. Russell E. Leavenworth (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1962), p. 259.

the poet states:

Seeing myself well lost once more, I sighed,  
 'Where, where in Heaven am I? But don't tell me!  
 Oh, opening clouds, by opening on me wide,  
 Let's let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me.'  
 (p. 385).

That this concept of "lostness" has overtones of fear is disclosed by Frost when he uses "consternation" in the preceding stanza to describe his state of mind as he utters the statements of the closing quatrain. In this same stanza he also introduces the "constellations" figure that will be developed to a greater extent in "Desert Places"; and the lines suggest that the usual guides for life are no longer present or visible:

But stars were scarce in that part of the sky,  
 And no two were of the same constellation--  
 No one was bright enough to identify. (p. 385).

Although the fear image in "Lost in Heaven" is given such a limited treatment that it never rises above the level of "consternation," the poem itself offers a partial view of the Frostian concept of emptiness, an emptiness that may be within man or in the world that surrounds him.

Utilizing this theme of emptiness, Robert Frost produces one of his fullest developments of the fear motif in "Desert Places." In each of the four stanzas he uses a different, but related, figure which all

combine in the culminating stanza to permit the poet to make "a declarative parallel between himself and the vacant stare of space."<sup>27</sup> Stanza one sets the stage with its description of the falling snow in much the same tone as the earlier "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The scene in "Desert Places" is detailed in the lines:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,  
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last. (p. 386).

A hint of the mood of the poem and the poet is given in the expression ". . . fast, oh, fast"; and this hint receives further delineation in the second stanza:

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares. (p. 386).

The key idea introduced here by the poet is his characterization of himself as "absent-spirited." This state of mind is a different one from that revealed in "Lost in Heaven." In the preceding poem the poet cared enough to experience consternation at his "lostness"; here there is no evidence of caring. He makes no effort to escape the loneliness that seem to be closing about him; he is content to wait passively for the scene to swallow him.

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<sup>27</sup>Squires, op. cit... p. 28.

The loneliness that engulfs him is destined to become even more overwhelming and more frightening in the third stanza:

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. (p. 386).

The night, the snow, and the dark wood have gained dominion over his world and made it a place of desolation.<sup>28</sup> The fourth stanza moves from the cold blankness of this lonely earthly scene to the terrifying emptiness that lies between the stars, then to the equally frightening voids within man himself:

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. (p. 386).

The "desert places" that Frost finds most terrifying lie on three levels: the snow-covered earth with "no expression, nothing to express"; the vacant space spreading between the stars; and the internal void of man, be it of the heart or of the mind. Particularly frightening to the poet, who, in reality, is "the non-benighted man, with a great deal to express,"<sup>29</sup> is the

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<sup>28</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 330-31, makes a rather tenuous connection between this poem and the death of Frost's daughter, Marjorie Frost Fraser, in May of 1934.

<sup>29</sup>Isaacs, op. cit., p. 109.

realization that he too has been guilty of harboring emptiness. This realization, however, is not without its advantages. As Elizabeth Isaacs observes:

There has come to him the peace of acceptance, the mystical acquaintance with his own desert places so that their very acknowledgment and resignation regenerate a kind of strength that is more than sheer fatalism.<sup>30</sup>

Frost repeats the scheme of "Lost in Heaven" and "Desert Places" in the next two poems by again having the first poem serve as a kind of introduction to the second. The closing lines of "Leaves Compared with Flowers,"

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,  
To lean against and hear in the dark.  
Petals I may have once pursued.  
Leaves are all my darker mood. (p. 387),

provide a clue to the theme of "A Leaf Treader." Taken at face value, these lines seem to represent the personal philosophy of a saddened and mature Frost. Going beyond the surface meaning, however, reveals a close connection with Frost's frequent use of woods symbols to depict the challenge and fascination of nature.<sup>31</sup> The careful reader of Frost is aware of the extensive use of the synecdoche; and the leaves, by representing all his darker moods, can, therefore, be interpreted as the poet's symbolization of the "dark wood" of fear,

<sup>30</sup>Ibid... p. 110.

<sup>31</sup>Dabbs, op. cit... 517.

death, or sorrow.

Although "A Leaf Treader" is set amidst the beauty of the falling leaves of autumn, the poem concerns itself with providing hurried glimpses of fear, death, and sorrow. The leaves that the narrator is trampling underfoot are not things of beauty and color; they are only sad reminders of a year that seems to have had more than its share of unpleasantness. He welcomes the going of the leaves by announcing:

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am  
autumn tired.  
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have  
trodden on and mired.  
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and  
been too fierce from fear.  
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of  
another year. (p. 388).

The lone reference to fear in the stanza makes the act of treading the leaves the man's method of countering his perplexities. Some unnamed fear has driven him into the woods where he can exorcise his private demon by fiercely trampling the leaves, completely oblivious to their color and beauty. He can put down his fear only by punishing the fallen leaves.

The second stanza develops the death theme by uniting the figures of the dying season and the dying leaves to offer a temptation to the man:

All summer long I thought I heard them threatening  
under their breath.

And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death. (p. 388).

If it were a fear of life that tortured the man and drove him to the woods, then his release is close at hand. All that is required of him is a quiet willingness to cross into death with the falling leaves. If, however, it were a fear of death that haunted him, he must now stand firm and reject the temptation spread before him. His situation recalls that of the weary traveler in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," who, at the moment of his temptation, "glances longingly at lonely woods, hesitates, and looks back toward men."<sup>32</sup>

But the leaves continue their insistent campaign, offering next the pain and fear of an abysmal grief:

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.  
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief. (p. 388).

Once again the narrator turns his back on the blandishments of the leaves, choosing to face into the future with a surprising show of optimism. He realizes

. . . it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.  
Now up my knee to keep on top of another year of snow. (p. 388).

As autumn passes, he will let his old fears and sorrows go with her and prepare himself for the new ones that

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<sup>32</sup>Dabbs, op. cit., 519.

are to come. He welcomes the snow, hopeful that a better spring will follow it.

This "hoped-for" spring seems to be the subject of the first three stanzas of "The Strong Are Saying Nothing." Tilled fields are made ready, and the seeds are sown in hopeful anticipation of a bountiful harvest. Plum trees in blossom dot the landscape, awaiting the arrival of the bees. After the long death-sleep of winter, nature holds out to the waiting earth the promise of new life. Then the questioning doubts ("teleological uncertainty"<sup>33</sup> is the term used by George W. Nitchie) set in. Will there be a crop this season? Will the bees come to pollinate the plum blossoms? Will nature fulfill her many promises of the early spring? It is on this point of questioning doubt that Frost develops the closing stanza:

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,  
 But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.  
 There may be little or much beyond the grave,  
 But the strong are saying nothing until they  
 see. (p. 391).

Just as nature has promised a rebirth of life after the winter, western religion has promised a life after death to man. The proof of this life after death, however, has assumed no tangible form; it possesses no more substance than do the spring winds that blow

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<sup>33</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 39.

from farm to farm, promising much, but giving no definite answer as to what the final harvest will be. "The strong," who here may represent those of great faith, make their "final refusal either to assert or to deny teleology."<sup>34</sup> They prefer to reserve their judgment regarding the eternal life until after the viaticum. The weak, as well as the less strong, are left to face the doubts and fears of what is to come after the earthly life is terminated. For the man who has been so often deluded by the glorious promises of nature, a mere promise of an eternal life is insufficient; he requires some small concrete proof that the hereafter will be exactly as he has always been told. Only then will he have applicable defense against the fears that assail him.

"Design," Frost's metaphysical horror story<sup>35</sup> set in the form of an Italian sonnet, derives its broader applications from this same teleological uncertainty, as it "both approaches and recoils from belief in a purposive universe."<sup>36</sup> The poem, which in an earlier version was entitled "In White,"<sup>37</sup> "seems to

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid... p. 37.      <sup>35</sup>Squires, op. cit... pp. 86-87.

<sup>36</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 38.

<sup>37</sup>Sergeant, op. cit... pp. 86-87. By quoting from a letter of Frost to Susan Ward, Miss Sergeant fixes the date of the composition of the earlier version of "Design" as January, 1912.

be hinting at some mysterious connection between things having, more or less by accident, the same coloration."<sup>38</sup> The poet chooses the color white, the traditional symbol of purity, to reveal the evil of the scene he witnesses:

A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,  
And dead wings carried like a paper kite. (p. 396).

The whiteness of the dimpled spider and of the dead moth by themselves might not have generated any feelings of terror for the poet; but "the perversity of the flower's being white perfects the mood of metaphysical disgust"<sup>39</sup> that comes over him. In its natural state the common wayside heal-all is blue; for Frost, therefore, "the strangeness of the charming blue flower's albino form becomes in its chill abnormality a kill-all."<sup>40</sup>

The octet serves as the vehicle for the introduction of the three principal objects, the spider, the moth, and the flower,

Assorted characters of death and blight  
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,  
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth. (p. 396).

Frost reserves the sestet for his personal questions as to the reasons behind the scene that he has witnessed:

<sup>38</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>39</sup>Squires, op. cit., p. 27.      <sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

What had that flower to do with being white,  
 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
 What but design of darkness to appall?--  
 If design govern in a thing so small. (p. 396).

In the closing line of the sonnet he offers his readers a choice of interpretations. They may regard the line as an attempt

to change the terror by suggesting that the universe perhaps does not sanction such a cruel and cannibal intersection, that it is accident rather than intent.<sup>41</sup>

Further exploiting the teleological uncertainty that seems to reflect the Thirties, he allows for a second, almost contradictory, interpretation, which is dependent upon the meaning ascribed to the "if" at the beginning of the line. This second interpretation, which is more in keeping with the character of the "mystical and dark-spirited"<sup>42</sup> Frost, as advanced by R. W. B. Lewis, seems

to confirm the terror . . . by the implication that there may be no design for anything whether great or small, nothing but an ash-white plain without love or faith or hope, where ignorant appetites cross by chance.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 86-87.

<sup>42</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, "Contemporary American Literature," Contemporary Literary Scholarship: A Critical Review, ed. Lewis Leary (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, Inc., 1958), p. 209.

<sup>43</sup>Squires, op. cit., p. 87. Squires adds to the terror of Frost's lines by making the summation a

Whichever choice one makes, he will still be brought face to face with a fear that transcends the daily problems of ordinary living. He may ask himself the why of existence. As he ponders the poem, he may come to agree with Lionel Trilling, who, on the occasion of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday in 1959, said:

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet.  
 . . . The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem "Design" and see if you sleep the better for it.<sup>44</sup>

Another type of "design," that of the twentieth century way of life, constitutes the framework for "Provide, Provide," Frost's bit of satiric advice for the youth of the Thirties. The poem, "first published in 1933 in the New Frontier, a small Harvard student publication,"<sup>45</sup> is alleged to have had its beginnings

near-paraphrase of the closing lines of Matthew Arnold's pessimistic "Dover Beach":

. . . for the world, which seems  
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
 So various, so beautiful, so new,  
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
 And we are here as on a darkling plain  
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.  
 (Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," An Oxford Anthology of English Poetry, ed. Howard Foster Lowry and Willard Thorp [New York: Oxford University Press, 1956], p. 1113.)

<sup>44</sup>Trilling, op. cit., 451.

<sup>45</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 350.

in

. . . the memory of a college . . . where the dormitory charwomen were so poorly paid that the undergraduates conducted a strike in their behalf.<sup>40</sup>

Frost, however, converts this memory into an attack upon the American belief that money and position are the only truly effective defenses against the fears of a lonely old age. Abishag, the one-time beauty of the motion picture screen, now reduced to the level of a charwoman, finds that

No memory of having starred  
Atones for later disregard,  
Or keeps the end from being hard. (p. 404).

With tongue in cheek, the poet advises the generation which comes after her to

Die early and avoid the fate.  
Or if predestined to die late,  
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
If need be occupy a throne,  
Where nobody can call you crone. (p. 404).

Although the use of "Abishag" and "crone" tends to slant the poem toward a feminine audience, Frost's "message" is for the youth of both sexes. He is offering them "insurance" against the fears of age, urging them to provide themselves with a better end than the one Abishag faces. He counsels that it is

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<sup>46</sup>Squires, op. cit., p. 87.

Better to go down dignified  
 With boughten friendship at your side  
 Than none at all. Provide, provide! (p. 404).

As the "sophisticated, disillusioned, and worldly-wise opposite"<sup>47</sup> of "The Pasture," the poem depicts a world in which the fears of age and loneliness can be escaped only by dying young or by amassing a fortune. The final order to "provide, provide," however, may be construed as a plea to youth to re-evaluate the society in which they move, a society that has become more fearsome than the fears it tries to combat. If they can improve upon the world they find, they will have provided themselves with another and better way to beat the fate of Abishag.

As the title, A Further Range, seems to imply, Frost's sixth volume of poetry "offers new geographical subject matter and a new range of meaning."<sup>48</sup> Included in this widened scope of poetic expression are treatments of the fears that haunted the generation caught in the Great Depression, fears that were peculiar to the Thirties alone. The world of "A Lone Striker," "A Drumlin Woodchuck," and "A Leaf Treader" is not the same world as that revealed in A Boy's Will and North of Boston, or even that of the later West-Running Brook, and Frost, who is "too genuine and clear-eyed to be

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<sup>47</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 349.    <sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 348.

fooled,"<sup>49</sup> has captured these differences with all their nuances of bleakness and despair. He has gone far, ". . . range beyond range even into the realm of government and religion,"<sup>50</sup> to unearth the fears that infected the times. As Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant states in her comments on A Further Range:

The stars are a little beclouded, in these poems --remember we are in the thirties--they do not . . . suggest Emersonian or Horatian aspiration. We cannot hitch our wagon to them. They may even be blank and stark.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>50</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 348. The quotation is taken from Frost's dedication statement for A Further Range:

To E. F. [his wife Elinor] for what it may mean to her that beyond the White Mountains were the Green; beyond both were the Rockies, the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and the Himalayas--range beyond range even into the realm of government and religion.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

## CHAPTER VII

### A WITNESS TREE: FEARS OF DOUBT AND DARKNESS

Although appearing in the midst of a great global conflict, Frost's seventh volume of poetry, A Witness Tree, relegates the subject of war to a secondary role and concentrates instead upon those themes that are vital regardless of whether the time is one of war or of peace. The year was 1942; but the poems are chiefly the products of the late Thirties, those years which seem to be the blackest in Frost's life. His wife, his beloved Elinor, had died in March of 1938; and

that black chaos which he sees as always close to the confines of man's adventure seemed to threaten him from every side.<sup>1</sup>

From his personal struggles with grief and despair, therefore, come many of the poems that fill this volume, poems that mark a return to the lyricism of A Boy's Will and of North of Boston.<sup>2</sup>

Essentially A Witness Tree reflects the change that Frost's poetry had undergone since the publication of A Further Range in 1936, a change which George

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 354.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 375.

W. Nitchie sees as "a surprising degree of recovery from hardening mannerisms."<sup>3</sup> For Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, this seventh volume contains

. . . the poetic first fruits of the new way of life, [and] suggests a breakthrough of heart, mind, [and] senses from some cold prison.<sup>4</sup>

Frost gives evidence of this significant breakthrough in his opening poem, "Beech," which provides both the title of the volume and a clue to one of its principal themes, that of "the value and limitations of all the imaginary lines or concepts which man creates through symbols."<sup>5</sup> Utilizing the figure of the "wounded" beech tree as his controlling image, Frost reveals "both the necessity which leads man to form ideas and the loss which the process inevitably involves":<sup>6</sup>

One tree, by being deeply wounded,  
Has been impressed as Witness Tree  
And made commit to memory  
My proof of being not unbounded.  
Thus truth's established and borne out,  
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt--  
Though by a world of doubt surrounded. (p. 439).

To relate this poem to the fear motif in Frost's poetry, one needs only a second glance at the last three lines, wherein the poet introduces the concepts of

<sup>3</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>4</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 375.

<sup>5</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

doubt and darkness.<sup>7</sup> In the world that Frost portrays, these two forces are synonymous with those fears that seem always to haunt mankind, those fears that make a Witness Tree a necessity, "whether it be the cross . . . or the beech which marks the property line."<sup>8</sup> Whatever constant symbol man chooses by which to order his existence may, however, serve as a restrictive element--his undeniable "proof of being not unbounded." (p. 439).

"All Revelation," with its interesting "double metaphor of earth as geode and geode as earth,"<sup>9</sup> also makes use of the force of darkness to develop its fear image. Although the surface discussion of the poem is based upon an alleged experiment of using cathode rays to pierce a geode, one can readily equate the figure of the geode with any "dark area of the unknown."<sup>10</sup> The element of light (the cathode ray) is introduced in

<sup>7</sup>The concepts of doubt and darkness play an important role in developing the fear motif in A Witness Tree, particularly in such poems as "All Revelation," "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," "Come In," "Our Hold on the Planet," and "The Lesson for Today."

<sup>8</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>9</sup>Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 140.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

the third stanza and becomes, in the manner of the Witness Tree, the one force capable of dispelling the fears and trepidations that the poet sees as always on the periphery of any existence:

But the impervious geode  
Was entered, and its inner crust  
Of crystals with a ray cathode  
At every point and facet glowed  
In answer to the mental thrust. (p. 444).

By correlating "ray cathode" with "mental thrust," Frost makes the poem "at once an image of physical thrusting into the cave and of entry of mind into experience,"<sup>11</sup> a combination intended to lead logically to the final revelation. But the poem ends ambiguously:

Eyes seeking the response of eyes  
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,  
Thus concentrating earth and skies  
So none need be afraid of size.  
All revelation has been ours. (p. 444).

Nitchie, who sees the geode figure as "possibly an oblique echo of Plato's cave,"<sup>12</sup> ponders on the conclusion of the poem and asks:

Does the last line mean "We ourselves have created all our revelations," or "All possible revelation has been bestowed on us"?<sup>13</sup>

The first option brings the poem close to a statement of solipsism, and makes man not only the author of his

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

fears but also the force responsible for their eradication. The second choice, however, admits to the possibility of a higher power, one which manifests itself by "concentrating earth and skies" (p. 444) for the elucidation of man. Although "the immense is terrifying,"<sup>14</sup> the human mind, through the revelation it has received, "deals with large realities of every sort, ordering them, and so mastering them."<sup>15</sup>

Although not to be considered as a full-fledged treatment of fear, "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length" begins on much the same note as "All Revelation." The opening lines,

Oh, stormy stormy world,  
 The days you were not swirled  
 Around with mist and cloud,  
 Or wrapped as in a shroud,  
 And the sun's brilliant ball  
 Was not in part or all  
 Obscured from mortal view--  
 Were days so very few . . . (p. 445),

present a world in the grasp of doubt and darkness, yet longing for illumination from some source. When that illumination comes, however, it is not the complete revelation; it is clouded by the pessimism of the poet's mistrust of nature:

If my mistrust is right  
 It may be altogether  
 From one day's perfect weather. (p. 445).

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<sup>14</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 142.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

A second fear, at which Frost only hints, is that of the carpe diem; and it is this fear which makes the poem an echo of his earlier "The Investment" and "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind." Written in 1935 while the Frosts were in Florida,<sup>16</sup> "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length" seems to presage the death of Elinor and the termination of "[f]orty years of profound and extraordinary marriage."<sup>17</sup> With this thought in mind, one may see in the poem the expression of Frost's fear that

. . . the young squander with reckless prodigality  
 [what] the old reserve and can often but imply  
 and cherish behind "the curtain of the inner  
 soul."<sup>18</sup>

The themes and images introduced in "All Revelation" and in "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length" culminate in "Come In," Frost's most complete and masterful treatment of fear images in A Witness Tree. As a companion poem to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," these five quatrains present the summer (or perhaps early autumn) counterpart of that snowswept scene. Once again the narrator faces "the haunting temptation to enter dark woods, stretching away unto the edge of doom"<sup>19</sup>:

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<sup>16</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 387.      <sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 354.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

As I came to the edge of the woods,  
 Thrush music--hark!  
 Now if it was dusk outside,  
 Inside it was dark. (p. 446).

Standing on the line that divides "dusk" from "dark," or life from death, as it were, the narrator's attention is caught first by the song of the thrush emanating from the blackness. Then his mind moves back to the darkness that stretches before him, offering no certainties and prophesying only danger. Short of the thrush, he cannot positively identify anything that he will find beyond the margin of the woods.

He tries to convince himself that it is

Too dark in the woods for a bird  
 By sleight of wing  
 To better its perch for the night,  
 Though it still could sing. (p. 446).

And it is this singing that so entrances him. He wants to know what compels the bird to loose its song in surroundings that could engender, for him, only fear. As he searches for some plausible explanation, he remembers the setting of the sun a short time earlier; and he explains the singing to himself by remarking:

The last of the light of the sun  
 That had died in the west  
 Still lived for one song more  
 In a thrush's breast. (p. 446).

But he has made the thrush's song both a siren call and a song of hope--a hope that the world beyond "the

edge of the woods" is a better world than the one he knows. That this world of darkness that he beholds is the world of the dead is suggested in the lines:

The last of the light of the sun  
That had died in the west. (p. 446).

By "clustering" these death images, then adding the figure of hope in the phrase, "Still lived," the narrator-poet brings himself to the ultimate question: Should he enter these dark woods, which to him symbolize death?

As he ponders the question, he is once more beset by temptation:

Far in the pillared dark  
Thrush music went--  
Almost like a call to come in  
To the dark and lament. (p. 446).

The "pillared dark" of the woods gives the scene an almost cathedral-like quality, and the "thrush music" becomes the inviting tones of an organ. But it is Death's Angel<sup>20</sup> at the keys, inviting the weary man to come in to Death and free himself from the sorrows of life. As strongly tempted as was his predecessor

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<sup>20</sup>The role of the thrush in the poem here offers an interesting contrast with that of the horse in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The thrush attempts to lure the narrator into the "dark woods" with its siren song; the horse, on the other hand, strives to lead the narrator back to the world of man with a shake of its harness bells. The thrush, therefore, may be said to represent the world of death; the horse, the world of life.

in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the narrator "glances longingly at the lonely woods, hesitates, and looks back towards men."<sup>21</sup> The inviting woods becomes dark and frightening again, frightening not only because it is dark but also because it is the unknown.

Turning his back on the blandishments of the "dark woods," the narrator announces his decision:

But no, I was out for stars:  
I would not come in.  
I meant not even if asked,  
And I hadn't been. (p. 446).

He has made his choice; he has rejected the woods and its foreboding darkness in favor of the stars and what little light they can offer. So insistent is his statement of rejection, however, that one is led to a re-appraisal of that moment of temptation at the edge of the woods. The scene, with its "stress on darkness and mysterious remoteness, [its] suggestions of death and transport,"<sup>22</sup> reveals the man's fear, whether it be of darkness, the unknown, or death itself. Momentarily he feels that it would be pleasant to put aside his fears and anxieties and to follow the song of the thrush into the deepest recesses of the woods; but he

. . . 'would not,' he 'meant not,' his emphasis showing how strongly he feels the pull. 'Not

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<sup>21</sup>Dabbs, op. cit., 519.

<sup>22</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 33.

even if asked,' he adds, as a child refuses an invitation while half-asking for it.<sup>23</sup>

In "Come In" Frost seeks to magnify that shiver of apprehension that one experiences in any contemplation of death and to transform it into an expression of fear. He accomplishes this transformation by building upon the concepts of doubt and darkness as they are revealed in the image of the woods. The force that does the most to intensify these concepts, however, is that of the thrush;<sup>24</sup> and here Frost turns to a fact of nature to achieve his desired effect: "thrushes sing deep in the woods at evening."<sup>25</sup> Then the poet completes the impression that he sought to convey by

'reading in' some feeling very much his own: the temptation to lament, . . . the pull from daylight into sleep and death, the awareness of awesome powers and processes.<sup>26</sup>

Another version of the temptation of the woods is found in part one of "The Wind and the Rain." Using the autumnal setting with its many connotations of death and last things, the poet presents a bleak and frightening scene:

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>24</sup>The reader may note a similarity between the function of the thrush in "Come In" and that of the hermit thrush in Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed."

<sup>25</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 76. <sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

That far-off day the leaves in flight  
 Were letting in the colder light.  
 A season-ending wind there blew  
 That as it did the forest strew  
 I leaned on with a singing trust  
 And let it drive me deathward too. (p. 449).

Here man has penetrated the woods, rather than remained at the edge as he did in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and in "Come In"; but the act has taken place in the daylight when there is no active fear of darkness to overcome. "Leaves are all my darker moods" (p. 387), Frost had said earlier; and now in contemplating a willful surrender to death, he is truly in a "darker mood," a mood dictated, in large part, by his personal sorrows. Armed only with "a singing trust," he is willing to let the autumn wind sweep him along to a shared oblivion with the dead leaves.

But what does his "singing trust" imply? Frost admits:

I sang of death--but had I known  
 The many deaths one must have died  
 Before he came to meet his own! (p. 449).

Such an admission makes clear that he saw his own death as the only avenue of escape from the fears of the lonely life he led. In the midst of his celebration of death, however, comes the calm realization that life contains many events that appear as monumental as the act of dying. Then the shift in his

thinking comes. His fear of living out his barren years, which seems rooted in his doubts as to the purposefulness of such a life, slides away, to be replaced by a grim philosophy that momentarily stays his fears by giving him a reason for going on:

Oh, should a child be left unwarned  
That any song in which he mourned  
Would be as if he prophesied? (p. 449).

New areas of doubt and darkness are explored in "The Subverted Flower," which has been described by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant as "a startling poem about sex in a pair of young Puritans."<sup>27</sup> The darkness that overlays this poem and engenders its fear images is a darkness of the spirit that approaches "something close to nightmare in its destructive equating of love and cruelty."<sup>28</sup> In the opening lines of the poem,

She drew back; he was calm:  
'It is this that had the power.'  
And he lashed his open palm  
With the tender-headed flower.<sup>29</sup>  
He smiled for her to smile,  
But she was either blind  
Or wilfully unkind. (p. 453),

Frost presents the two necessary characters and sketches

<sup>27</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 386.

<sup>28</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>29</sup>The "tender-headed flower" serves two functions in the poem. On one level it represents an actual flower; on the second level, however, it symbolizes the male sex organ.

in enough of their background situation to make evident the poem's erotic connotations.

George Nitchie, who calls the poem "unpredictable," considers it to be "as powerful as anything in North of Boston."<sup>30</sup> No small part of this power is derived from the constantly fluctuating point of view as the poem is presented through the eyes of "the girl, the man, and an impersonal third-person observer and commentator."<sup>31</sup> For the girl, the man's love, or perhaps his sexual desires, has made him bestial and dangerous:

. . . with every word he spoke  
 His lips were sucked and blown  
 And the effort made him choke  
 Like a tiger at a bone.  
 She had to lean away.  
 She dared not stir a foot,  
 Lest movement should provoke  
 The demon of pursuit  
 That slumbers in a brute. (pp. 453-54).

The girl gives the appearance of being, at once, both repulsed and fascinated by the beast that she has awakened in the man. She stands transfixed, until her mother's voice from within the safe confines of the garden breaks the spell. She starts, coming back to reality to

. . . . steal a look of fear  
 To see if he could hear

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<sup>30</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

And would pounce to end it all  
Before her mother came. (p. 454).

Half-fearing, half-wanting the expected contact, the  
girl watches as a sense of shame comes over the man.

She sees

An ingratiating laugh  
That cut the snout in half,  
An eye become evasive. (p. 454).

Then the observer interposes with his explanation  
of the scene:

A girl could only see  
That a flower had marred a man,  
But what she could not see  
Was that the flower might be  
Other than base and fetid:  
That the flower had done but part,  
And what the flower began  
Her own too meager heart  
Had terribly completed.  
She looked and saw the worst. (p. 454).

What he has witnessed has "the power of sudden and  
shocking revelation,"<sup>32</sup> as it takes one behind the  
barrier that Frost normally uses to separate man and  
woman relationships from the rest of the inquisitive  
world. This poem, however, because of "its explicit  
concern with sexual pathology,"<sup>33</sup> must necessarily  
invade areas that the majority of Frost's poems have  
deliberately chosen to ignore; and it is this third-  
person observer-commentator who acts as guide through

<sup>32</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>33</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 103.

these uncharted regions. It is he who leads the reader to accept the transformation of the girl into a beast in the closing lines:

Her mother wiped the foam  
From her chin, picked up her comb  
And drew her backward home. (p. 455).

Whether these last lines are delivered from the point of view of the observer or of the girl is not made clear by the poet, a fact which George Nitchie feels strengthens the conclusion. In his examination of the poem<sup>34</sup> he says:

In this final image, the poem's wobbling point of view justifies itself in a significant ambiguity; we are not sure whether the final metamorphosis is a function of the observer's view of the girl, in which case she is merely a pathetic object, or whether it represents the girl's sudden vision of herself, transformed by God knows what machinery of guilt and fear.<sup>35</sup>

Although the subject matter of "The Subverted Flower" may be new to the poetry of Robert Frost, it forms an integral part of the literature of New England. The closest parallel to the poem is probably Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story, "A Symphony in Lavender," the tragic tale of Caroline Munson, "whose love is crippled by an irrational horror of her beloved."<sup>36</sup> Frost has made his poem a more complete

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-106. A rather detailed study of "The Subverted Flower," relating the poem to the Eden myth, is found on these pages.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

study of fears by depicting the would-be lover as a frightened man, who,

Obeying bestial laws,  
A coward save at night,  
Turned from the place and ran. (p. 454).

The poem, therefore, becomes an assessment of the fears of both the girl and the man. These fears are, for the most part, engendered by sudden self-realizations. When they are provided with intimate glances at what the darkness of animal desire has made of them, they become so frightened that they are impelled to quit the scene of their shame. Ironically, however, their departures are colored by the same animal darkness. Just before the girl with the foam-flecked face is brought to safety by her mother, she watches the man leave the field of goldenrod:

She heard him stumble first  
And use his hands in flight.  
She heard him bark outright. (p. 454).

Another manifestation of the circumstances of doubt and darkness is presented in "Our Hold on the Planet,"<sup>37</sup> a poem which owes much in the way of subject matter and symbols to the earlier "In Time of Cloudburst."<sup>38</sup> The fear image, for example, that is expressed in the first six lines,

<sup>37</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>38</sup>Supra, pp. 112-13.

We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.  
 It didn't lose its temper at our demand  
 And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand  
 And give us more than our spokesman bargained for;  
 And just because we owned to a wish for rain,  
 Send us a flood and bid us be damned and drown.  
(p. 469),

is, as in the earlier poem, centered in the prospect of a flood that may destroy the world and its inhabitants. The doubt voiced in these lines, however, seems to have been allayed at that time in the past when nature did not commit the destruction that was in her power. The figure of darkness, therefore, plays a stronger role in the passage, as the scene seems to be one set amid heavy and ominous clouds; and Frost heightens the fear aspect of this darkness by using the pronoun "it" to refer to nature, almost as if he did not dare to name the force that was responsible for the rain.

The closing lines of the poem remove the possibility of any further development of the fear image and shift the emphasis to the promise of regeneration. The one-time fear that nature might misconstrue man's demand for rain and send floods instead is now forgotten. The soil awaiting new growth and productivity, lies "natal wet" (a distinct echo of the baptism symbol found in "In Time of Cloudburst"). Frost, at his philosophic best, draws upon this symbol of hope to advise

the people:

There is much in nature against us. But we forget:

Take nature altogether since time began,  
Including human nature, in peace and war,  
And it must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,  
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.  
(p. 469).

In another attempt to offer advice, Frost presents in "The Lesson for Today" an exploration of the fears that are generated by the darkness of pessimism. Although he accepts the idea, current with his contemporaries, that fears and anxieties are abroad in the world, he rejects their conclusion that there is no hope left. He refuses to allow himself to be immersed in total pessimism:

If this uncertain age in which we dwell  
Were really as dark as I hear sages tell,  
And I convinced that they were really sages,  
I should not curse myself with it to hell,  
But leaving not the chair I long have sat in,  
I should betake me back ten thousand pages  
To the world's undebatably dark ages. (p. 471).

Speaking to Alcuin, a silent listener who represents the Middle Ages,<sup>39</sup> Frost proposes a public dispute to decide

As to whose age deserves the lower mark,  
Or should I say the higher one, for dark. (p. 472).

This dispute, as summarized by Reuben Brower,

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<sup>39</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 132.

. . . brings out the prevailing attitude of the speaker, his rueful melancholy and gloomy acceptance of the 'equal darkness' of all ages.<sup>40</sup>

The speaker, who, for the purpose of the poem, may be regarded as Frost, is offering a proof that "what seems to be medieval gloom is not limited to any single time,"<sup>41</sup> a theme which he will use again as a basis for "A Cliff Dwelling" in Steeple Bush.

"The Lesson for Today," which Nitchie sees as one of the finest expressions of "the explicitly Lucretian note [that] becomes more more marked in Frost's later work,"<sup>42</sup> may well become the poem that is most characteristic of the poet's later volumes.<sup>43</sup> At the present time, however, it serves as a convenient bridge between his fear poems of the Twenties in New Hampshire (1923) and West-Running Brook (1928) and those of the Atomic Age in Steeple Bush (1947) and In the Clearing (1962). The poem is more than another of Frost's ironic thrusts at the New Deal; it goes beyond the pertinent issues of the day to provide a prophetic diagnosis of the problems of post-war America:

Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.  
Its contemplation makes us out as small

<sup>40</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>42</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>43</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 139.

As a brief epidemic of microbes  
 That in a good glass may be seen to crawl  
 The patina of this the least of globes. (p. 473).

By paralleling this modern age of scientific thought  
 with the medieval age of religious thought, when men

. . . were belittled into vilest worms  
 God hardly tolerated with his feet. (p. 473),

Frost strengthens his original contention that the  
 fears of gloom and darkness are not peculiar to any one  
 specific age, but rather are the adjuncts of all ages,  
 as "all ages shine/With equal darkness." (p. 474). To  
 conclude the comparison of the two eras, Frost has his  
 speaker point out to Alcuin that

We both are the belittled human race,  
 One as compared with God and one with space.  
 (p. 473).

Having sketched in man's heritage of gloom and  
 darkness, the poet turns to a presentation of a philo-  
 sophy for modern man. He realizes that

. . . though we all may be inclined to wait  
 And follow some development of state,  
 Or see what comes of science and invention,  
 There is a limit to our time extension. (p. 475).

The choice of a time to die is not in the province of  
 man, the poet warns; and he offers as the truth of  
 existence the self-gained knowledge that

We all are doomed to broken-off careers,  
 And so's the nation, so's the total race.  
 The earth itself is liable to the fate  
 Of meaninglessly being broken off. (p. 475).

Faced with this harsh evaluation of life, man has two

alternatives. He may allow himself to sink into a morass of despondency where the fears and uncertainties of life reign unchecked; or he may accept the world for what it is, noting all of its problems and imperfections with a clear vision, but not letting any of them destroy his passion for living. If he chooses this second way of life, he can come to say, along with Frost:

I take my incompleteness with the rest.  
 God bless himself can no one else be blessed.  
(p. 476).

His task is not to gain a complete victory over the forces of doubt and darkness; it is simply to learn to cope with them to the best of his ability.

The months after the death of his wife Elinor were, for Frost, a time of learning to cope with these same forces of doubt and darkness. Plagued by grief, loneliness, and ill-health,<sup>44</sup> he returned to his beloved New England to adapt himself to a new mode of living, now that "the pivot of his personal life was lost and gone."<sup>45</sup> Out of these months of struggle, however, emerged one poem in particular that seems to catch the full flavor of the poet's personal trials. Entitled "November," and bearing the dateline of 1938,

<sup>44</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 357-360 passim.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 359.

the poem is a desolate account "in which somebody is taking farewell of basic stocks of values that seem to be sweeping to waste."<sup>46</sup>

Set amid the falling leaves of autumn, the poem begins with a brief description of the day when that season merges with winter:

We saw leaves go to glory,  
Then almost migratory  
Go part way down the lane,  
And then to end the story  
Get beaten down and pasted  
In one wild day of rain. (p. 485).

Because of the frequency with which Frost uses such a setting, this description seems, at first, to be no more than a mere noting of the violent days of wind and rain which marks the end of the leaves and of a pleasant season. In the lines that follow, however, "a cry from age's very vitals rings out"<sup>47</sup> to an unheeding world:

We heard 'Tis over' roaring.  
A year of leaves was wasted. (p. 485).

From the pathetic overtones of the lines, which Sergeant relates to Frost's personal tragedy,<sup>48</sup> springs the fear image that he develops in the remainder of the poem. As he knows men, the poet knows that they "save" unwisely; and he fears that they also "waste"

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

unwisely

. . . by ignoring  
 The waste of moments sleeping,  
 The waste of pleasure weeping,  
 By denying and ignoring  
 The waste of nations warring. (p. 485).

For Frost waste must be a disciplined action; waste that is denied or ignored, insofar as one's basic values are concerned, can lead only to irrevocable loss or to destruction. It is precisely a fear of just such occurrences that prompts Frost to say: "You've got to know how to waste."<sup>49</sup>

A fear of another kind of destruction is revealed in "A Loose Mountain," the poem which completes Frost's treatment of fear in A Witness Tree. Beginning with a reference to "the star shower known as Leonid" (p. 487), the poet describes it as

. . . but fiery puffs of dust and pebbles,  
 No doubt directed at our heads as rebels  
 In having taken artificial light  
 Against the ancient sovereignty of night. (p. 487).

He argues that the star shower is proof of ". . . an at least potentially malevolent universe,"<sup>50</sup> which may, at

<sup>49</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 144 n. In a footnote Nitchie states: "In my copy of A Witness Tree, I find the following gloss to 'November,' evidently taken down during a talk Frost gave at Breadloaf in 1942: 'You wouldn't know that here I was praising waste. You've got to know how to waste.'"

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

any time, bring about destruction much nearer home.

The star shower, as far as the poet is concerned,

. . . constitutes a hint  
 That the loose mountain lately seen to glint  
 In sunlight near us in momentous swing  
 Is something in a Balearic sling  
 The heartless and enormous Outer Black  
 Is still withholding in the Zodiac. (p. 487).

The universe, that "enormous Outer Black" that is frightening enough in itself, becomes even doubly so when one views it as an omnipresent threat to man's day by day existence. If a star shower can be originated somewhere out in space, it seems not only logical, but also very possible, that "a loose mountain" on earth could be converted into a brief but destructive avalanche.

Although the poems dealing with fear may be fewer in number in A Witness Tree than in some of the previous books, the ones that are included make the volume a worthwhile addition to Frost's handling of the subject of fears. Of the poems which present some aspect of this subject, three are particularly significant--"Come In," "The Subverted Flower," and "The Lesson for Today." These selections, in themselves, give direction to the fear motif in the work, as well as contributing to the unifying theme of doubt and darkness. Of the three, "Come In" is, perhaps, the most valuable addition to the growing list of Frost's poems

that are concerned with the problems of fear, as it represents one of the fullest treatments of the subject that the poet has produced.

## CHAPTER VIII

### STEEPLE BUSH: FEAR IN THE POSTWAR WORLD

The decade of the Forties was for Robert Frost the most productive period of his literary career. As "his new form of life was for that decade centrally dedicated to poetry,"<sup>1</sup> he was able to write and publish four new volumes, as well as to oversee the compilation of his Complete Poems. He followed A Witness Tree, his slim volume of 1942, with A Masque of Reason, his first attempt at verse drama, in 1945. Two years later he published two works, Steeple Bush and the second of his verse dramas, A Masque of Mercy. The climactic event of the era, however, was the publication in 1949 of his collected works, "which Frost chose to call Complete Poems."<sup>2</sup>

When Steeple Bush appeared in 1947 as Frost's eighth book of poetry,<sup>3</sup> it failed to stir any great enthusiasm among the reviewers and critics. For the most part, they seemed to be of the opinion that the

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<sup>1</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>2</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>For the purpose of this study, the two masques will be regarded as verse dramas rather than as volumes of poetry.

best of Frost's work had already been written.<sup>4</sup> With this point in mind, one may take Nitchie's evaluation of the volume as "a painful book, a little treasury of the trivial,"<sup>5</sup> to be the prevailing attitude. The book has, however, elicited favorable comments, such as Louis Untermeyer's contention that the volume is "particularly salted with wit and peppered with satire."<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the faults that the critics may find in Steeple Bush, the book does provide a number of poems in which the fear motif plays an important role. One of these poems is "One Step Backward Taken," which is placed third in the volume. Whether the central image is "a sand bank in a cloudburst"<sup>7</sup> or a world at war is of no great importance. What does matter is Frost's approach to the threat of destruction, his method of creating in words a fear that most men have felt at sometime in their lives:

Great boulders off their balance  
 Bumped heads together dully  
 And started down the gully.  
 Whole capes caked off in slices.  
 I felt my standpoint shaken

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<sup>4</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>6</sup>Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry: Mid-Century Edition (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1950), p. 182.

<sup>7</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 142.

In the universal crisis. (p. 519).

Frequently interpreted as a war poem,<sup>8</sup> largely because of the passage:

But with one step backward taken  
I saved myself from going.  
A world torn loose went by me. (p. 519),

"One Step Backward Taken" is actually the poetic result of Frost's having witnessed a flash flood in an Arizona arroyo.<sup>9</sup> The fear images, however, since they stem from a concern with destruction, can be extended to include both situations.

In the section of Steeple Bush that bears the title, "Five Nocturnes," Frost presents hurried glimpses at a number of fears, all of which are set against the background of darkness. In "The Night Light," the first of the nocturnes, he brings together in eight lines three of the world's most prevalent fears: fear of the dark, fear of death, and fear of life. For the woman who keeps the night light burning, dark and death are synonymous:

She always had to burn a light  
Beside her attic bed at night.  
It gave bad dreams and broken sleep,

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<sup>8</sup>Both Nitchie, op. cit., p. 143, and Sergeant, op. cit., p. 381, make this observation.

<sup>9</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 381, recounts a conversation with Frost, in which the poet states the genesis of the poem.

But helped the Lord her soul to keep.  
 Good gloom on her was thrown away. (p. 529).

But the gloom that was wasted on her becomes a fear of life, or, more precisely, a fear of what lies ahead, to the narrator. "It is on me by night or day," he moans, referring to the cloud of gloom,

Who have, as I suppose, ahead  
 The darkest of it still to dread (p. 529).

In that closing couplet is the implication that he not only fears life, but that he also fears death, as well.

Numbers three and four of the nocturnes, "Bravado" and "On Making Certain Anything Has Happened," both make use of the stars "as images of cosmic nature's indifference to man."<sup>10</sup> The former poem, a cryptic little quatrain, is an expression of man's daring in the face of fear, a kind of whistling in the cosmic dark:

Have I not walked without an upward look  
 Of caution under stars that very well  
 Might not have missed me when they shot and fell?  
 It was a risk I had to take--and took. (p. 531).

The stars, which he fears as a representation of the awesome power of the universe, are not to be considered as malevolent as they were in "A Loose Mountain"; Frost intends for them to be seen as cold and glittering,

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<sup>10</sup>Nitchie, op. cit... p. 96.

completely uncaring insofar as man and his fears are concerned. "On Making Certain Anything Has Happened" echoes this same idea by referring to the void of space in the opening stanza:

I could be worse employed  
 Than as watcher of the void  
 Whose part should be to tell  
 What star if any fell. (p. 532).

Repeating the falling star figure of "Bravado," the poem accents its fear qualities by pointing out the possibility that the cosmic order might be awry:

Suppose some seed-pearl sun  
 Should be the only one;  
 Yet still I must report  
 Some cluster one star short. (p. 532).

In the last of the nocturnes, "In the Long Night," the narrator accepts the appeal of the darkness<sup>11</sup> as the only escape from the fears and pressures of the modern world. Searching for a new Eden,<sup>12</sup> he is willing to go to the Arctic regions

With a solitary friend  
 Where the cold cracks like a pistol  
 And the needle stands on end. (p. 533).

Essentially he accomplishes the same feat of adjustment as did "The Drumlin Woodchuck," that of fitting himself into an adverse environment.<sup>13</sup> Although he may not have gained the Eden that he sought, he has

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

secured a momentary respite from his fears. Content in his igloo, he can say

As one rankly warm insider . . .  
 We can rest assured on eider  
 There will come another day. (p. 533).

And "another day," with all its hopes and promises, can mean only one more opportunity to wrestle with the fears of existence. There is no actual victory to be had; the best he can hope for is a momentary adjustment.

In the nocturnes Frost has provided his readers with only passing glances at a number of fears; but in "The Fear of God" and "The Fear of Man," he presents a pair of well-rounded delineations of what he considers to be fundamental fears of the human race. The two poems recall a passage from his introduction to Robinson's King Jasper (1935), in which he stated that "two fears should follow us through life. . . . the fear of God . . . [and] the fear of man."<sup>14</sup> By placing the poems together in Steeple Bush, Frost seems to be drawing attention to this earlier statement. He is, perhaps, suggesting that what were primary concerns for Robinson are also primary concerns for him.

"The Fear of God," which is addressed to some nameless "you," is an earnest plea for humility in the

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<sup>14</sup>Supra, pp. 8-9.

midst of success:

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,  
 From being No one up to being Someone,  
 Be sure to keep repeating to yourself  
 You owe it to an arbitrary god  
 Whose mercy to you rather than to others  
 Won't bear too critical examination. (p. 538).

Frost would have the one who has succeeded "attribute his success to mercy,"<sup>15</sup> rather than to ability or to diligent labor. To show his gratitude for the mercy extended him, the man should not persist in his attempt to prove himself God's chosen one. The success might very well have gone, and still might go, to someone else; and if such be the case, man has no right to call God to account. Advising his listener further, the poet adds:

Stay unassuming. If for lack of license  
 To wear the uniform of who you are,  
 You should be tempted to make up for it  
 In a subordinating look or tone  
 Beware of coming too much to the surface,  
 And using for apparel what was meant  
 To be the curtain of the inmost soul. (p. 538).

For Frost the fear of God should never be panic; it should be, instead, that undefinable quality, hidden by "the curtain of the inmost soul," that manifests itself in the proper display of humility. Although Frost realizes

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<sup>15</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 390.

How hard it is to keep from being king,<sup>16</sup>  
 When it's in you and in the situation,<sup>16</sup>

he cautions his "newly-sprung Someone" to avoid the danger of pride and the pitfall of God's wrath. In essence he is commanding: "Fear God. He had the power to make you; He also has the power to break you."

In the second poem, "The Fear of Man," Frost departs slightly from the definition made in the King Jasper introduction, as he gives the fear a sexual connotation:

As a girl no one gallantly attends  
 Sets forth for home at midnight from a friend's--  
 She tries to make it in one catch of breath,  
 And this is not because she thinks of death.  
 (p. 539).

The fear of darkness, which is one of the most common of Frost's figures, is implied in the reference to midnight; but the darkness now contains a new terror--a man. For the panic-stricken girl, he is everywhere along the darkened street, hiding behind every tree or crouching low in every clump of bushes. The fourth line of the passage, ". . . this is not because she thinks of death," twists the girl's inordinate fear of man to mean a fear of sexual attack--the so-called "Fate worse than Death." The deliberate subordination

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<sup>16</sup>Robert Frost, "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," In the Clearing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 84.

of the fear of death to the fear of man provides a possible clue to the girl's childhood training in an atmosphere where any relationship with a man invariably bore the stigma of sin. The girl's obsessive fear of rape is actually an ambivalent fear; she is afraid of being attacked, yet at the same she is afraid that she will not be. She faces then a complex fear-- partly that of man, partly that of loneliness:

But there are little street lights she should trust  
So jewel steady in the wind and dust.  
Her fear is being spoken by the rude  
And having her exposure misconstrued. (p. 539).

In relating her fear, in part, to a fear of being misunderstood,<sup>17</sup> Frost returns to his original premise stated in his introduction to King Jasper.

Another treatment of fear is afforded in "Skeptic," which, despite its beginning in the "comic-metaphysical vein,"<sup>18</sup> makes a significant contribution to the fear motif in Steeple Bush. In an apostrophe to a distant star, the poet says:

I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,  
I don't believe you're anywhere near the last,  
I don't believe what makes you red in the face  
Is after explosion going away so fast. (p. 549).

After this breathy and naive assertion,<sup>19</sup> however, he moves into an expression of isolation that is akin to

<sup>17</sup>Supra, pp. 8-9.

<sup>18</sup>Squires, op. cit., p. 33.      <sup>19</sup>Ibid.

the earlier "Desert Places." In the last stanza,

The universe may or may not be very immense.  
 As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt  
 To feel it close in tight against my sense  
 Like a caul in which I was born and still am  
 wrapped. (p. 549),

Frost returns to another of his favorite fear symbolizations--that of the contrast between man and the universe. The last two lines, which Radcliffe Squires considers to be "among Frost's finest,"<sup>20</sup>

. . . draw together the intimate nature of self  
 and the separate nature of the universe . . .  
 with the mutual terror of old man and cosmos in  
 "An Old Man's Winter Night."<sup>21</sup>

The reference to the caul in the closing line of the poem brings an additional fear image into focus. According to most of the world's folk tales, the one born with the caul has the gift of second sight, clairvoyance. As the line reads, "Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped," a strong hint is given that the poet has this alleged ability of prophecy. The fear that is suggested by the line is that Frost, who admits that he is still in his caul, has not made the proper use of his talent. He has not seen the future of the universe with any degree of accuracy. In fact, he owns to a fear that his vision of his own time has been clouded.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

But fear is not a factor known only to modern civilization. Even the ancient caveman,<sup>22</sup> in the utter simplicity of his struggle for mere existence, knew the torment of fear:

Some halfway up the limestone wall,  
That spot of black is not a stain  
Or shadow, but a cavern hole,  
Where someone used to climb and crawl  
To rest from his besetting fears. (p. 554).

In these few lines in "A Cliff Dwelling," Frost sketches the heritage of fear that has been passed onward from generation to generation in the history of the earth. He offers no explanation for the fears of primitive man; he merely points out that such fears did exist. Implied in these lines is a comparison between the past and the present; and the passage,

I see the callus on his sole  
The disappearing last of him  
And of his race starvation slim,  
Oh, years ago--ten thousand years. (p. 554),

seem to be a fearful prophecy of what could happen to the men who inhabit the earth today. If Frost intends these lines to be a serious consideration of the fear of the future, he weakens the effect with his awkward pun on the word, "last," in

I see the callus on his sole  
The disappearing last of him. (p. 554).

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<sup>22</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 342-45, relates "A Cliff Dwelling" to a trip that Frost made to the Pueblo Indian villages in 1935.

More serious concerns for the future are voiced by Frost in the six short poems with which he rounds out the fear motif in Steeple Bush. The six,--"It Bids Pretty Fair," "Why Wait for Science," "The Planners," "Bursting Rapture," "U. S. 1946 King's X," and "The Broken Drought,"--are "influenced by the ominous facts of the war, and the aftermath."<sup>23</sup> The ominous fact which determines the fear image in most of these poems is the discovery and use of atomic power, although "It Bids Pretty Fair" is probably pre-Hiroshima. This powerful quatrain, which develops an idea of destruction that may be either divine or man-made, is Frost's version of Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage . . .":

The play seems out for an almost infinite run.  
 Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.  
 The only thing I worry about is the sun.  
 We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the  
 lighting. (p. 555).

Like "Once by the Pacific," this poem derives its images of fear from the poet's implication "that the long term odds may be less than even"<sup>24</sup> for man. On the surface everything seems to be going well for "a play" called the human race, the only jarring note being a few minor disagreements among the "actors."

<sup>23</sup>Ibid... p. 389.

<sup>24</sup>Nitchie, op. cit.., p. 26.

The only thing that anyone fears is a failure in the "lighting," the loss of the sun as the source of all life.

The concern with atomic power that caught the world after the Hiroshima bombing in 1945 provides the principal theme of the five remaining poems. Frost uses all of them to ". . . give warning that man's spiritual verities and discoveries tend to become tools of careless power."<sup>25</sup> The opening lines of "Why Wait for Science,"

Sarcastic Science she would like to know  
 In her complacent ministry of fear,  
 How we propose to get away from here  
 When she has made things so we have to go  
 Or be wiped out. . . . (p. 563),

make science the arch-demon of the age, the force that is to be feared most by mankind. The ironic suggestions in "The Planners" and in "Bursting Rapture"--that man use the bomb to destroy his world and all its problems--serve to point up the strength of the fears that came in the wake of the atomic advances. As Frost says in the beginning of "The Planners":

If anything should put an end to This,  
 I'm thinking the unborn would never miss  
 What they had never had of vital bliss.  
 No burst of nuclear phenomenon  
 That put an end to what was going on  
 Could make much difference to the dead and gone.  
 (p. 566).

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<sup>25</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 390.

In "Bursting Rapture" it is the physician who speaks the words of "comfort," this time to an aging farmer who complains:

The time had been when anyone could turn  
 To farming for a simple way to earn;  
 But now 'twas there as elsewhere, any gain  
 Was made by getting science on the brain. (p. 568).

All the physician can offer his weary patient is the promise of a release from worldly tensions, sometime after the "blessing" of an atomic holocaust:

What you complain of all the nations share.  
 Their effort is a mounting ecstasy  
 That when it gets too exquisite to bear  
 Will find relief in one burst. You shall see  
 That's what a certain bomb was sent to be.  
 (p. 568).

"The Broken Drought," which is Frost's final treatment of fear in Steeple Bush, offers two possible interpretations of the drought that is the subject of the poem. On one level, it may be regarded as a natural phenomenon, a simple prolonged absence of rainfall. On the second level, however, it may be related to man's meddling with the order of the universe by continuing to experiment in the field of atomic energy.<sup>26</sup> The "prophet of disaster," who is so positive that

The drought was one no spit of rain could cure.  
 It was the drought of deserts. Earth would soon  
 Be uninhabitable as the moon. (p. 571),

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<sup>26</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 390, relates the theme of "A Broken Drought" to a discussion of atomic power.

can play similar roles in either situation. He can promote the fear of divine punishment, or he can promote the fear of unbridled science. And Frost makes no definite statement as to which of the fears moves the prophet in his shouted harangues.

Steeple Bush, which, in philosophy, brings Frost "nearer to William James than to Emerson or Wordsworth,"<sup>27</sup> provides two important additions to the poet's studies of fear. One is, of course, the pair of poems that treat of man's two fears--"The Fear of God" and "The Fear of Man." The second contribution, which probably interests modern man even more, is Frost's personal vision of the threat of atomic power, which culminates in the short poems that deal with a fear of future destruction. These poems, branded by Rolfe Humphries as "ugly editorials,"<sup>28</sup> concern themselves with fears that are rooted in man's newly acquired capability to destroy more than just himself. Their inclusion in the volume is important to a furtherance of the fear motif because they indicate that Frost once again has been led "to alter with age."

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<sup>27</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 147.

<sup>28</sup>Rolfe Humphries, "Verse Chronicle," Nation, CLXIX (July 23, 1949), 92.

## CHAPTER IX

### ROBERT FROST: POET OF TERROR

Although Lionel Trilling's remarks at Robert Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner in 1959 provoked widespread controversy among literary critics, his statements finally gave to Frost the label that he had been earning since the publication of A Boy's Will in 1913. In his tribute Professor Trilling said:

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called "Design" and see if you sleep the better for it. Read "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived.<sup>1</sup>

When those who objected to Frost's being called "a poet of terror" spoke out, the controversy was on. J. Donald Adams of the New York Times led the battle against the Trilling statements in his column, "Speaking of Books." "Holy mackerel!" he wrote,

Frost simply sees the universe as it is and accepts it. He isn't terrified by what he sees, and neither should we be. He takes it in his stride. . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Trilling, op. cit., 451.

<sup>2</sup>J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," New York Times Book Review (April 12, 1959), p. 2.

M. L. Rosenthal took issue with Adams, pointing out that

one would never guess the brute realities Frost so often deals with. Frost himself, as it happens, does not encourage people to think about them, and perhaps has half-forgotten his own horror at some of his realizations.<sup>3</sup>

John Ciardi, poetry editor of Saturday Review, however, seems to be the one who had the last word in the debate. In his review of Frost's last volume, In the Clearing, in 1962, he recalls the "hot if meaningless controversy"<sup>4</sup> by saying:

Trilling saluted Mr. Frost as "a poet of terror." All angry voices to the contrary, I could find nothing wrong with Trilling's choice of words. That he meant nothing but praise is obvious. In fact he compared Mr. Frost to Sophocles in this sense. What man could fail to feel honored at being so paired?<sup>5</sup>

As a poet of terror, Frost must necessarily concern himself with the darker areas of human existence; he must be "something more than a rural Longfellow."<sup>6</sup> He must search out the fears of his age and express them to his audience in language that they will understand and will accept. Like Sophocles, he must make "plain to them the terrible things of human life."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Rosenthal, op. cit., 560.

<sup>4</sup>Ciardi, op. cit., 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Rosenthal, op. cit., 559.

<sup>7</sup>Trilling, op. cit., 452.

From his earliest poetry on through his last volume, Frost has been a poet of terror. For over a half-century, he has demonstrated a particular interest in exploring the various fears that affect the human experience. This interest in the broad subject of fear has not only provided him with a wealth of material for poetic expression, but it has also been one of the prime forces in shaping the tone and direction of much of his poetry. As Lawrance Thompson observes:

Any careful reader of Frost's poems notices how frequently "fear" provides different kinds of premises for him.

This study is an examination of Frost's many treatments of fear; and as such, it identifies the subject as a major theme present in each of the volumes, a theme which, as it progresses through his works, becomes a recognizable motif. This fear motif is not, under any circumstances, an exemplification of a specific doctrine regarding fear; nor is it a study of fear in any formal sense. It is present because Frost writes poetry about existence and because fear plays an important role in that existence. It is present because Robert Frost seeks an honest portrayal of life; and for him,

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<sup>8</sup>Thompson, op. cit... p. 19.

. . . the attempt to see clearly, and from all sides, requires a willingness to confront the frightening and the appalling in even its darkest forms.'

Because of Frost's willingness to confront that which is frightening, he is a poet not of the surface of American life (as perhaps Sandburg is), but of the tensions, fears, and anxieties that lie beneath. He may speak out for the individual; he may speak out for the entire human race. But for whichever he speaks, Frost makes it clear that "he has never expected to find this world any easy place for man to save his soul in."<sup>10</sup> The fear motif, which, in reality, is this voice of the poet of terror, is best summarized by Lawrance Thompson:

If nature and human nature have the power to reduce man to a fearful sense of his own smallness, his own lostness, in a seemingly indifferent or even malicious universe, then one suggested way to confront such fear is to imagine life stripped down to its most naked forms, in order to decide what is left to go on with, and to weigh the question as to whether the possible gains are worth the necessary cost.<sup>11</sup>

Frost, however, does not seek always to supply the answers that his stated fears seem to demand. He is more interested in revealing a section of life--

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>George F. Whicher, "Frost at Seventy," American Scholar. XIV (Autumn, 1945), 408.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 19.

an existence--perhaps a view of the world--that takes at least some of its meaning from a direct relationship with fear. Insofar as the poet is concerned, there can be no concrete and unwavering answers to the many problems of fear that man is heir to. For Frost no code of values is immutable. What works for one man in a given age will not necessarily work for another in a different age. Frost's unerring sense of time, "his awareness of constant flux, of the relation of the here and now to the limits of time,"<sup>12</sup> does not permit him to offer arbitrary answers to the man who reads his poetry.

To develop the fear motif in his poetry, Frost works through a series of images and symbols that are, for the most part, drawn from nature. As Lynen points out,

while the referents of his symbols are not specified, the area within which referents are to be found is strictly delimited . . . the symbol, presented quite casually as an image, opens outward upon a vista of meaning.<sup>13</sup>

One symbol that is particularly recurrent in Frost is that of the woods,

which play a curious part in Frost's poems; they seem to be his symbol for the uncharted country

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<sup>12</sup>Isaacs, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>13</sup>Lynen, op. cit., p. 27.

within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of horror.<sup>14</sup>

When darkened, as these woods so frequently are, they add even stronger fear impulses to the scene that is being revealed. Darkness is, in itself, frightening enough for man, basically because of its close alignment with the unknown. When Frost brings together his ideas of the woods and of darkness, he plunges his reader into an experience which can lead only to the recognition of the fear images; and he presents these

. . . confrontations of fear, lostness, alienation, not so much for purposes of shuddering as for purposes of overcoming fright, first through individual and then through social ingenuity, courage, daring, and action.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to representing the unknown, darkness can, in the Frostian world, be equated with doubt, pessimism, a lack of knowledge, grief, or even death. As one reads in Frost's poetry, he will note, as does John Ciardi, that

the darkness in his poems is as profound as the light in them is long. They are terrible because they are from life at a depth into which we cannot look unshaken.<sup>16</sup>

One other symbol that plays an important part in the fear motif is that of the leaves. At times they are

<sup>14</sup>Cowley, op. cit... 346.

<sup>15</sup>Thompson, op. cit... p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>Ciardi, op. cit... 16.

the fresh, green leaves of "Nothing Gold Can Stay"; at other times they are dried and dead ones of "A Leaf Treader." But regardless of how Frost pictures them, they are related to his concern with the fears of the world. As he says in the closing stanza of "Leaves Compared with Flowers":

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,  
To lean against and hear in the dark.  
Petals I may have once pursued.  
Leaves are all my darker mood. (p. 387).

The world that Frost reveals is not always a pleasant one; but it is more often than not a true world, a world that has its gloom, its sorrow, its ugliness, and its fears. Perhaps the most understanding evaluation of this world was presented by another poet, Amy Lowell, in her review of North of Boston:

. . . Frost has reproduced both people and scenery with a vividness which is extraordinary. Here are the huge hills, undraped by any sympathetic legend, felt as things hard and unyielding, almost sinister, not exactly feared, but regarded as . . . influences nevertheless. . . . Heavy thunderstorms drench the lonely roads and spatter on the walls of farm-houses rotting in abandonment; and the modern New England town, with narrow frame houses, . . . is painted in all its ugliness. For Mr. Frost's is not the kindly New England of Whittier, nor the humorous and sensible one of Lowell; it is a latter-day New England, where a civilization is decaying to give place to another and very different one.<sup>17</sup>

In his vision of this world, Frost sees as the raw

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<sup>17</sup>Amy Lowell, "North of Boston." New Republic, II (February 20, 1915), 31.

material of poetry the fears and anxieties that seem such an integral portion of every man's existence. As he converts them into poetic expression, he gives his work a fear motif that serves to bind together the volumes that began with A Boy's Will in 1913. Robert Frost is more than the genial old man who wrote poems describing the New England countryside; he "emerges . . . as the poet of his people, the poet who speaks America to time."<sup>18</sup> He is the poet of terror, who, in his moments of serious thought, has discovered that the ultimate source of fear is life itself.

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<sup>18</sup>Ciardi, op. cit., 52.

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