‘Nature is the symbol of spirit’: the spiritual cartographies of Robert Frost’s poetry

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‘Nature is the Symbol of Spirit’:
The Spiritual Cartographies of Robert Frost’s Poetry

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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By

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Abstract

Informed by the insights of scholarly authorities including Lionel Trilling and Randall Jarrell, critics since the mid-twentieth century have been wont to find in the corpus of Robert Frost a profound pessimism, Gothicism, and scepticism. This seems to go against the grain of Frost’s reputation as one of the most popular and revered of American poets. The dominant critical discourse surrounding the poet holds that beneath the surface of Frost’s homespun wisdom and provincial charm beats the heart of a despairing man, whose poetry reflects the abandonment of hope, the stark confrontation between the frail and fleeting human and the indifferent and eternal universe. This study does not seek to invalidate this critical perspective entirely, but it does propose a modulation and counter-reading. In this study, I will argue that Frost’s philosophical and aesthetic orientations are far more robust and sophisticated than traditional Gothic readings alone can accommodate. The potentially unnuanced categorization of Frost as a Gothic scribe of doom and gloom misrepresents a complex and often ambivalent aesthetic rooted in a fundamental dualism. Though often antagonistic to organized religion, Frost must nevertheless be recognized as a spiritual poet who combines doubt with faith, despair with hope and darkness with light.
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A Note on Referencing in this Text

Except where indicated otherwise, Frost’s poems cited in this research are taken from Edward Connery Lethem’s edition of *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976). The poems are presented with line numbers. In referencing all other books, journal publications and online sources used in this research, this thesis adopts the author-date referencing system in accordance with Harvard guidelines. A full and complete reference list is included at the end of the work.
Introduction

‘I am a mystic. I believe in symbols’.

(Robert Frost cited in, Thompson, 1963: 64)

Although he came to be universally known as a New England poet, Robert Lee Frost was in fact born in San Francisco, on March 26, 1874 and spent his first eleven years on the West Coast. His father, William Prescott Frost Jr, was a journalist and later died of tuberculosis. His mother, Isabelle Moodie was a teacher at Lewistown Academy. Frost attended Lawrence High School where he first met with his wife Elinor White who turned down his first proposal because she wanted to finish her studies in St. Lawrence University before settling down. After her studies, Frost returned from his trip to Virginia and made his second proposal to her. On December 19, 1895, they got married and in 1896 they had their first child.

In 1899 Frost gained admission and later dropped out of Harvard University after two years due to financial hardships and health issues related to depression. Relocated to a farm in New Hampshire, a property that his grandfather had purchased for them, Frost seemed to have been economically secure, but his personal life was beset with tragedies. He lost his first son to cholera in 1900 and lost his remaining four children at a tender age. Perhaps partly in response to these personal challenges, Frost became intimately acquainted with and devoted to rural life and drew his poetic inspiration from the countryside. Frost began composing poetry early in life, but his first collection of poems was not published until he was approaching forty. Frost’s first published poem, ‘My Butterfly: An Elegy’ was composed in 1893 and published the following year in the New York literary journal The Independent. Frost decided to sell the family farm in New Hampshire and move with his family to England partly to pursue the best publishers for his other early poems. A Boy’s Will, Frost’s first collection of poetry, was subsequently published in England in 1913.

Upon England’s involvement in the First World War, Frost returned to America in 1915 and began to develop his standing in the literary world. Shortly after his return from England and somewhere around the time that A Boy’s Will was published, Frost began to receive widespread public recognition. Following the success of his second volume North of Boston in 1914, Frost became established as the quintessential contemporary poet of New England.
Frost’s verse and the style of his writing rapidly advanced with each publication of his subsequent volumes that included some of his best-known, anthologized and critically examined poems such as ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ published in *New Hampshire* (1923), for which he was awarded his first Pulitzer Prize.

By the later phase of Frost’s literary career, his poetry underwent significant transformation. With the production of his two verse dramas ‘A Masque of Reason’ (1945) and ‘A Masque of Mercy’ (1947), Frost demonstrated a shift in theme (from the consistent involvement with New England landscapes and the relationship between humans and Nature to the growing philosophical preoccupation with matters that are classified as purely of a ‘religious’ nature) and in structure (from an uncomplicated type of lyric verse to more sophisticated verse forms). At the age of eighty-six, Frost read his popular poem ‘The Gift Outright’ at President John Kennedy’s presidential inauguration, on January 20, 1961. Two years later, he died of complications following prostate surgery.

In this introductory chapter, I will provide a brief critical overview of the prevailing readings of Frost as a dark, Gothic or even nihilistic poet. At issue will be the origins of this critical orientation and the reasons for its persistence across the decades, despite ample evidence within the corpus of a necessarily more complex rendering of the Frostian aesthetic. This chapter will then segue into emerging trends among some scholars to emphasize the philosophical and aesthetic challenges presented by the oeuvre which starkly nihilistic interpretive models cannot satisfy. Among the most significant of the critics to be discussed in this vein is Peter Stanlis, whose incisive and important theories concerning Frost’s philosophical dualism and its relation to Frost’s aesthetic profoundly inform this study. After briefly discussing Stanlis’ perspective on Frost, I will begin to present the analytical framework upon which this study is built. More specifically, I will describe the intentions of this study to build from and expand upon Stanlis’ insights while refuting dominant critical orientations defining Frost as a poet of unremitting darkness. I will then proceed to consider other particular areas that pertain directly to the matters under discussion in the current thesis by briefly introducing Frost’s affiliation with earlier poetic and philosophical movements, most notably Transcendentalism. I will describe the intentions behind the approaches used in this study to affirm Frost’s status as a profoundly spiritual poet, but one for whom spirituality operates by and through the juxtaposition of indissoluble opposites. Specifically, this thesis will address the tension between mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing polarities of darkness and light.
and their corollaries: hope/despair, life/death, creation/dest... will conclude with a brief sketch of the argument to be presented in each subsequent chapter and an explication of the key terminology to be deployed in my analysis.

To analyse the significance of Frost’s three most prevalent and important clusters of nature imagery – skycapes, woods and mountains - representative selections from across the poet’s career will be used, from his earlier and lesser known works, including ‘Pan with Us’ (1913) and ‘The Mountain’ (1915) to his most iconic later works, including ‘Directive’ (1947). In other words, the scope of this study aims to be extensive, encompassing the evolution of Frost’s poetics from the very beginning of his career to posthumous publications. In addition to presenting a comprehensive reading by tracing the evolution of Frost’s aesthetic across the course of his career, this study deploys both Frost’s own autobiographical and non-fictional writings, as well as interviews and authorized biographies, to ascertain the poet’s perspectives on life and experience, art and spirit. Taken together, these readings will enable a critical discourse on Frost’s poetics which aims to relocate it from the realm of the Gothic and the nihilistic. This alternative vision of the corpus is one which aims to accommodate hope and optimism, even in the acknowledgment of pain, loss, and uncertainty. The comprehensive reach of this study, it will be argued, is essential for the construction of a robust and nuanced reading of the oeuvre, for accurately interpreting Frost not as a spiritual pessimist, an atheist or agnostic, but as a pragmatic metaphysical dualist. My methodology will be based on a combination of close reading of the poetry alongside careful critical consideration of key philosophical and religious thematics.

**Critical Reception: Reading Frost as the Poet of Darkness**

In the spring of 1959, the illustrious literary critic, Lionel Trilling, set the literary intelligentsia on its ear when he infamously declared America’s most beloved poet, Robert Frost was a ‘terrifying poet’ whose work, for all its seeming homespun simplicity and surface cheer, in fact plumbed ‘the empty immensity of the universe’ (Trilling, 1959: 450-1). In addition to Trilling, it is, perhaps, the criticism of the celebrated poet and critic, Randall Jarrell, with whom Frost engaged in lengthy correspondence, which has exerted the most profound influence on
contemporary Frostian criticism. In his 1953 essay, ‘The Other Frost’ Jarrell asserts an unorthodox perspective on the poet which Trilling would endorse with the resonance and effect of a megaphone in a broom closet six years later. Jarrell writes,

And so far from being obvious, optimistic, orthodox, many of these poems are extraordinarily subtle and strange, poems which express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism seem a hopeful evasion; they begin with a flat and terrible reproduction of the evil in the world and end by saying: It’s so; and there’s nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would you ever do it? The limits which existence approaches and falls back from have seldom been stated with such bare composure (Jarrell, 1953: 40).

This idea that Frost’s corpus is so unremittingly bleak that it makes even ‘pessimism seem a hopeful evasion’ is, in itself, a striking claim. Jarrell’s analysis appeared at the height of Frost’s popularity, the zenith of his persona as a poet of the American people; it presents a stark and, for many non-academic readers, unpalatable view of a poet embraced and lauded by a wide readership wooed by a rustic hopefulness which, according to Jarrell, is at best a misreading and, at worst, a mirage, a strategic poetic device to deflect from and obfuscate the poet’s true intent.

Despite being antithetical to the populist view of Frost, Jarrell’s frequent and thoughtful reviews contributed perhaps more to the restoration of Frost to the good graces of the critics than any other factor. Jarrell’s assertions of the depth, subtlety, and complexity of the oeuvre at last ratified Frost’s place in the American canon and legitimized certain modes of critical work conducted upon his corpus. However, Jarrell’s assertion of the obscure Frostian depths was conjoined, in the critical purview, with an equal and inextricable darkness, a despair so deep that a hopeless pessimism becomes humanity’s last best option. This presumption, as taken up and affirmed by Trilling in ‘A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode’ (1959), has informed and – it is the contention of this thesis – at times deformed the critical discourse surrounding Frost for decades.

In the nearly sixty years since Trilling’s stunning declaration, a critical perspective which once appeared revolutionary has now become commonplace. To read Robert Frost as a pessimistic poet, an iconic writer of dark Romanticism, and, perhaps, an exemplar of a subtle and deceptive modern Gothicism has become not merely a standard critical perspective but, in many respects, a compulsory one, ensuring both the prestige of the poet and of the critic capable of reading ‘deeply’ enough beyond Frost’s cozy rustic imagery to discern the terror
which lies beneath. Many recent critics, such as Robert F. Fleissner’s *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscape of Self* (1975), William H. Pritchard’s *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984), among others, have similarly emphasized the dark attitude Frost expresses in his poetry. For these critics, Frost’s dark imagery aligns him with the American Gothic tradition, or even with a Dark Romantic nihilism that is overwhelmingly negative and characterized by scepticism and despair.

Among the most common themes surrounding the critical reception of Frost’s dark imagery is the purported connection between this iconography and the poet’s lived experiences. Simonson, in ‘Terror and Defensive Stratagems in Robert Frost’ (1983) insists upon an autobiographical valence to Frost’s dark images. Simonson asserts, for example, that this imagery can be associated with primitive fears learned in Frost’s childhood at the hands of an alcoholic father and a traumatized and anxious mother. For these critics, Frost’s iconography of darkness exemplifies a sort of Freudian return of the repressed, the recurrence of past traumas in the scene of writing. As such, these theories configure Frost’s oeuvre as fundamentally narcissistic, the effort to achieve catharsis through the inscription—and therefore the externalization—of an interior and ancient psychic wound.

Further, William H. Pritchard in ‘Witness to Dark Circumstances’ (1984) situates Frost’s dark imagery within the context of grief and loss endured by the poet as an adult, including the illnesses and deaths of his wife and five of his children. For Pritchard, Frost’s dark aesthetic exemplifies the struggle of a bereaved husband and father, grappling with the irrevocability of death and the implications such losses carry for the belief in God. Such readings suggest an overriding spiritual pessimism in Frost’s aesthetic, signifying a nihilist or atheistic worldview spurred by grief if not by nature.

This grappling with the question of the existence of God is characteristic of interpretations of Frost’s aesthetic by critics like Frank Lentricchia who argues in *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and Landscape of the Self* (1975) that Frost’s dark images signify the annihilation of the subject in the absence of God. Frost’s darkness, according to Lentricchia, is intractably negative. It is the darkness of the void, where meaning, purpose, understanding, or hope cannot exist. Such readings galvanize contemporary tendencies in Frost studies to associate the poet with the Gothic or the dark Romantics whose prevailing conceit is an aesthetics of denial and scepticism.
In ‘Last Roads Taken’ (2015) Bryan Giemza presents a reading of Frost’s iconic poem, ‘Directive’ which exemplifies the ubiquitous critical perspective on Frost as a Gothic poet. In comparing Frost to the notoriously bleak Southern and Western Gothic novelist, Cormac McCarthy, Giemza asserts that both writers, ‘seek after the ultimate sources of meaning when the enterprise of civilization is a vanishingly ephemeral prospect… ‘Directive’ embarks in an apocalyptic end-time to get back to the beginnings of things’ (Giemza, 2015: 163). Such nihilistic readings of Frost’s work are common to current critical discourse, and it is precisely this type of reading which this study seeks to refute or, at the very least, to problematize.

In his probing analysis of Frost’s ‘An Old Man’s Winter’s Night’, Ronald A. Sharp (1979) argues that the poet cunningly deconstructs Coleridge’s canonical ‘Frost at Midnight’ by substituting the vision of a householder’s repose amid the blanking snows with a vision of emptiness at the centre of a frozen tomb. Sharp argues that at the core of Frost’s revision of Coleridge is a sense of the absence…of that organic conception of the universe that is the foundation of Coleridge’s vital relationship with both nature and his own past self. By inviting the comparison with Coleridge, Frost infuses our experience of this absence with a sense of radical diminishment, a feeling of profound loss (Sharp, 1979: 313).

For Sharp, Frost’s deployment of a pun on his own name as the opening salvo in a full-scale assault on one of the greatest poets of the English language is not a casual self-allusion. Rather, for Sharp, Frost’s disarming humor, his seemingly benign cleverness, obfuscates and, in so doing, enables the subtle insinuation of a much darker agenda. Specifically, here, Sharp argues, Frost is invoking a beloved text not for the purposes of its affirmation but for the purposes of its destruction. Phrased more accurately, according to Sharp, Frost is conjuring an image of nature that is, at best, indifferent to man and, at worst, antithetical to him. Perhaps even more disturbing is the very subtlety of Frost’s concept, the beguiling word play which inaugurates the ascendancy of a chilling worldview, both literally and figuratively. Frost writes,

A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.

…. One aged man—one man—cannot fill a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It’s thus he does it of a winter night.

(15-28)
This is not Coleridge’s old man peacefully slumbering by the warmth of his hearth. Frost’s veteran is unmoored in a material and metaphysical world alien and quite likely antagonistic to him. Frost’s old man cannot sleep the sleep of the just, nor even of the blissfully deluded. He has woken to his reality, the universal reality of the human condition, before his light is extinguished forever. The fact that he is a ‘light to no one but himself’, for Sharp, signifies an essential aloneness that is then elevated to the core of Frost’s oeuvre. The radical diminishment Sharp finds here is exemplified in the poem’s final lines, cited above, wherein the speaker seems to deny the old man substance and signification: he is, in himself, made of too meager stuff to occupy any significant place. He cannot fill a home (i.e. he is fundamentally without purpose or meaning within the context of human relationships (family); he cannot fill a farm (i.e. he has no significant position within the context of civilization, the human exercise of dominion over the land); he cannot fill the countryside (i.e. neither the physical world of nature nor the metaphysical world of spirit). His purpose and meaning, the final line asserts, are illustrated by his condition on this night: the light blinds rather than illuminates. It severs, rendering the outside world invisible to him and he to it. It illuminates only his isolation and insignificance and that does not long endure before it is extinguished. Such imagery, for Sharp, suggests in Frost a perspective in which the only illumination to which humans can aspire is the revelation of their own blindness, the killing acknowledgement of human brevity and inevitable consignment to oblivion.

Russell Fraser (1998) echoes Sharp’s reading, homing in on similar imagery to construct a perspective on Frost’s corpus that is at once thoroughly modernist and fundamentally nihilistic.

Seeking to determine our place among the infinities, [Frost] trained a telescope on the heavens, like the man in ‘The Star-Splitter’ who fails at hugger-mugger farming. But peering through it didn't sharpen his sense of how things stood ‘between the night tonight/And a man with a smoky lantern chimney’. This man, like Diogenes, sees only as far as the lantern throws its light. ‘For Once, Then, Something’, among the permanent poems, shows him looking down the well to the surface of the water. He sees his image in the water, framed by summer's furniture, ‘a wreath of feta and cloud puffs’. Absolutes he doesn't see, and of truth at the bottom of the well there is nothing (Fraser, 1998: 49).

Like Sharp’s reading of the old man’s light which simultaneously blinds him to the world outside and renders him invisible to it, Fraser finds in Frost’s oeuvre, in essence, a failed quest, a search eager to glimpse a truth that, finally, never reveals itself. For Fraser, the reflection at
the bottom of Frost’s ubiquitous wells is not Truth, it is not the Absolute. It is only a reflection of the gazer’s desperate and, ultimately, unfulfilled need for these things.

**An Alternative View**

Despite the prevalence of the contemporary critical view of Frost as quintessentially a poet of darkness, some theorists have begun to advance an alternative view of the poet’s palette. The most notable of these, perhaps, is Peter Stanlis, who has written exhaustively on Frost as a philosophical poet. Stanlis’ rich insights into the dualism at the centre of Frost’s life and work facilitate a robust and sophisticated re-reading of the corpus which resists the critical gravitation towards an exclusively Gothic Frost. Stanlis’ interpretations, derived in part from a long friendship with the poet, offer a powerful lens through which to gaze beyond the (I would argue strategically) beguiling and distracting surface layers of the texts to the highly-charged depths beneath, where Frost’s dualism operates in a complex interplay between signification and its undoing, between creation and destruction, between hope and despair. Stanlis writes ‘[d]ualism as the basis of Frost’s philosophy is the foremost single element that scholars and literary critics need to consider in any study of his life and thought, including the themes of his poetry’ (Stanlis, 2007: 1). According to Stanlis, Frost’s dualism is fundamentally predicated upon the irresolvable clashing of opposites, the conjoining of contradictory forces, the indissoluble ‘twoness’ of reality, in which all things are joined, hand-in-glove, with their antithesis. Quoting from the poet, Stanlis underlines the contention that ‘[t]here can be little doubt that the “endless…things in pairs ordained in everlasting opposition” was to Frost the universal, God-given condition of man’s trial by existence’ (Stanlis, 2007: 3-4). For Stanlis, then, Frost’s dualism is one in which the meeting of opposites means neither their mutual annihilation nor the ascendance of one and the descent of the other, rather, the meeting of opposites is a manifestation of a universal mode of existence, the fate to which all creation, both matter and spirit, human and non-human, terrestrial and cosmological, is consigned. Indeed, Stanlis suggests, Frost finds life, vitality, and immortality in this universal struggle, this trial of existence that simultaneously constructs the self and dismantles it, that concurrently joys and grieves, hopes and abandons hope.¹ According to Stanlis, Frost’s view of God is

¹ This term is used here with reservation, not to connote an evangelical image of an eternal afterlife of heavenly reward or retributive suffering. Frost largely eschewed organized religion and religious dogma. ‘Immortality’, when used in the context of Frost’s work and thought, signifies the infinite continuation of vital energy, of life force, most often through conditions of struggle, conflict, and contention at the point of the conjunction of opposites: life discovered and affirmed in grappling with death; spirit realized through matter; darkness as the conjoined twin of light.
principally as One who metes out ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions, through which it is the lot of mankind to learn to navigate. This, for Frost, is not some divinely masochistic enterprise, the fiat of a Supreme Being watching with amusement the struggles of His paltry playthings. Rather, this infinite progression, this careful negotiation of the labyrinth of polarities is, in essence, a mechanism of creative evolution; it is the essential process through which the self, a particularly vexed but significant concept in Frost’s oeuvre, as will be shown, develops, matures, dies, and is reborn—endlessly.

This study, then, seeks to build upon Stanlis’ crucial analyses to explore Frost as a spiritual poet and to underscore his works as a vital, complex, and often misunderstood iteration of his sophisticated philosophical, aesthetic and spiritual worldview. This study will focus principally upon Frost’s nature poetry insofar as this robust element of his corpus best exemplifies the juxtaposition of spirit and matter at the core of the Frost episteme. An array of major and minor works will be analyzed, with particular focus paid to the following: ‘Acquainted with the Night’ (1928), ‘Acceptance’ (1928), ‘Once by the Pacific’ (1928), ‘Bereft’ (1928), ‘A Question (1942), ‘Take Something Like a Star’ (1943), ‘On Looking up by Chance on Constellations’ (1928), ‘Afterflakes’ (1936), ‘The Sound of Trees’ (1916), ‘A Young Birch’ (1946), ‘After Apple-Picking’ (1914), ‘Into My Own’ (1913), ‘Pan with Us’ (1915), ‘Directive’ (1946), ‘Two Look at Two’ (1923), ‘A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey’s Ears, and Some Books’ (1923), and ‘The Mountain’ (1915). Borrowing from Frost’s frequent conceit of representing spiritual and metaphysical themes in material terms (and vice versa), this study will use Frost’s nature poetry to develop a cartography of the poet’s aesthetic and philosophical journey. More specifically, this study seeks to use Frost’s nature poetry to map the poet’s conceptualization of the spiritual and moral development of the human in general and of the poet, as moral teacher and philosophical guide, in particular.

This critical cartography centres upon three principal images recurring throughout Frost’s oeuvre: mountains, woods, and heavenly bodies. The goal of this study, then, is to evaluate the function and significance of Frost’s terrestrial and celestial landscapes as a manifestation of a complex spiritual ethos and related aesthetic hitherto underappreciated and undertheorized in a contemporary critical discourse at times apparently infatuated with the consolations of a Gothic pessimism. This study will propose that prevailing readings of Frost as a poet of scepticism and despair grossly skew the oeuvre by taking only one half of his essential dualism for the whole of this aesthetic. This study does not seek to deny Frost’s
darkness, his rage, his doubt, for to do so would be wildly reductive—at once intellectually lazy and as misleading as readings which only feature those attributes. Rather, this study seeks to advance an understanding of Frost’s oeuvre as encompassing both darkness and light, hope and despair, faith and doubt, matter and spirit, creation and destruction, life and death—each coexisting and simultaneous, mutually dependent rather than mutually annihilating. Further, this thesis will argue that it is in the philosophical and aesthetic fusion of these binaries that, for Frost, spirituality exists. Frost is not an atheistic poet. He is not the poet of nihilism and negation. But these attributes, these verities of human emotion and experience, do exist within his corpus and his philosophy and his aesthetic are, indeed, inextricable from it. What emerges from Frost’s fusion of polarities, the analyses in this study will show, is a distinctive mode of spirituality, one in which life, creativity, and immortality are born through the endless struggle, the toil in the tension between belief and unbelief, pleasure and pain, love and hate. This is the singular source of life and death, or, put more precisely, life-in-death/death-in-life and its corollaries, galvanizing and vitalizing spirit and matter. And it is this journey—to, from, around, and within this source—that Frost’s poetry charts, most notably through his nature imagery. This study thus seeks to trace Frost’s spiritual topographies in the mountains, woods, and skyscapes of the oeuvre to illuminate a philosophical aesthetic which captures and expresses an unceasing evolution of spirit and matter.

**Frost and Transcendentalism**

There is general scholarly consensus that Frost’s work owed a crucial debt to his reading of Transcendentalism, particularly to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Frost himself encouraged this association through public acknowledgment of his deep respect for their distinctive achievement as literary figures. Frost wrote, for example, that ‘some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian’ (Richardson, 2007: 200). In his reference to the first talk with John Erskine on the subject of sentences, Frost states ‘I took Emerson’s prose and verse as my illustration’ (Richardson, 2007: 202) On another occasion, in a letter to Thompson in 1959, Frost wrote of Emerson ‘what a poet he was in prose and verse’ (cited in Wilcox & Barron, 2000:171). Thompson later reports: ‘Of [the] three poets to whom [Frost’s mother] had first exposed him – Emerson, Wordsworth, Bryant – his favourite was hers: Ralph Waldo Emerson’ (Thompson, 1967: 71). Frost also emphasized the influence of Emerson on the formation of his religious frame of mind: ‘I was brought up in all three of these
religions [Presbyterian, Unitarian, and Swedenborgianism]. But . . . it was pretty much under the auspices of Emerson. It was all very Emersonian. Phrases of his began to come to me early’ (Richardson, 2007: 200). In addition to Emerson, Frost also credited Thoreau’s *Walden* with a significant impact on his formation, remarking on one occasion that ‘a particular passage therein [unspecified] must have a good deal with the making of me’ (Faggen, 2001: 102). On another occasion, Frost affirms that ‘[in] one book [Walden] he [Thoreau] surpasses everything we have had in America’ (cited in Atmore, et al., 2016: 745).

Transcendentalism is essential to this study because it foregrounds the inextricable link between the natural world and the spiritual realm. The onset of this movement dates back to 1836 during the inaugural gathering of the Transcendentalism Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines Transcendentalism as ‘an American Literary, Political and Philosophical Movement of the early nineteenth century, centred around Ralph Waldo Emerson’ (Russell, 2015: n.p). In Emerson’s landmark essay on *Nature* (1836), Transcendentalism derived its full vision. *Nature* describes the natural world as sacred, an abode of God, the source of nourishment, beauty and inspiration. Emerson believed that ‘the quest for this spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical world is only possible through intuition and the subordination of men to the eloquence of nature and not through established religious doctrines or through reason or sensory experience alone’ (Mussetta & Vartalitis, 2010: n.p). A second major figure within this movement was Henry David Thoreau (1817 -1867) who, as we have seen above, Frost credited with an epochal contribution to American literature. Thoreau, Emerson and other adherents of Transcendentalism opposed the idea of deriving knowledge though the senses believing instead that full knowledge can only be derived through intuition and the contemplation of the internal spirit. They did not conform to the authority of religious institutions. They believed that nature is equivalent to God and accordingly advocated a permanent close relationship with the natural world. Transcendentalists also believed that nature is divine and since humans are creatures of nature, we too are divine. Emerson proposed that man was a ‘god in ruins’: ‘A man is a god in ruins’ and Transcendentalism sought nothing less than the restoration of this spiritual monument (qtd in Filed, 2003: 119).

As will be demonstrated in more detail during the chapter on forests, I will trace Frost’s poetics back to his most significant aesthetic forebears, focusing in particular on the influence of Emerson and Thoreau. The work of the Transcendentalists, I will argue, provides an
essential context for the physical, spiritual and psychological attachment to Nature throughout Frost’s poetics. However, while Frost owes a debt of gratitude to both these writers, ultimately his aesthetic is entirely his own, developing across decades of self-cultivation as both a poet and, it will be argued, a spiritual philosopher. The study aims to be distinctive in its contribution to existing scholarship by contesting critical orthodoxy regarding Frost’s transcendentalist sensibility; by taking into account his own complex and evolving metaphysical dualism, a new interpretation of the corpus will emerge, one which is more optimistic, hopeful, and future-oriented, one which affirms the possibility of creative evolution not merely in spite of darkness and loss but through and because of it.

**Skyscapes, Woods, Mountains: The Poet’s Encounter with the Natural World**

*The Cradle of Innocence/The Cradle of Ignorance*

This thesis begins its in-depth analysis of Frost’s use of natural imagery as a manifestation and exploration of his dualistic philosophy and aesthetic in Chapter One: ‘In the Crèche of The Cosmos’. This chapter will explore Frost’s symbolic economy of celestial imagery as a representation of the metaphysical journey of the human soul. A core concern of this chapter is the poet’s use of images of darkness and light, which is assessed from the perspective of Frost’s dualistic metaphysics, exemplifying the fundamental and indissoluble nexus between frequencies in the visible spectrum.

This chapter is an appropriate launching point for our study of Frost insofar as the ubiquity of dark imagery within the corpus has been the principal evidence base relied upon by critics keen to build an image of Frost as a Gothic poet of metaphysical darkness. This chapter aims to offer a more nuanced analysis of the use of dark and light imagery within the corpus, arguing that Frost’s dualism necessitates a new understanding of the intractable and inviolable relationship between darkness and light. A mystical reading of Frost’s oeuvre may be among the most significant of a more nuanced reading of his dark imagery. Frost once described himself as a mystic, and his dualism perfectly exemplifies Stace’s discussion of the type of mystical experience called ‘extrovertive’ which describes the mechanisms of creative production occasioned when the sense of mystical consciousness commingles with the individual’s sensory perception of the external world (cited in Forman, 1999: 6). Such is the locus for the meeting of darkness and light, for the nexus of discovery and loss, for the junction
of joy and grief. This is the site where the friction of opposites kindles the creative fire of newness oriented toward dualism; mystical readings of Frost’s oeuvre find in his dark images the inevitable implication and immanence of the light—and within the corpus of Frost is the spark of poetic innovation.

Thus, this chapter will aim to demonstrate that when one image is advanced it should always already be understood to imply and invoke the binary opposite with which it is linked. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to resist the prevailing critical discourse which privileges nihilistic interpretations of the oeuvre by discounting or dismissing the profound and pervasive influence of dualism on Frost’s work and thought. As was noted previously, to underscore one component at the expense of the other is to perpetuate a flagrant misrepresentation of both the author and his work.

The partial readings of the ‘Gothic’ Frost tell only half the tale of a writer and aesthetic that not only invites but demands and necessitates probative analysis, repeat encounters with the text, and the fumbling through error and misdirection which reading at the surface levels of Frost’s work engender. In beginning this study with an exploration of Frost’s representation of heavenly bodies, the celestial sphere which brings both darkness and light, this study seeks to underscore the idea that Frost constructs his oeuvre to operate as a sort of lyrical metonym for the human metaphysical journey, the stark encounter between matter and spirit and the fierce grappling, the laborious tangle to achieve understanding and stability—a foothold and grounding in the essentials of our being. The poem, the book, after all, is a material artifact in the hand of the reader but through this encounter with the materiality of the book, and, especially, by rubbing against the highly concrete language of Frost’s ostensibly homespun imagery, the spirit is presumably to be illuminated, to be enlightened—that is, to be brought into the light.

Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, the subtlety of Frost’s dualism gives rise to misdirection, a poetics of beveled glass upon which the reader at first sees nothing but his/her own distorted reflection. Thus it is that the rustic reader finds in Frost the voice of the rural American people—finds in him his own voice. And thus it is that the literary theorist might also find in Frost the dark depths so coveted in parts of the modern academy. This is, however, as this chapter demonstrates, a false start, a strategic misdirection to waylay and, ultimately, arrest the timid who dare to seek no further into the depths.
It is for these reasons that I have chosen to launch this study with a chapter whose title invokes the image of the nursery, the crèche referring to the cradle of infancy. As this chapter demonstrates, for Frost, the first stage of human spiritual evolution is to understand the interconnectedness of darkness and light, to recognise the inevitable and immediate presence of the one when the other alone seems apparent. This first stage of development, this first leg of the spiritual journey we are endeavouring to map through Frost’s oeuvre, however, is a circuitous one, as has been suggested, filled with false starts, regressions, wrong turnings and interpretative cul-de-sacs. This is a process which, as will be shown, Frost replicates as a sort of audience conditioning on the part of the poet/philosopher/teacher/guide. Frost creates beguiling surfaces below which bubble and roil a multitude of paradoxes and antitheses, giving the lie to the surfaces of simple understandings and obvious, easy truths. In this chapter’s analysis of light and dark imagery, and of Frost’s corollary invocation of heavenly bodies which bring light and/or cast darkness (the stars, the moon, the clouds, the sun, etc.), I will present Frost’s aesthetic as one in which light brings darkness (i.e. a moment of clarity only brings about the revelation of ignorance) and darkness, light (i.e. the blindness that both presages and invokes a new illumination). In Frost’s philosophy and his aesthetic, this is the first stage of spiritual development. This acknowledgement of the coexistence and interdependence, the fundamental duality, of darkness and light, is how the human spirit moves from the nursery to the schoolhouse.

The Test of Transformation

The thesis will then proceed in Chapter Two from the crèche to visit Frost’s ‘Cathedral of the Forest’. Following the trajectory of the spiritual journey in Frost’s aesthetic, the forest symbolizes the second stage of development, the locus wherein the possibility for true transformation, true creative evolution, exists. By exploring the forest imagery so prevalent in Frost’s corpus, this chapter seeks to assert a new understanding of the poet’s underlying aesthetic and spiritual philosophies. Put more precisely, this chapter argues that forests in Frost’s works signify a triangulated space of epiphanic encounter between self, material and metaphysical worlds (which, as has already been suggested and will be established below, is manifested for Frost in the materiality of nature).

This chapter asserts, in particular, that trees play an especially vital role in this process of encounter between the human and the spiritual. Positioned as this chapter is in the middle of our ‘map’ of Frost’s spiritual aesthetic, the chapter presupposes human subjects, whether the
subject of the poem or the reader as subject, who have been tempered and conditioned for this meeting, who have been baptized by the fires of loss, pain, and grief and who therefore come to these forests changed, come to them other than the babes who entered the nursery, different than the pupils first stepping foot into the classroom. These are subjects who are well acquainted with light and dark and for whom no mountains have been removed. So they come to the forest with the armaments of the swirling dance of cosmological dualities, of life-in-death-in-life, of pain-in-pleasure-in-pain, of despair-in-hope-in-despair.

A central focus of this chapter will be the theme of aurality in connection to Frost’s ubiquitous trees. This emphasis on aurality speaks to an apotheosis of Frost’s philosophical aesthetic insofar as this exemplifies not merely the meeting of matter and spirit but their mingling, merging, fusion, and fissuring. Throughout the corpus, Frost represents his illustrious trees as having voice, beside which the human voice falls silent. And yet, it will be argued, it is within this context of silent listening that the hearer discovers a new language. For Frost, this language is, at its root, a new spirituality, a new religion.

Though principally concerned with the spiritual journey as it is configured in Frost’s work, this chapter also examines Frost’s deployment of woodland scenes to deconstruct and problematize modernity’s struggle between the agrarian and the industrial, between the primitive and the civilized. Such readings are by no means uncommon, as Frost’s populist appeal attests. However, this chapter argues that Frost’s analysis of the clash of modernity and antiquity is, in actuality, another manifestation of his dualism and an attribute of the spiritual evolution to which it linked.

The forest is a liminal space: presumably untouched as yet by the domesticating forces of civilization, it at once retains its wildness and yet offers a space for encounter with the denizens of the other world of modernity. It welcomes the civilized into itself. Whereas the mountain may repel, may shake off the intruder, the forest embraces, encircles, and absorbs. But in this infiltration, both parties are changed: the civilized man is imbued with something of the forest’s wildness. The forest, having taken into itself the cool of domestication, loses a measure of its savage heat. There is in this a diminishment which Frost acknowledges, addresses with bracing frankness, and laments.

Nevertheless, in keeping with Frost’s aesthetic and spiritual dualism, there is also a potentiality at play, the prospect of something to be gained in the place of that which is lost.
There is no question of ranking gains to losses in Frost’s model, however: that which is lost is lost; that which is gained is gained. To endeavour to gauge the balance is to endeavour that which is both impossible and without purpose. Spiritual evolution, for Frost, occurs in the tension at the meeting of opposites, at the conjunction of binaries. This chapter argues that Frost’s forest imagery signifies not merely the locus wherein the potential for individual spiritual transformation is strong, but also the site where the collective spiritual ethos emerges or is transformed.

This chapter argues that while Frost reviled the pernicious effects of modern civilization on the natural world and on man’s relationship—both to it and to himself—he also recognized the possibility for a progressive creative evolution in the marriage of the primitive and the civilized. He did not reject modernity or industrialization *in toto*; he was not of Rousseau’s school of the Noble Savage. Instead, forest imagery functions for Frost as emblematic of the hybridity upon which social progressivism depends, the recognition and the allowance of the nature of the human experience as the clash of matter and spirit, darkness and light—and the application of those same principles to the collective. Political systems, education systems, religious systems—these may be manifestations of the progress of civilization and may possess some utility in their own right. Nevertheless, they are that which is partial, insufficient, and temporal pretending to be whole, potent, and eternal. The forest is always waiting. Once harvested of its woods by civilized man to build his homes and businesses, it will someday harvest and claim the civilization which once presumed to claim it.

Thus, in this chapter, I argue against critical models which assert that Frost’s vision is essentially apocalyptic by evaluating the important role forest imagery plays. This imagery signifies the material and the spiritual transformation of both individuals and the collective, of the human self and of human society. As liminal sites, both tamed and untamed, woodlands exemplify the meeting place of opposites which, in Frost’s aesthetic, also links to vitality, growth, movement, and change. Perhaps most significant, as the reference to cathedrals in this chapter’s title suggests, as the locus of transformation, forests also presage the advent of a new spirituality. After the sloughing off of old illusions, the abandonment of childish innocence, as exemplified in the earlier stages of this spiritual journey, the travels—whether poet, character, or reader—have now come to the forest cathedral, the place of worship that exists outside of and in contrast to organized religion. It is here that the forest teaches of limits, of transience, of boundaries broken and spaces, places, and selves infiltrated. But it is also here where the forest,
and especially the eloquent aurality of the trees, teach the initiate to praise and to supplicate a new self before a new spiritual order, a new vision of the cosmos, the divine, and the place of man and society within it.

*The Difficult Taskmaster*

In Chapter Three, ‘In the Classroom of the Mountains’ I examine the final stage of the spiritual journey in Frost’s oeuvre, focusing on the poet’s use of mountainscapes to symbolise the pedagogical powers of these awe-inspiring works of nature. In this chapter, I explore a number of Frost’s more celebrated works, including ‘The Mountain’, ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears, and Some Books’ and ‘Two Look at Two’ to evaluate the unique and important role mountains play in developing Frost’s metaphysics and the aesthetic to which it is linked.

One of the most salient issues to be explored in this chapter is the motif of the failed quest in Frost’s corpus. His strong orientation to narrative poetry enables the emergence of this significant and pervasive theme across his career. This chapter will argue that mountains often figure heavily in these failed quest narratives. However, while the prevailing critical model has been, once again, to read such narratives as illustrative of a profound sense of futility at the core of Frost’s work, I propose that, on the contrary, the failed quest narrative operates within the corpus as a teaching tool; the mountains which so often serve to condemn the quest to failure are, in Frost’s aesthetic, the schoolmasters, severe but wise, unyielding but instructive. They set the scene for the quester’s loss and in so doing they teach the essential curriculum of disappointment.

This chapter seeks to refute the ready interpretations of Frost’s failed quest narratives as exemplary of an overriding scepticism. If we are to accept that idea that dualism underscores the entirety of the oeuvre then, as this chapter asserts, we must also seek to understand the dualistic character of the failed quest narrative. The chapter emphasizes not merely the process of questing but the aftermath of failed questing, which plays an equal if not greater role in Frost’s work. The failed questers live to journey another day. The impenetrable wall, the undiscovered fountain—these are turnings, not termini.

Mountains figure heavily in Frost’s spiritual drama of the failed quest in that they signify that which is at once eternal and immovable. Often, the questers are drawn in, seduced by the allure of the majesty of the mountain, its formidableness, its mystery. These are the things which beckon, but they are also that which deny, once again underscoring the dualistic
ethos in which the clashing of opposites energizes rather than enervates, galvanizes rather than paralyzes. Significantly, in the confrontation with the mountain which both welcomes and withholds, the quester undergoes a spiritual transformation. The pupil who leaves the schoolroom a poised and prepared graduate is not the same pupil who entered it a callow and unformed babe. The classroom changes. It hardens and it sobers - so too Frost’s mountains.

The salient issue, as this chapter demonstrates, is that the classroom does not kill. The mountain’s victory is not lethal. There is, for Frost’s failed questers, life after loss. However, this life is not the old life. It is not life before the ascent. Those who have tasted declivity cannot forget its bitterness. Frost knew too much of the world, too much of pain and grief to deny their envenomed fangs. As this chapter seeks to demonstrate, Frost’s oeuvre is, in many respects, a symphony of pain but without a fatal Gothic discord. The scenes of loss which blanket his oeuvre like fresh fallen snow are sometimes searing in their rawness, their brutal frankness. However, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate, the oeuvre is also an ode to joy, and it is in the rough classroom of the mountainside, with its loss and denial, its pain and privation, that failed questers learn not only the dirge of despair but also the rhapsodies of a new and unexpected rapture. The thwarted couple of ‘Two Look at Two’ discover the breathtaking beauty of the natural world coexisting beside them by first being denied entry to that world, by learning first the hard lessons of humility and restraint, of learning one’s proper place in the grand framework of the cosmos, of which the natural world is, to Frost, the material manifestation. Likewise, in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and Some Books’ the protagonist ultimately must abandon his search for the sacred fountain, but it is on his return journey, the journey of denial, that he discovers a new and perhaps ultimately more meaningful, because won in the context of loss, totem: a ‘shut-in’s’ book of poems.

Thus, the readings of the significance of the mountainscape presented in this chapter constitute a stark reversal of a critical orthodoxy of negativity. Arthur Saltzman’s ‘Futility and Robert Frost’ (2000), for example, asserts that the poet’s mountains typically figure as a locus of denial and failure. Thus, he argues, Frost constructs a poetics of provisionality which operates as a means of conceiving, testing, augmenting, or discarding language in an effort to stave off fear and despair. While Saltzman’s analysis borders on the nihilism which this study rejects, as will be shown, it does offer important insights into Frost’s processes of situating the quest for language in the tension at the meeting point of opposite forces. Mountains function symbolically as just such a force. To stand on a mountain is to be poised precisely between
ascension and declension. To be confronted by a mountain is to recognize the limits of one’s own power and the finitude of one’s own life in contrast to that which is boundless in strength and infinite in endurance.

Richard Wakefield’s ‘Thomas Eakins and Robert Frost: To Be a Natural Man in a Man-made World (2000) asserts that mountains in Frost signify a disavowal of modern society, the subordination of the human and human relationships to the edicts of progressive civilization. Frost’s mountains, Wakefield argues, exemplify a sublime transcendence, the repudiation of man’s regimented, clock-driven life under the shadow of industrialisation. Frost’s mountains stand outside of and beyond time, the author suggests: implacable, immovable, and undeniable. It would be a mistake, however, to read Frost’s mountain images simplistically, as part of a binaristic opposition of nature and culture, of the wilds versus civilization, with the former operating as the privileged term. Such recognitions are at the heart of my effort to restore to Frost the spiritual complexity his philosophy and his poetics deserve. Mountains, then, should not be understood to signify the immobility of an indifferent universe; the disproportionality of human pain to human power; the thwarting of endeavor and the futility of hope. Mountains are not, as nihilistic readings of Frost’s oeuvre might suggest, the granite tombs against which foolhardy man bashes himself to bits. Mountains, in the spiritual reading presented in this chapter, are the purveyors of essential knowledge, of truths which pain but also propel, which stun but also stir, which deny but also redirect. Frost’s mountains teach those stalwarts enough to grapple with them who they are, for better and for worse, for good and for ill. It is, for Frost, the wise pupil who, after many failed tutorials, at last learns the lesson.

The concluding chapter draws on the preceding discussion and findings to offer an understanding of the place of faith and meaning in Frost’s work. Taken together, the chapters of this study seek to present an image of Robert Frost distinct from the one so prevalent in much modern critical parlance. The Robert Frost of this study is not an unremittingly Gothic poet. He is not the bard of bad times, the sage of scepticism, the dean of denial. He is a spiritual man and poet, embarked upon a profound and complex spiritual journey, of which his poetry is the record, an aestheticizing of an emerging philosophy, of an idiosyncratic dualism which seeks to make sense of a world which, more often than not, appears to make no sense. As philosopher poet, he is both mapmaker and guide. This study charts his spiritual trajectory.


**Definition of Terms**

Before moving into the main body of the thesis and close readings of poems and to facilitate an understanding of Frost’s complex aesthetics, an explication of a few key terms as they are to be used in this study, as well as their function within the corpus as a whole, is necessary.

In this thesis, ‘religion’ signifies an organized and codified system of spiritual belief and praxis. In as much as it is a systematized and, frequently, hierarchical structure, it represents an ideological framework which Frost largely resists. Though a student of religion, incorporating diverse tenets from different Christian denominations and global faiths into his oeuvre, Frost envisions organised religion, per se, as a potentially repressive regime which stifles rather than effectuates moral development. The metaphysical dualism upon which Frost’s corpus depends constitutes a fundamental movement toward the systematization of religion as imagined and represented in Frost’s poetics. Religion, for Frost, constitutes the imposition of a moral and spiritual framework upon the individual. The moral sense, through religious indoctrination and compulsion, is stifled and deformed, the moral evolution of the individual stunted through the prescriptive and proscriptive mechanisms of religious orthodoxy.

*Spirituality* is perhaps the most significant and symbolically resonant term used in Frost’s poetics and a central focus of this study. ‘Spirituality’ in Frost’s lexicon aligns with Frost’s metaphysical dualism. It is the vital but intangible element which exists in connection to and contradistinction with the material realm, the meeting of which is, for Frost, the locus of possibility, creation, and evolution. Spirituality, in Frost, signifies the individual’s connection with the divine, the eternal, and the transcendent. It defies complete comprehension, articulation, or encapsulation, and in this sense, constitutes a rejection of organised religion—or at least its fundamental premises as the purveyor and practitioner of ultimate Truth. At the core of Frost’s understanding and representation of spirituality is the image of the quest, the presumption of the individual’s right and responsibility to cultivate his/her own spiritual sense, to attend to one’s own spiritual evolution. This is an effort to seek God within, to determine the nature of the divine and in so doing to determine the nature of the self. Such a process, for Frost, is preeminently a humbling one insofar as it necessitates the recognition of and acquiescence to the limitations of human knowledge and power. This further affirms Frost’s scepticism of organised religion, with its investments in human spiritual authority and its
claims to infallible revelation. Spirituality, this study argues, is an overriding concern in Frost’s corpus, as he seeks to understand and to represent processes of spiritual development even as he asserts the intractably and necessarily personal nature of this process. Spiritual development is, for Frost, fundamentally idiosyncratic. It belongs to and for the individual alone. Its manifestations are as unique as a fingerprint, as the curves of the ear, as the flecks of colour in the human eye. Further, like these unique features through which the human can come to be known, the highly personal, unpredictable, and inimitable nature of this process of spiritual development is also intrinsically bound with the material. Thus, as will be shown, when Frost invokes the spiritual in his oeuvre he is always already invoking the material as well.

Frost’s ubiquitous nature imagery, I argue, manifests the poet’s evolving metaphysical dualism, signifying the correlation and inter-dynamics of the spiritual and the material. For Frost, natural elements both literally and metaphorically signify the meeting of the tangible and the intangible, the confrontation of opposing forces which make creative evolution possible. This act of creative evolution, this study demonstrates, is also for Frost a mechanism of spiritual evolution. Because spiritual evolution is tied to this clash of opposing forces, the confrontation of the material and the spiritual, of limits and limitlessness, of possibility and denial, it is also inevitably a process of innovation. This, again, sets Frost’s paradigm of spirituality apart from the often-inflexible schema of organised religion, which is bounded, self-referential, and largely static. The spiritual, for Frost, is the nexus of the intangible and the intangible, wherein the individual simultaneously glimpses the divine and becomes aware of his blindness to it. The spiritual and the material operate as the locus of revelation and mystification, of clarity and opaqueness, which do not contradict or cancel out one another, as in the physical realm explicable through science (in its pragmatic materialism) or religion (in its codification of the ineffable), but which coexist and, indeed, necessitate one another.

This thesis will argue that Frost positions mysticism as an integral component of spiritual development. More specifically, for Frost, the confrontation of spirit and matter which is necessary to creative evolution is, at its core, a form of mysticism. This is what enables the simultaneous coexistence of contradicting elements, the meeting of opposing forces which leads not to mutual annihilation but to a state of tension which galvanises innovation and the ascension of the spirit to a higher state of evolution. Frost’s mysticism, then, defines his dualistic metaphysics insofar as it signifies a simultaneous discovery and loss of the self. It speaks to the moment of human spiritual evolution when confronted with a universe that is
itself simultaneously spirit and matter, permanence and evanescence, immanence and otherness.

In spatial terms, Frost’s poetics offer the reader a spiritual cartography. The evolution of the individual is envisioned spatially, a movement through a geographic landscape which is both tangible and intangible. While Frost’s poems frequently centre upon efforts to map the terrestrial plane, this endeavour, for Frost, always already signifies its corollary, the mapping of the spiritual plane, as well. Thus, cartography is, in Frost’s aesthetic, emblematic of a new science, one distinct from the deceptions and diminishments of empiricism, with its presumptions to quantify the unquantifiable, to map the infinite. Frost’s cartography is, fundamentally, a mapping of the ever-shifting (and thereby eternally innovating) space where opposites meet, the creative cathexis of spirit and matter. The outer edges of Frost’s map, to which we will turn now, are a star chart of the skyscape and heavens.
Chapter One

In the Crèche of the Cosmos: Frost in Darkness and Light

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

(Robert Frost, ‘A Question’, 1942)

Lord, I have loved your sky,
Be it said against or for me,
Have loved it clear and high,
Or low and stormy.

(Robert Frost, ‘Astrometaphysical’, 1946)

Frost’s nature imagery is often read as evidence of an overarching pessimism and a bleakness bordering on nihilism. Nowhere are such readings more ubiquitous than in the critical discourse surrounding Frost’s dark images and his nocturnal motifs. The frequency and potency of these images in Frost’s corpus is taken by some contemporary critics as compelling evidence in support of Frost’s status as a Gothic poet. Whilst elements of the corpus do indeed support readings of Frost as a poet with Gothic impulses, this chapter will show that such readings on their own are incomplete and misleading. To be certain, Frost, on occasion, is Gothic, but he is not only Gothic and, indeed, if the dualism at the heart of his aesthetic is properly understood, then it must also be underscored that Frost’s aesthetic operates by and through dualities: thus, in Frost, darkness always already signifies and invokes light, even as light always and already invokes darkness.

In his 1928 poem, ‘Acceptance’ Frost writes, ‘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’ (12-14). It is such passages which have provided the impetus for some critics’ assertions that Frost is, at base, a pessimistic poet, a poet of denial and despair, exemplified by his frequent use of ‘dark’ imagery. Norwood argues that a prevalent theme in Frost’s oeuvre is the effort to conceal, obscure, or hide from terrors which are fundamentally inescapable. Norwood invokes here Kristeva’s theories of abjection to explain Frost’s poetic ethos:
Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a name for the unnameable 'something to be scared of' that haunts several of Frost's finest poems. For Kristeva, the 'abject' is what is excluded from, and what threatens, the symbolic order and its mutually confirming subject/object relations…. Although he pragmatically privileges the work of knowing – the constructive acts that constitute the symbolic order - Frost is aware of the irreducible and threatening excess that order excludes and protects against (Norwood, 1993: n.p).

Norwood’s deployment of Kristeva to assess and interpret Frost’s aesthetic impulses and their manifestation in his dark imagery prompts a hermeneutic in which the poet’s endeavours are, at root, acts of desperation, subconscious attempts to deny the chaos and destruction which language can neither reach nor contain. Thus, for Norwood, poetry is Frost’s inevitably unsuccessful attempts to domesticate and, ultimately, to dismiss abjection, to give form, intelligibility, and governability to that which is, and forever will be, anything but.

Readings like Norwood’s situate Frost as a poet of futility and affirm the tendency among other critics to read the poet’s corpus as an expression of near cosmic negativity. Anna Juhnk, for example, argues that the pessimism manifesting in Frost’s work speaks to a broader loss of faith in the possibility of divine order or a transcendent purpose driving men’s lives and justifying their pain: ‘Yet any self-transcending leap of faith toward such a possibility seems too great a risk when even to stand firm in self-possession requires heroic efforts against the onslaughts of time, nature, and the dehumanizing chaos of modern society’ (Juhnk, 1964: 153). For Juhnk, Frost’s poetry represents a vain effort to prevent destruction, even as it chronicles it. Frost’s poetics, Juhnk suggests, is one in which the stay against annihilation is only temporary and the struggle to slow down the forces of entropy is too fierce—and too exhausting—to allow for any sustained hope in something beyond the self, particularly if that something is to be regarded as benevolent and purposeful. Darrel Abel echoes such readings, arguing:

Frost no longer expects to find his sylvan home a ‘spot sacred to thought and God’. He only wishes that the dark trees were not the ‘merest mask of gloom’, but that they ‘stretched away unto the edge of doom’….If they were such an avenue into the Absolute, he would ‘steal away’ into it….But Frost’s dark trees are not the bush where man can meet God; they are only an equivalent figure for his wish to do so (Abel, 1978: 41, emphasis original).

Thus, Abel suggests, dark imagery in Frost’s corpus is linked both to nihilism and to the desire to deny or escape it, most particularly through the use of the creative imagination. Again, this aligns with prevailing critical perspectives which associate Frost with an overriding pessimism, a Gothic ethos which as Douglass Thompson notes, can be defined as ‘the embodiment of the
insane pursuit of the Absolute…. [which] is metaphysical, mythic, and religious, defining the hero’s equivocal relationship to the universe’ (cited in Alam, 2012: 297). Thompson’s definition of the literary Gothic parallels Abel’s reading of Frost insofar as both equate the operation of the creative imagination with the frustrated effort to find a God—or at least an orderly and purposive ‘Absolute’ – which does not exist. Such an effort, these readings suggest, exemplifies the quest to prevent the inevitable annihilation of the self, even as that self speeds toward its destruction.

However, Abel’s reading of Frost, though in keeping with critical presumptions of Frost’s pessimistic, atheistic Gothicism, nevertheless opens up important avenues for further critical assessment, avenues which this chapter will explore. For, in Frost, wish fulfilment, both as it operates on the level of poetic creation and as it links to the search for the Divine, is not in and of itself a token of desolation, a signifier of an unremitting absence of meaning. Rather, as Crossan Poirer asserts in his analysis of critical responses to Frost’s ‘For Once, Then, Something’ (1920) and, specifically, of his interpretation of the poem’s conceit of the well-gazer, ‘the way scholars press this metaphor more often than not reflects their own epistemologies’ (Poirer, 2012: 127-128). To be sure, Poirer’s statement is not revolutionary, but reflects a truism which any earnest and self-reflexive critic would acknowledge. However, critical perspectives which privilege these more pessimistic and Gothic interpretations of Frost as possessing greater intellectual heft and importance have given rise to an almost coercive orientation toward Frost, virtually mandating Gothic readings as the only ones worthy of scholars’ time, effort, or attention.¹ Thus, Poirer’s assertion suggests that these epistemologies constrain, direct, and determine critical perspectives. In so doing, they easily give rise to reductive analyses and gross misreadings which obscure and erase the complexity of Frost’s aesthetic. For example, Poirer proposes a reversal of dominant interpretations of Frost’s well-gazer which state that the observer sees nothing in the well water beyond his own reflection. Poirer argues, rather, that Frost’s well-gazer is ‘successful (albeit marginally) in his attempts to see “something more of the depths” (128). Poirer’s qualifier, ‘albeit marginally’ is instructive here, providing a more nuanced perspective which is the aspiration behind my readings. It is my intention in this thesis to demonstrate that Frost must be understood as a poet neither of unremitting pessimism nor of blind optimism but, rather, as a poet of tempered hope, a poet ‘marginally’ successful in his efforts to find God, however slippery and shifting the language

used to describe Him (the Absolute, Order, Purpose) may be. As Frost writes in his charming
couplet, ‘The Secret Sits’ (1942): ‘We dance round in a ring and suppose, / but the secret sits in
the middle and knows’ (1-2).

In working with a poetics of darkness and light, Frost operates within a discourse that
has a strong and deep-rooted history of mystical representation. The motifs of darkness and
light occupy a central position in the Judeo-Christian tradition not only because they are seen
as the foundational aspects of existence, but also because darkness and light establish a
relationship with God at the moment of Creation:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Then God said, ‘Let
there be light’; and there was light, that it was good; and God divided the light
from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the Darkness He called Night

This chapter advances a counter-interpretation which insists upon the interpretation of Frost’s
dark imagery through the lens of his dualistic metaphysics. More specifically, this chapter will
show that Frost’s nocturnal poetics is entrenched in a complex and evolving aesthetic and
philosophical framework, one informed by his own idiosyncratic mysticism and predicated
upon the juxtaposition of opposing elements. Invariably, this posits that Frost is not only a
Gothic poet but the Gothic strands in his poems and the more affirmative transcendentalist
impulses are intricacies within the corpus of his poetic vision. Thus, rather than constituting a
stable signifier, in which darkness is used invariably to connote established and
unproblematized meanings—evil, despair, hopelessness—Frost’s dark necessitates a more
nuanced and supple reading. Frost deploys his dark and nocturnal images, this chapter will
show, to speak to his evolving metaphysics, his affirmation of the meeting of opposing and
contradictory forces as the site of evolution, progress, and creation.

This chapter will chart the trajectory of Frost’s evolving symbolic economy of
darkness, situating its origins in the tragedies which beset the poet’s life from a young age.
These catastrophic events typically provide the impetus for the critical readings which will be
disputed here, with some scholars ascribing a comfortable one-to-one corollary between the
poet’s private pain and what is perceived to be a tragic poetic sensibility. However, this chapter
asserts that Frost’s personal losses instead galvanized the emergence of a dualistic
metaphysical philosophy through which the poet endeavoured, if not to make sense of his pain,
then at least to evolve through it, not merely to endure but to progress—and, more to the point,
to transmute those abject experiences into creative innovation, into a new poetic ethos, a new discourse of art and spirit.

Frost’s early experience of loss, it will be proposed, cannot be separated from his nocturnal poetics. However, in reading into Frost’s poetry elements from his biography, it will be necessary to recognize and to emphasize the poet’s philosophical orientation toward his losses and the firm connection he draws between these lived human experiences and the work of the poet. Human life is besieged with tragedy, failures, and frustrations. Frost does not find himself exceptional in this regard. The work of the human in general and of the poet in particular is to confront the inevitable Stygian darkness when it comes, but not to be stymied by it. This is where Frost’s dualism figures most significantly, for in his aesthetic, the darkness not only implies the light but compels it. Because Frost situates the locus of possibility, of creative evolution and spiritual progress, at the junction of opposing and contradictory forces, his invocation of darkness always already signifies the nexus at which darkness meets its opposite, the cathexis wherein light is not simply possible but necessary, not merely potential but inevitable. Thus, through a close reading of Frost’s dark imagery and nocturnal motifs, drawn from selections spanning all stages of the poet’s career, this chapter will assert the necessity for a more robust and accommodating reading of Frost’s poetics, one which supersedes the simplistic binaries (optimism/pessimism, good/evil, hope/despair) which easily give rise to casual valorizations of home-spun positivity and Gothic negativity. In Frost’s poetics, darkness signifies both loss and creation, despair and hope, paralysis and progress, the opaque and the light, each co-existing simultaneously, equally essential and owing its existence to the other.

Aligned with this, in the readings below we will look deeply into the literal and figurative darkness of Frost’s verse and explore its complex relationship with the light. The thread I aim to weave between these poems will connect the dualism of darkness and light throughout the body of Frost’s poetry. First, I will discuss how Frost’s early ‘dark experiences’ led to the emergence of a mystical sensibility. Second, I will examine the literal darkness in relation to Frost’s nocturnal poems, eventually relating it to the theme of metaphysical gloom. It will be shown that Frost’s religious mysticism is not extinguished or eclipsed by the darkness, but instead is drawn towards and nested within a deep albeit hidden light. For this, I will endeavour to shed figurative light on several poems from different stages of Frost’s career, notably ‘Acquainted with the Night’ (1928), ‘Once by the Pacific’ (1928), ‘Iris by Night’

1.1 A Light in Dark Times

Jeffery Meyers, Frost’s biographer, reported that the poet ‘always slept with a night-light’ (cited in Fagan, 2007: 396). In recalling the poet’s nyctophobia, a friend once said, ‘I would have to go into the house before him at night, to turn on all the lights. It was a thing left over from childhood’ (cited in Fagan, 2007, 396). Despite such fears, however, Frost ‘also was known for taking night walks alone and with his children’ which hints at the poet’s complex and ambivalent attitude toward night, a complexity evident in the poet’s oeuvre and representative of the sophisticated dualism which informs his work (cited in Fagan, 2007: 396).

Without question, Frost’s darkness was real, but it was also far more complex than the binaristic positive/negative readings suggest. Frost’s dark imagery, above all, is mystical, or possessed a dimension that may be called mystical. To be sure, Frost’s imagery derives in no small measure from his life experiences. The incidents which darkened Frost’s life prior to the maturation of his mystical philosophy and aesthetic are essential to understanding why critics have associated the recurrent figure of night with grief and the image of dark with terror, suffering, fear, and sorrow. Harold Peter Simonson in his chapter ‘Terror and Defensive Stratagems in Robert Frost’ (1983) summarizes this point as follows:

Young Frost and his sister were cursed by fear. Thompson [Frost’s biographer] says they drank it with their mother’s milk. Their father, who died when Robbie was eleven, was often violent and drunk. After his death in San Francisco, their bereft mother took them east to live off relatives. In the inexorable years that followed, sister Jeanie died in a Maine asylum for the insane and their mother died of cancer (Simonson, 1983: 139).

Further, Frost’s marriage was the beginning of a new phase of suffering. The first tragedy in their married life was in 1900 when their first child, Eliot, died of cholera infantum at the age of three. Thompson and Winnick, Frost’s biographers, reported that ‘the doctor who was called in held Frost responsible for not calling him sooner’ (Thompson & Winnick, 1966: xix).

Years later, having successfully raised a family that included a son and three daughters, he lived to see death or insanity overtake all but one of his children. Marjorie, the youngest surviving child and Frost’s favourite, died of puerperal
fever in 1934 after giving birth to her first child. Six years later Frost’s only surviving son, Carol, died by his own hand, after years of mental difficulty. Irma, too, was the victim of a mental disorder much like that which necessitated the institutionalization of Frost’s sister, Jeanie, and she finally had to be placed in a mental institution herself by her anguish father (Thompson & Winnick, 1966: xix).

As reported by Frost himself in his 1960 *Paris Review* interview with Richard Poirier: ‘I’ve been more or less unhappy since 1896. More or less unhappy, but not very unhappy’ (Poirier, 1960: n.p). The qualifier *not very unhappy* here is telling insofar as it eschews a wholesale despondency and hopelessness, recognizing and even accepting suffering without giving over to it entirely. To have failed to acknowledge this reality would have been laughable at best and patently mendacious at worst. Thompson goes so far as to describe Frost as a ‘Modern Job’ in the sense that both experienced horrendous tragedies that took away all that they held dear (Thompson, 1964: xi). There is simply no escaping the reality of Frost’s suffering, either for the poet or the readers of his work. However, a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of how these experiences play out in the oeuvre is required.

Without question, all this biographical observation can be said to contribute towards Frost’s reputation as a dark poet. Yet, Frost, as Thompson reports, ‘wanted life so much (that) he had not time to play with dead things’ (cited in Mishra, 1992: 1) Frost’s personal life might be described as tragic, but he was not without hope. The following letter to Louis Untermeyer provides evidence of how the poet sought comfort amidst the total darkness that surrounded his world. The letter was written during the period when Frost’s daughter was lying in hospital close to death and yet Frost managed to write:

> We are going through the valley of the shadow with Marjorie we are afraid . . .
> But that blood transfusions every other day and Marjorie’s tenacity and Elinor’s devotion and the mercy of God are our hopes. You will probably see us home again alive whatever the outcome (cited in Thompson & Winnick, 1966: 407).

This reveals much about the poet’s own attitude towards the tragic experiences in his life. His belief in God remained a bright hope during even the darkest days and moments, galvanizing an aesthetic in which darkness and light would be powerfully, beautifully, and often painfully linked, as in the nexus between the experience of pain and the awareness of a divine presence. Yet Frost was both a believer and a doubter. Gary Sloan observed that ‘Frost liked to call himself an Old Testament Christian’ (Sloan, 2003: n.p). He also stated that Frost ‘might joke about God’ and cited Peter Stanlis’s observation that Frost believes that ‘because of the
uncertainty of God’s ultimate justice or mercy, man is compelled to stay afraid deep in his soul’ (Sloam, 2003: n.p). In this regard, there is a continuous binary juxtaposition of dark and light, but most significantly, light springs out in darkness and manifests itself not only in his personal life but also throughout his verse.

So, while there is no question that Frost’s work is galvanized by the despair of loss, it is vital to recognize his efforts to cope with, contextualize, and channel his grief. The darkness he experienced and then reflected in his writing was mitigated by a sense of ‘metaphysical design’, a spark of spiritual light in the gloom, which Frost detected at an early age. Frost’s early mystical experience took place during his senior year at Lawrence High School, when he endeavoured deliberately to invoke feelings of despondency and despair. His youthful intentions, Thompson suggests, were to explore the nexus between hope and despair and in so doing to embark on a metaphysical journey which would ‘extend his spiritual and intellectual horizons’ (Thompson, 1967: 118) in Robert Frost: The Early Years (1874-1915).

As it happened, Rob did catch a new glimpse of the metaphysical design while in the very act of doubting, one day in the spring of his senior year. As he walked alone toward high school, troubled by problems in his own home, he puzzled over the old questions concerning whence and why misfortune is. He seriously doubted, now, whether all the griefs, sorrows, pains, and evils which had darkened his loved ones since the death of his father, could be made to fit positively into any larger design. Suddenly an answer came to him, as a flash of second sight, while he continued to walk. If our souls do come to this earth from heaven, he thought, then each must choose to come. Heroically and courageously, each must want – and must therefore choose – to be tested or tried by the ordeal of earthly existence (Thompson, 1967: 118-121).

Thompson relays this anecdote as evidence of a mystical epiphany at a formative stage in the young Frost’s development. In this moment Frost detected a ‘metaphysical design’ in which, significantly, the human is not merely a hapless victim of the indifferent will of God or fate, but a willing participant, an active agent, in life’s journey and in the process of choice and creation. The terrifying and painful experiences began to form a new kind of reality for the young Frost. As Thompson reports:

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2 The phrase ‘metaphysical design’ is used by Thompson in his explanation of the emergence of Frost’s mystical consciousness in Lawrance Thompson (1967), Robert Frost: The Early Years: 1874-1915, London: Jonathan Cape.
Reassured, for the moment, by this insight, Rob ventured further. He imagined related elements in such a metaphysical design: This ordeal could not become a valid test unless the soul, in making its departure from heaven, should agree to surrender the memory of having chosen to be tested. If, on the other hand, the memory of the choice did remain, there could be no real danger of ultimate defeat and failure; there could be no valid trial worthy of man’s spiritual and God-given capacities. These answers to his doubts were new – at least for him – and he began to search for vivid poetic images to dramatize them (Thompson, 1976: 121).

This experience establishes that Frost’s mystical consciousness grows out of periods of great suffering and darkness. Indeed, it is in the presence of the possibility of failure and defeat that spiritual evolution occurs. It is, in fact, the very precondition necessary to the soul’s development, for Frost, and in that sense darkness can no longer be exclusively the materialization of loss or resignation but must inevitably signify the conditions through which change, progress, and creation occur.

Frost’s ideas and thoughts on his early mystical experience found their best expression in his early poem ‘The Trial by Existence’ (1906) which ‘embraces the idea of human life as an ongoing pilgrimage with no certainty about any futurity’ (Faggen, 2002: 256). In a letter to his friend Louis Untermeyer in 1916, Frost adds:

The day I did ‘The Trial by Existence’ says I to myself, this is the way of all flesh. I was not much over twenty, but I was wise for my years. I knew that it was a race between me and the poet and that in me that would be flirting with entelechies or the coming of that in me (Untermeyer, 1964: 202).

Wallace Martin argues in his essay ‘Frost’s Thanatography’ (1987) that the above remark leads toward the connection the critic Paul de Man posits between ‘the birth of the imagination and consciousness of death’ which underlines a key aspect of Frost’s coming-of-age as a poet (Martin, 1987: 399). This reading suggests the vital link between poetic creation and spiritual exploration, including the exploration of positive and negative dualities. The consciousness of mortal death, for example, gives rise in this formulation to the quickening of the creative/poetic life force. Martin hints at the fact that Frost’s significant recognition as a poet did not occur until he was nearly 39 years of age, but this facilitated the emergence of his complex, dualistic aesthetic which had been developing throughout his life, with the relative anonymity of his early adulthood as an unknown poet allowing for the maturation of the aesthetic, and the metaphysical philosophy informing, in the absence of the pressures, requirements, and expectations he would later be compelled to endure as a literary celebrity.
By way of further illustration and reflection on the notion of ‘entelechy’, Henry Bergson, in *Creative Evolution*, proposes a notion which is very similar to that of entelechy - ‘*elan vital*’ - which he saw as a creative force pulsing through evolution, and responsible for the purposeful drives in all evolving organisms’ (De Quincey, 2002: 251). *Creative Evolution*, it should be noted, was among Frost’s favorite books. As Thompson reports:

Frost began reading *Creative Evolution* a few days after Christmas 1911 and he found in the book an inspiration that had its inevitable if residual effect on his poetry . . . Frost saw in the same text a basis for a new aesthetic, and his marginalia indicate a manifold influence upon his thinking about evolution and science generally, history, religious faith, and of course, poetry. Frost read the following passage, for example, in the opening chapter: ‘[e]volution implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a connection link’ (Quirk, 2001: 20-21).

1.2 The Night Light: Finding Illumination in Frost’s Darkness

The counter-reading of Frost’s dark imagery being offered here centres in particular on the vital but often overlooked, minimized, or misinterpreted nexus in Frost’s philosophy and aesthetics between darkness and light. What we might refer to in this context as ‘the night light’ is encountered in Frost’s poems and especially in such poems which critics have long regarded as the darkest of Frost’s poems. Take, for example, ‘Acquainted with the Night’ (1928):

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.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.
Most readers and critics are acquainted with ‘Acquainted with the Night’ - indeed this is one of Frost’s most frequently quoted poems. The poem describes a night-time wanderer who appears trapped in a Blakean ‘endless night’, or perhaps the sublunary travails of one of Poe’s flâneurs. The poem urgently articulates both desperation and fears that are the cause of, or caused by, the speaker’s loneliness and isolation. Frank Lentricchia goes further and interprets the figure of night as a representation of ‘the experience of annihilation’ that occurs as a result of ‘the death of God’ which brings about or leaves a feeling of dispossession and terrible aloneness (Lentricchia, 1975: 77). Adopting this assertion would pose two possible questions here: is the wanderer annihilated because of the absence of God, or has the wanderer’s annihilation engendered (or simply revealed) the absence of God? Looking only at the dark side of the poem, we can say that the experience of being acquainted with the night is the result of the absence of God or that ‘the experience of annihilation’ has resulted in the experience of being acquainted with the night. Speaking in terms of the contrasting images of dark and night, one can say that Frost portrays a wanderer who is in the dark because of the absence of light (or more specifically of God’s light), or a wanderer who is actively seeking a light due to his suffocating sense and paradigmatically Gothic sense of being trapped in darkness. Even when considering Lentricchia’s interpretation, the image of light cannot be separable from darkness.

Upon closer scrutiny we find that although Frost’s wandering night speaker is walking in darkness, he has ‘outwalked the furthest city light’ and seen ‘further still at an unearthly height /one luminary clock against the sky’. Frost here subtly insinuates the presence of light amidst the darkness of his night. Yes, the wanderer has moved beyond the boundaries of the town, beyond, symbolically, the limits of civilization, but he is not outside of time or of illumination. There is still coherence; there is still temporality (with its inevitable linkage to progress, to forward movement in time, if not space); there is still enough illumination by which to navigate. The clock, after all, is a source of light that orients the wanderer both in space (he can see where he is physically because of its illumination) and time. It is a positive sign because it gives the speaker hope that he will soon be free from his depression and sense of alienation to interact with others in society and become acquainted with the day too. Since the poet is already acquainted with the night, he finds strength in his knowledge of time by looking at the location of the moon in the sky. The presence of this clock seems to define the speaker’s destination because it brings an escape from darkness, depression and alienation. Thus, in this interchange between darkness and light is a groundedness that implies the possibility, the inevitability in fact, of some level of progress.
The movement of the poem suggests a striving for something, but something which is not explicitly articulated. This is implicitly represented by the city light and the luminary clock against the sky. These two are the sources of light in the poem as for the wanderer himself. This implies that, as much as the poem is about loneliness, isolation, and inner darkness, it is also a poem about seeking light amid the darkness. The form of the poem – its elegance and anaphora – further suggests that the poem appears to be narrated not only from the depths of the darkness but also, retrospectively, from a point of illumination. This is suggested by Frost’s tenses which locate the reader in the recent past: ‘I have been acquainted’, ‘I have walked’, ‘I have outwalked’, ‘I have looked down’, ‘I have passed by’ and ‘I have stood still’.

Much has been said about the figure of night in this poem but very little attention has been paid to its contrasting imagery of light. In his analysis of the poem, John Doyle provides a somewhat reductive explanation for why the walker of the poem is out at night, remarking that ‘he is walking for the walk, and for the chance to be alone, and for the chance to have contact with the night itself’ (cited in Maxson, 1997: 74). He concludes his discussion by remarking that ‘one line of the poem indicates that “night” represents the sadness that life has to offer, but much more important are the lines pointing to the fact that “night” symbolizes the basic isolation of man from other men and from nature’ (cited in Maxson, 1997: 74). Doyle’s interpretation ignores the dynamic interplay between darkness and light – how each requires the other for its meaning and existence. Feelings of grief, isolation and sadness are undeniably present in this poem but they are thrown into sharp relief by the possibility of transcendence, the illuminated clock signifying the simultaneous coexistence of past, present, and future.

Robert F. Fleissner in ‘Coleridge and Frost at Midnight: Telling the Time’ (1996) sheds light on Frost’s nocturnal poems in relation to the British Romantics, particularly Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In comparing ‘Acquainted with the Night’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’, Fleissner believes that Coleridge had a direct influence on Frost, and that ‘Acquainted with the Night’ ‘hardly detracts from the overall Coleridgian resonance’ (Fleissner, 1996: 45). Fleissner argues that the key image of the ‘luminary clock against the sky’ echoes the Coleridgean church tower clock in ‘Frost at Midnight’ where the two hands of the clock point straight up to the sky. He concludes that the midnight hour presents a night of revelation in Frost’s poem but without the profound mystical insights encountered in Coleridge’s verse. Fleissner adopts this reading despite his awareness of the strong evidence that ‘Frost admitted being inspired by a tower clock which he happened to notice during his walks in Ann Arbor at night-time’ (Fleissner,
1996: 50). We can see here an important interchange between lived experience and its transmutation into Frost’s dualistic metaphysics which he channels into his poetry. The nod to Coleridge is further evidence of Frost’s investment in deploying aesthetic models in his own process of metaphysical (re)creation, a mechanism of revision and reimagining in which what exists, both aesthetically and experientially, becomes the components for new creation, for a process of adaptation that engenders and reflects the new dualistic metaphysics and aesthetic.

‘Acquainted with the Night’ inspires comparison with the sonnet ‘Acceptance’ (1928). Both poems appear in Frost’s fifth collection of poetry *West-Running Brook* (1928) and both, superficially, feature isolated people trapped in circumscribed situations:

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
And goes down burning into the gulf below,
No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
At what has happened. Birds, at least must know
It is the change to darkness in the sky.
Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
One bird begins to close a faded eye;
Or overtaken too far from his nest,
Hurrying low above the grove, some waif
Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
At most he thinks or twitters softly, 'Safe!
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.

(1-14)

Based on what the speaker expresses some critics have suggested that Frost, here, expresses a fundamental acceptance of darkness. As Deirdre J. Fagan (2007) observes:

[The speaker] goes on to accept the darkness and his inability to see into the future. Indeed, he says, ‘Let what will be, be.’ This acceptance is something the speaker desires, because just letting be is not something humans can fully do (Fagan, 2007: 21).

A straightforward explanation of the poem, as suggested by its title and adopted by Fagan, does give us a hint of its meaning in the sense of accepting something, but does not state what it is, exactly, that has been accepted. The key line ‘Let the night be too dark for me to see/Into the future’ allows a space for a different meaning than that offered by Fagan in the sense that the speaker has accepted darkness only to gain enlightenment *in a different form*. Again, the complexity of Frost’s aesthetic is important here insofar as the speaker desires his vision, his light, to be limited. For the purpose of this study, this does not signify despair or the belief that
what the light would reveal of the future is intractably bleak. Rather, the limitation of the light signifies the extension of the creative potential of darkness, the expansion of creative possibility. What the light reveals must be accepted, perhaps, but in the presence of darkness there is always the possibility for a new revelation, the possibility that what will emerge into the light is different, perhaps, and potentially better than one’s expectation. The work of the darkness, indeed, creates the light, determining the quality of its revelation – and, as is inevitable in Frost’s dualism, the reverse is always already true.

1.3 The God of Good and Evil

Conventionally, of course, light and dark are not morally or spiritually neutral but are culturally encoded respectively as signifiers of good and evil. Frost appears to subscribe to this orthodox symbolism. In ‘Once by the Pacific’, for instance, darkness is equated unequivocally with evil and danger. The poem begins by describing the chaotic state of the physical surroundings caused by the ocean-water:

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
The water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent.

(1-9)

The poem then moves on to establish a relation between both physical darkness and the speaker’s own spiritual gloom:

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.

(10-14)

Signifying the evil and danger that arise from darkness, the poem calls attention to the philosophy of Manichaeism in relation to the realm of darkness and its link to the idea of evil. In Manichaeism, both realms are seen as two antithetical realms of being. Darkness is the realm of evil and light is the realm of goodness. According to the Manichaean cosmogony, the
world is originated from the mixtures of these two principles. Regarded as self-existent and eternal, the two principles of Light and Dark have and will always exist side by side but in incompatible, binaristic opposition to one another.

Richard J. Calhoun describes the poem as ‘an underrated, darkly toned sonnet’ suggesting that it ‘deserves a place among Frost’s ‘terrifying’ poems along with ‘Desert Places’ and the two poems that Lionel Trilling – and before him, Randall Jarrell – had singled out as representative of the darker Frost: ‘Design’ and ‘Neither Out Far Nor in Deep’’ (cited in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 253). Calhoun has gone so far as to argue that ‘Frost alludes to the titanic metaphysical question of God’s responsibility for evil: Is the creator who commanded “Let there be light” also the destroyer?’ (Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 254).

Maxson approached the poem’s final line in a different way:

‘Put Out the Light’ is the clue. Whether one embraces creationism or evolution, the ‘light’ is going to go out. Thus by having a conclusion that does not commit to one theory or the other, Frost stands somewhere in the middle (of ‘uncertainties. Mystery, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’) (Maxson, 1997: 68).

Maxson presents a reasonable argument, and one that contradicts Calhoun’s. Maxson’s allusion in the last line to Keats’ concept of negative capability is key here, as it signifies the capacity of the artist to operate effectively—and, indeed, perhaps more effectively—in the realm of doubt, ambiguity, and paradox. This is an aestheticizing of the abandonment of empiricism, of seeking the safe harbours of logic, predictability, and explicable, harbours which are, especially in Frost’s oeuvre, all too often nothing more than mirages. The threat in the night of ‘Once by the Pacific’ comes, not from God, but from the ocean waves. God’s seeming silence is significant here in that it may be read, legitimately, as a despairing lamentation over a deity indifferent to the suffering of His creations or, conversely, as the awestruck revelations of a wanderer coming to grips with his own agency, the scope (and limitations) of his own power, and the complexity of his primordial connections to nature, man, and deity. Such a reading speaks to Frost’s aesthetic as it foregrounds his speakers’ process of understanding the nature, scope, and integrity of the self, its metaphysical and material positionality, and its capacity as an instrument of creation and evolution.
If night symbolizes darkness and evil, then light is the corresponding image for hope, peace and God’s protection. This is an underlying message in ‘The Night Light’ (1947) in which Frost depicts a woman who:

... always had to burn a light
Beside her attic bed at night.
It gave bad dreams and broken sleep,
But helped the Lord her soul to keep.

(1-4)

What is interesting here is the dualistic property of the night light the poet describes. The night light gives ‘bad dreams’ and ‘broken sleep’ but it is also linked with the belief in the possibility of divine protection. This twofold aspect of artificial light recurs in the subsequent nocturnal poem ‘Were I in Trouble with Night Tonight’ in which a lonely character portrayed as in need of companionship, seems briefly encouraged by the fact that he is not entirely alone but becomes conscious that he is touched by the “unintimate” car light which made him feel less alone than he rightly should:

Where I could think of no thoroughfare,
Away on the mountain, up far too high,
A blinding headlight shifted glare
And began to bounce down a granite stair
Like a star, fresh-fallen out of the sky.

And I, away in my opposite wood,
Am touched by that intimate light
And made feel less alone than I rightly should
For traveller there could do me no good
Were I in trouble with night tonight.

(1-10)

Frost’s engagement with man-made lights is a feature in another nocturnal poem – ‘In the Long Night’ - in which the speaker imagines building ‘a house of crystal with a solitary friend’ from which he ‘would crawl out’ in order to ‘observe the Northern Light’:

I would build my house of crystal,
With a solitary friend,
Where the cold cracks like a pistol
And the needle stands on end.

We would pour oil on the ingle
And for want of books recite.
We would crawl out filing single
To observe the Northern Light.

Here we have a juxtaposition between the natural and the man-made, artificial lights and northern lights. Unlike traditional Romantic binaries which tend to privilege the natural and impugn the artificial, Frost situates the natural and artificial, the constructed and the created, alongside one another in a morally neutral paradigm in which the civilized, the natural, the bodily, and the spiritual conjoin to orient the individual. Each element engenders both its own darkness and its own light, and in so doing it plays a unique role in constructing and comforting the human, while simultaneously giving rise to the processes of creative evolution, to the possibility of human innovation (also symbolized by the artificial lights).

In ‘Iris by Night’ (1936) Frost offers an interesting contrast between two images:

One misty evening, one another's guide,  
We two were groping down a Malvern side  
The last wet fields and dripping hedges home.  
There came a moment of confusing lights.  
……………………………………………..  
Were seen of old at Memphis on the heights  
Before the fragments of a former sun  
Could concentrate anew and rise as one.  
Light was a paste of pigment in our eyes.  
And then there was a moon and then a scene  
So watery as to seem submarine;  
In which we two stood saturated, drowned  
……………………………………………..  
A very small moon-made prismatic bow,  
Stood closely over us through which to go.  
And then we were vouchsafed a miracle  
That never yet to other two befell  
And I alone of us have lived to tell.  
A wonder! Bow and rainbow as it bent,  
Instead of moving with us as we went.

The poem portrays two friends walking at night and puzzled by the sight of ‘confusing lights’. It begins with a dark and gloomy background, but moves from silence into motion and contemplation. This shift is also seen in adjectival selections. Frost progresses from negative adjectives suggestive of obscurity, darkness, coldness, and slipperiness - misty evening, wet fields, dripping hedges – into positive nouns - sun, moon, lights, and rainbow, suggestive of
light, vibrant warmth, and stability. The entirety of the poem refers to the portrayal of the sudden shining light of the rainbow at night, a portrayal which led Nancy Vogel (2001) to point to the Biblical resonances:

In the New Testament, miraculously, a blind man sees after the application of spittle by Christ (Mark 8: 22-26). Note the possibility of a biblical illusion in the unrhymed lines ‘Light was a paste of pigment in our eyes’ and ‘And then we were vouchsafed a miracle’ The end words in these lines are ‘eyes’ and ‘miracle’. With the revelation of Frost’s poetic form, eyes can see the beauty of the rainbow and circle hidden in the rhyme scheme of this poetic celebration of ‘elected friends’ (Vogel in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 174).

The poem moves beyond the monochrome palette of light and dark into a vibrant spectrum of faith through the presence of the prismatic rainbow colours. Iris, in Greek mythology, ‘is the personification of the rainbow that unites both Heaven and Earth’ (Fagan, 2007: 187). More significantly, the rainbow is of course a key Christian symbol of God’s promise to Man. The Old Testament parable of the Flood recounts God’s Covenant with humanity where He placed the rainbow in the sky as a sign of His promise to never again destroy the earth by flood. Based on this reading, then, the poem can also be seen as an expression of faith and as a direct reflection on the ‘miracle’ of the rainbow that should always remind us of God’s promise and mercy. It is no accident, then, that the rainbow should appear after the darkness of the storm. The presence of the darkness was essential to the manifestation—and the understanding—of the miracle.

1.4 The Darkness of Contemplation: Existential Suffering and Spiritual Darkness

Darkness per se does not always imply a physical darkness but can suggest any situation or circumstance that threatens a man’s life and which requires strength to confront and contend with. As explained earlier, while it is true that the suffering the young Frost had early in life motivated him to compose ‘The Trial by Existence’ it must also be understood that this suffering is not only personal, but, more precisely, rooted in the darkness of contemplation – that is, the inability to understand the nature and purpose of existence. ‘The Trial by Existence’ presents Frost’s earliest mystical thoughts in relation to suffering and what counts most for my purpose here is the degree to which the poet formulates a precise vision of existence in the closing stanza:
'Tis of the essence of life here,
Though we choose greatly, still to lack
The lasting memory at all clear,
That life has for us on the wrack
Nothing but what we somehow chose;
Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
In the pain that has but one close,
Bearing it crushed and mystified. 

Frost portrays life as the sum of one’s choices that ends in the pain of death with us ‘crushed and mystified’. Pain and suffering are an inevitable part of life and are an intrinsic feature of human experience. Both can be seen as requiring spirituality when our meaningful perception and understanding of life is challenged.

The twentieth century American mystic, Thomas Merton, referred to the ‘infinitely productive darkness of contemplation’ (cited in Egan, 1998: 225). Contemplation, according to Merton, required a ‘plunging into the luminous dark’ (Egan, 1998: 225). Frost engaged with contemplation to experience and express both its dark and luminous sides. The former is the result of a perceived absence of the Divine while the latter stands for the warranted belief in the immanence of a Divine power in the cosmos. This is expressed in the short poem ‘Bereft’ (1928) which dramatizes a moment of human suffering when standing in the middle of two forces: the cruelty of nature and the perceived absence of God.

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
Holding open a restive door,
Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
Summer was past and the day was past.
Sombre clouds in the west were massed.
Out on the porch's sagging floor,
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
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.

The orthodox reading of the poem sees the speaker, who suddenly finds himself alone and lonely in a house, in conflict with nature where, as Jeannette E. Riley explains, ‘the storm acts
to terrorize and mock the speaker as he stands in the doorway’ (Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 24). This, however, underestimates the significance of the closing lines - ‘Word I was in my life alone / Word I had no one left but God’ - which move a step further and express that the speaker is not only alone in the house, but also alone in his life and in this world. This implies that while he is not ignorant of God, he feels abandoned. This abandonment is what contributes to the loneliness and suffering of the soul. As St. John of the Cross explained:

Because the light and wisdom of contemplation is most pure and clear, and because the soul, within, is impure and dark, that soul which is the recipient must greatly suffer. So grievous and painful is this feeling – for the soul feels as if God has abandoned it (cited in Lewis, 1864: 382).

Critics who have contributed to the interpretation of the poem, however, express different opinions in relation to the significance of its closing lines. Some see them as ‘empty words’ offering meaningless aid whereas others, such as Jeannette E. Riley, read them ‘as a call of faith to God’ (Riley in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 24). In addition to these two different points of view, a third perspective has been provided by Robert Faggen who maintains that:

When he [the speaker] says, ‘Word I was in my life alone, / Word I have no one left but God’, it is the torment of blind faith before a terrible God. God here, as elsewhere in Frost, follows the Epicurean division of being either omnipotent but evil or else good but removed from the world, which is left to the play of an evil demiurge, the factors of change and decay implied by wind, ‘the frothy shore,’ ‘the porch’s sagging floor,’ and ‘the leaves.’ He fends off a feeling of complete emptiness and disorder only by the personification, perhaps paranoid, of unknown enemies to whom the word was out. If he has no one left but God, there is but little comfort (Faggen, 2004: 246-7).

This interpretation of the final lines leads us to view the speaker’s suffering as resulting from his ‘blind faith’. Faggen makes rhetorical use of contrasting terms such as ‘blind / faith’, ‘evil / good’ and ‘emptiness / comfort’. These opposites serve to emphasize the mystery of the speaker’s situation in the sense that they leave the reader with uncertainty in the end. This uncertainty is further strengthened by Frost’s own response to the question by the interviewer John Sherrill in 1955 about what God meant to him in this poem. As Frost explains:

People have sometimes asked me to sum up my poetry. I can’t do that. It’s the same with my feelings about God. If you would learn the way a man feels about God, don’t ask him to put a name on himself. All that is said with names is soon not enough (cited in Lathem, 1966, 148).
Here, Frost suggests a metaphysics grounded in processes of perpetual movement. The singular name, the singular definition, the singular understanding of God will never be sufficient. Some darkness will always exist and here is where the mystery of God’s nature and will reside. To grasp God fully is to become God. It is to be entirely light, which God himself is. It is a human impossibility. The insufficiency of humans’ capacity to name, articulate, or understand God, however, is, once again, the locus and driving force of the creative quest, of the desire to illuminate the darkness through perpetual seeking, through ongoing spiritual and creative evolution. Frost’s explanation above adds more tension to the poem, encouraging critics as well as readers to thoughtfully consider the poem’s elusive ending. Commenting on the closing lines of the poem, Fagan writes:

As the poem draws to its close, the ‘secret’ of the speaker is revealed: He is in his ‘life alone’ and has ‘no one left but God’. The irony of the last line is compelling. If the speaker has God left, then he should not feel so vulnerable at the whim of nature, which is controlled by God . . . Frost seems to poke fun at those who can find God in a nature that is so disagreeable (Fagan, 2007: 41).

The poem raises two intertwined issues here: the problem of human suffering and the nature of epistemology. These issues tie the poem neatly into ‘The Trial by Existence’ (1906), ‘Neither Out Far Nor in Deep’ (1936), ‘A Masque of Reason’ (1945) and ‘A Masque of Mercy’ (1947), for in each ‘the characters look far and deep into the nature of God and His actions, but also into the nature of the human condition’ (Timmerman, 2002: 76-77).

Frost’s poems about existential suffering, however, reveal individuals facing the loss of meaning and purpose; individuals who have sometimes come to doubt their religious beliefs, symbolised in selected poems by the shining light of the seemingly indifferent stars. This message is conveyed in the late verse, ‘A Question’ (1942):

A voice said, look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

(1-4)

This poem exemplifies Frost’s tendency to articulate the working out of broader spiritual questions on material and immaterial planes simultaneously. Here, we have questions of doubt and faith cast both onto the tangible bodies of stars and in the context of the light they give, light which, for this speaker, offers no illumination. This four-line poem addresses the meaning
of human suffering and pain might, at first glance, seem straightforward. But the voice here and the question it raises invite deep reading. One way of approaching the poem is in terms of the question raised: ‘If all the soul-and-body scars / Were not too much to pay for birth’. Frost here touches upon a fundamental issue in mysticism – that is, the idea of suffering and pain in the body and soul: ‘the soul-and-body-scars’. In this respect, the poem’s historical and autobiographical backgrounds are essential. Historically, the poem can be read at one level as part of Frost’s response to the Second World War which was being waged at the time of the poem’s composition. Equally important are the poet’s personal experiences prior to the publication of ‘A Question’. The poem was collected in *A Witness Tree* (1942), Frost’s seventh book of poetry. This volume was published after several painful and tragic experiences in the poet’s personal life: the death of his daughter Marjorie in 1934, the death of his wife in 1938 and the death of his son Carol in 1940. Later, in a 1956 interview, Frost characterized the poem as ‘a mood, when you sometimes wonder if it is worth it, all the pain’ (cited in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 297). In casting his spiritual darkness on the stars which, in traditional poetic iconography, signify light penetrating and relieving darkness, Frost advances his complex dualistic philosophy in which the light and the dark are inextricably bound. The stars’ light offers no vision, but in the darkness, there is still some measure of light—even if it is only in the hope and possibility of its return. The poem’s question, therefore, can also be viewed as entirely personal. It can be read in terms of Frost’s own fear, doubt and uncertainty about God’s ultimate mercy which is often alluded to in his letters and lectures. In 1974, Frost told his friend G. R. Elliot that ‘my fear of God has settled down into deep and inward fear that my best offering may not prove acceptable in His sight’ (cited in Sloan, 2003: n.p).

While this further confirms viewing the poem’s question as grounded specifically in religious dread of a God that exists, some critics, such as Elaine Barry, propose that the poem articulates a fear of a godless existence: ‘intellectually he [Frost] had even taken the step beyond the romantic awareness of personal despair to contemplate the possibility of cosmic meaninglessness’ (Barry, 1973: 101). Nevertheless, as the interview quoted above reveals, Frost never abandoned the question of life’s worth nor the quest to find meaning and purpose in it. This undermines critical efforts, such as Barry’s to ascribe to Frost a nihilistic or even atheistic ethos.

Approached from a different angle, the poem can also be read in terms of what St. John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic, refers to in ‘In an Obscure Night’ as the pain and torment that the soul experiences in a contemplative night. This figurative dark night of the soul, according
to St. John, ‘is a certain inflowing of God into the soul’ (cited in Lewis, 1864: 380). One of the pains the soul experiences in this night is, as John explains, ‘the weakness of self felt under the strength of God’ (Lewis, 1864:383). Frost in ‘A Question’ seems to imply a similar view in the sense that ‘God above’ addresses ‘men below’ which can be inferred from the first two opening lines: ‘A voice said, look me in the stars / And tell me truly, men of earth’. This gives a sense of power and sovereign authority to these lines. The inability to respond to the question raised by God’s voice - ‘If all the soul-and-body scars / Were not too much to pay for birth’ - indicates that the addressee is in a state of weakness. The most notable albeit brief interpretation of this otherwise neglected poem is offered by Deirdre Fagan who observes that:

In only four lines, the poem calls into question the very concept of being, and if it is God’s voice, then the poem also paints a picture of God not only as unknowing but also as neither powerful nor good, or perhaps as ironic to the point of cruelty. God is unknowing because he does not know what we find worthy of great pain; he does not know what it is to be men of earth and what it is to survive in spite of such pain (Fagan, 2007: 287).

Fagan’s view of God as unknowing in the poem does not seem very persuasive especially when considering the fact that the question in the poem is addressed from God to men of earth for deep contemplation and reflection. More significantly, such a description contradicts what C.S. Lewis refers to in The Problem of Pain where he sheds light, in particular, on the reason for human suffering. He saw pain and suffering as a test and trial. As Lynne Gibson further explains ‘pain and suffering was God’s way of getting people to turn to Him’ (Gibson, 2002: 54). This idea is rooted in the Bible in the story of Job ‘who is tested by suffering to see if he will continue to worship, praise and believe in God’ (Gibson, 2002: 59). Whether viewing the question as raised by God for humans to contemplate or by humans seeking an answer, it is a question that carries a certain metaphorical darkness, since no definitive answer has been given. This, however, may be read as part of Frost’s purpose here inasmuch as it is emblematic of the dualistic metaphysics driving his dark aesthetic since, viewed from the perspective of Frostian dualism, what matters is not the answer to the question. What matters is the process of asking the question in the first place.

Questioning reveals human limitations, but also simultaneously betrays a deep curiosity and the drive to understand the universe. Frost approaches this idea in ‘The Lesson for Today’ (1942):

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 undebateably dark ages.

The poem revolves around the central question raised in these opening lines: shall we simply believe and accept what others (sages) say without questioning? Or shall we challenge such thought and attitude and investigate to arrive at our very own conclusion? Keat Murray argues that Frost exemplifies here a modernist ethos, one characterized by scepticism and fraught with uncertainty (Murray, 2000: 370-384). Alternatively, we might suggest that these sages themselves are modernity’s wisemen: the scientists, the technocrats, the men of business and politics. They are no longer the poets, the shaman, or the oracle. And yet even these sages, the modern bringers of light, can offer none. Thus, Frost here puts the idea of questioning into perspective, suggesting that this is not a question that has an immediate answer. Rather, it requires turning back ‘to the world’s undebateably dark ages’. In other words, to an age where, unlike modernity, darkness does not masquerade itself—or delude itself—as light. This contemplation makes us more confused, Frost suggests, because it eschews the very source of contemplation—the spirit, the self, and the struggle to return to origins. In his ‘A Letter to the Amherst Student’ (1935) Frost writes:

The confusion that we face, that comes from our place in the world, can be pleasant, and we can ‘look out on it with an instrument’, – literally, a telescope or, figuratively, our imagination – and tackle it to reduce it to human terms (Fagan, 2007: 98).

This reverses traditional connotations—and the pessimistic critical readings of Frost’s dark aesthetic—in that Frost here valorizes the experience of being humbled as a human race, of being shocked by the awareness of one’s insignificance and ignorance. This darkness of lack of understanding in the face of eternal and vast cosmic truths set the ground for discovery and evolution, for questing and creation. We only seek the light, after all, once we realize how very much in the dark we are.

1.5 ‘Proper Enigmatical Reserve’: Doubt and Certainty in Frost

In describing his poems, Frost once claimed that they have the ‘proper enigmatical reserve’ (cited in Pack, 2003: 136). Some of Frost’s poems are designed neither to affirm faith nor to
dismiss it, but rather to place it in a ‘proper enigmatical reserve’. ‘Take Something like a Star’ (1943) is exemplary in this regard:

O Star, (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud
It will not do to say of night
Since the dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.

………………………………
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says ‘I burn’.
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
………………………………
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
……………………………………..
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

The speaker addresses a star in the sky, praying for certainty and the clearing away of the darkness to unravel the mystery of the universe. He first acknowledges the height and ‘loftiness’ of the star and its distance from the earth. And although, as he states, the dark is what brings out the star’s light and what makes it ‘the fairest one in sight’ there is still some uncertainty about the star’s continued existence.

The poem is often read as ‘a desperate desire for a response from the universe’ (Hadas, 1985: 176). This is evidenced by the star’s response which is not a satisfying one for the speaker. In just two words the star answers: ‘I burn’. This is an answer which fails to meet the speaker’s expectation: ‘It gives us strangely little aid’. Note that the speaker seeks clear explanation of the mystery of its being and not brief and incomprehensible words. He uses direct imperatives that occur in the form of both imperatives and questions: ‘Say something’, ‘say with what degree of heat’, ‘Talk Fahrenheit’, ‘Talk Centigrade’, ‘Use language we can comprehend’ and ‘Tell us what elements you blend’. These are questions in the form of directive utterances – and the language of scientific reason - which are meant to force the star toward an empirically satisfying response.
The speaker is in spiritual darkness and Frost’s use of the phrase ‘obscurity of cloud’ further affirms this dis-location with its allusion to a significant work of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing* which was written in middle English around 1370. The text, whose author remains unknown, was written as a guide to contemplative prayer and ‘is an exposition of spiritual exercise as a way of apprehending the total incomprehensibility of God’ (Flood, 2012: 85) The cloud in the title, as Flood explains, places ‘emphasis on the darkness of God and ineffability’ (Flood, 2012: 85). Similarly, Frost places emphasis on the relationship between the dark night and the dark soul, which indicate the ultimate incomprehensibility of such things as ‘the star’ which in this instance metonymically represents God or His existence.

The poem can also be viewed from another perspective which reads the stars as the light of heaven. The two-word answer the star tells us ‘in the end’ (‘I burn’) is significant and carries the implication of the star’s shining quality and its interdependence on the obsidian firmament. Rajenda Mishra elaborates: ‘here “star” is used as a heavenly model. It represents light, patience and all good qualities. . . A star offers light. To see the light of a star, darkness is needed. In a dark surrounding one can see light’ (Mishra, 1992: 76). However, the ‘burning’ adds an important valence because this is an illumination that does not come without pain or self-destruction. Indeed, illumination depends upon both of these. Thus, both beauty and enlightenment require the conflagration, the suffering and self-immolation, the loss of who one is and what one knows in order to shrink the darkness with new light.

Although it foregrounds ‘incomprehensibility’ there are hints which suggest that the poem is not essentially about the star. Rather it is about ‘something like a star’. ‘O Star’ in the very first line invokes the traditional way of addressing God in prayer, or might direct us to the symbol of the star in the New Testament which the Wise Men were instructed to follow and beneath which, in Bethlehem, lay the new-born Saviour. It is also significant to mention that the poem appeared as ‘Take Something like a Star’ in *Selected Poems* (1962), where the word ‘choose’ in the final line was also changed to ‘take’ (Fagan, 2007: 63). Whether it is ‘choose’ or ‘take’ both words suggest selecting something from a number of alternatives. In his talk ‘On Extravagance’, published posthumously, Frost introduces the poem, and then elaborates on what the star in the poem means: ‘By that star I mean the Arabian Nights, or Catullus or something in the Bible or something way off or something way off in the woods’ (cited in Fagan, 2007: 46). Frost here does not give a direct answer as to what the star precisely signifies. Rather, he toys with the ‘points’ of the star by suggesting various vectors of possibility. Indeed,
on another occasion, Frost commented on the poem saying that he ‘mingle[d] science and spirit’ (cited in Fagan, 2007: 63). Again, Frost is in punning mode because this refers both to human and also Holy Spirit. Harold Bloom points out that Frost was ‘one of the geniuses of a particularly dark irony, in which you do not so much say one thing while meaning another, but the meaning itself doubles back and undoes the one thing’ (cited in Little, 2010: 62) Frost seemed to resist giving straightforward answers and could even be rather mischievous at times. At the same time he seemed to hint at the possibility of hovering on the threshold of revelation and a grand design. In his interview with the novelist Mark Harris in the summer of 1961, Frost said that his work ‘is a vast symbolic structure’ and that ‘[he] is always saying something that is just the edge of something more’ (cited in Burnshaw, 1986: 298) This applies to ‘Take something like a Star’. The meaning of the star as represented in the Bible is one of the possibilities Frost mentions. The Bible refers to the height of the stars and their distance from the earth: ‘Is not God in the highest of heaven? And see how lofty are the highest stars!’ (Job: 22:12) (cited in Douglas & Tenney, 2001: 135). The great height of the stars is also referred to in Isaiah (14:13): ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God’ (Douglas & Tenney, 2001: 135). However, besides their literal meaning in the Bible, stars possess other interpretative possibilities. Among hundreds of biblical references to stars, they are represented as ‘a symbol of God’s prodigality and of any other limitless number: “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them” (Gen. 15:5)’ (cited in Bromiley, 1979: 347). What is significant here is that in all these references from the Bible, stars are associated with God who is, as we have seen previously, undefinable, subject to linguistic classification and some measure of human understanding, but also infinitely beyond the capacity of either language or human understanding to contain Him fully. The inability or refusal to identify the star also aligns with the imagery of burning, of the destruction of the discrete self. The star is an entity separate and alone, consuming itself in its own fire, simultaneously beautiful and annihilating, illuminating and devouring, the source of its illumination, a vital light plunging toward the darkness of death. To truly shed light, the star must never be consigned to simply being one static and wholly known thing. It must be light and fire, gas and chemical reaction, present and absent, near and far, burning and already extinguished. The star, then, signifies what in poststructuralist parlance would be referred to as a Transcendental Signified which is ultimately and forever beyond human signification.

The engagement with the heavens in Frost’s verse can thus be viewed from two different sides: the light and the dark. The former entails the contemplation of the cosmos in
which a higher power resides while the latter indicates a state of spiritual darkness. A pair of short poems quite different in tone crystallises this paradoxical spiritual dynamic in Frost: ‘Lost in Heaven’ (1936) and ‘On Looking up by Chance on Constellations’ (1928). In the former, Frost reflects on the limitations of human understanding of the spiritual realm:

The clouds, the source of rain, one stormy night
Offered an opening to the source of dew,
Which I accepted with impatient sight,
Looking for my old sky-marks in the blue

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.
So ’twas with not ungrateful consternation,

Seeing myself well lost once more, I sighed
‘Where, where in heaven am I? But don’t tell me’,
I warned the clouds, ‘by opening me wide!
Let’s let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me’.

In the latter, the act of heaven-gazing occurs ‘by chance’ and initiates a spiritual process of contemplating the metaphysical design of the cosmos:

You’ll wait a long, long time for anything much
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.
The sun and moon get crossed, but they never touch,
Nor strike out fire from each other, nor crash out loud.
The planets seem to interfere in their curves,
But nothing ever happens, no harm is done.
We may as well go patiently on with our life,
And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun.

Towards the end of the poem Frost suggests that the operation of the divine cosmos, the orderly flow of the God-ordained universe will move in its ordained fashion, even without the intervention, or the witnessing, of the human.

Still it wouldn’t reward the watcher to stay awake
In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
On his particular time and personal sight.
That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.
This bears comparison to the early work ‘God’s Garden’ (1890) where in the final third stanza Frost writes:

Look upward to the glitter
Of stars in God's clear skies.
Their ways are pure and harmless
And will not lead astray,
Bid aid your erring footsteps
To keep the narrow way.
And when the sun shines brightly
Tend flowers that God has given
And keep the pathway open
That leads you on to heaven.

(27-36)

Taken together, these poems can be seen as an elaboration on Emerson’s two-line poem ‘The Heavens’ in which he wrote: ‘Wisp and meteor nightly falling, / But the Stars of God remain’ (cited in Orth, 1986: 343). Taken literally, Emerson’s ‘the Stars of God’ symbolize the heavenly realm and the word ‘remain’ is a comment on the continuous state of order. Likewise, Frost’s speaker in ‘On Looking up by Chance on Constellations’ stresses that ‘the hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break’ are not going to be fulfilled because of the distinguishing of the realm of heaven and ordering of its parts. In ‘God’s Garden’ the stars act as a spiritual guidance that ‘will not lead astray’ (Hass, 2002: 90). These words can be seen as reflecting a sense of certainty and a state of calmness and heavenly order.

As we have seen, a significant feature of Frost’s nocturnal poems is that his night speakers are usually depicted looking skyward. In ‘A Star in a Stone-Boat’ (1923), for instance, Frost affirms: ‘From following walls I never lift my eyes / Except at night to places in the sky / Where showers of charted meteors let fly’. Similarly, in ‘Bravado’ (1947), a four-line poem, Frost writes:

Have I not walked without an upward look
Of caution under stars that very well
Might have missed me when they shot and fell?
It was a risk I had to take – and I took.

(1-4)

In ‘Afterflakes’ (1936) Frost sheds light on this experience from a different perspective:

In the thick of a teeming snowfall
I saw my shadow on snow.
I turned and looked back up at the sky,
Where we still look to ask the why
Of everything below.                        (1-5)

These last three lines of the first stanza are the very essence of the poem and the compass to Frost’s cartography. The speaker gazes towards the sky questioning as though expecting an answer from that vastness. The idea of juxtaposing skyward looking with questioning is explicitly expressed in one of Frost’s earliest poems ‘Love and a Question’ (1913), when ‘a stranger came to the door at eve’ and ‘asked for a shelter for the night’ and the bridegroom’s answer was: ‘Let us look at the sky / And question what of the night to be’. In the following two stanzas, the relationship between darkness (his shadow) and light (sunshine) becomes clearer:

If I shed such a darkness,
If the reason was in me,
That shadow of mine should show in form
Against the shapeless shadow of storm,
How swarthy I must be.

I turned and looked back upward.
The whole sky was blue;
And the thick flakes floating at a pause
Were but frost knots on an airy gauze,
With the sun shining through. (5-14)

One of the most detailed commentaries on this poem, however, is offered by Hadas in her chapter ‘Stars and Light’ and in which she explains that:

The sky-watcher here looks up as far and deep as he can to discover a reason for darkness – a reason that turns out to be ‘in him’. Through the prism of self, his sense of the world reverses itself between the first and third stanzas. The action of the poem is a floundering search for a centre of awareness from which to launch the processes of perception. Is the world heliocentric or anthropocentric? Where are we to look for the explanation of what we perceive; and how far (or deep) can we perceive at all? (Hadas, 1985: 166).

Hadas suggests that the poem articulates philosophical questioning rather than providing religious answers, presenting the limits of both looking and vision. She considers this poem one of ‘Frost’s most trenchant poems about the universe, however, it never quite arrives at the point of contemplating a cosmic dialectic’ (Hadas, 1985: 167).
The poem epitomizes the darkness of the soul and can be considered as an ‘afterflake’ of Transcendentalism – specifically as a dialogue with Emerson’s ‘The Snowstorm’ (1835) which describes the majestic arrival of a snowstorm, leaving

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{When the sun appears, astonished Art} \\
& \text{To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,} \\
& \text{Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,} \\
& \text{The frolic architecture of the snow.}
\end{align*}
\]

(cited in Frank, 2015: 40)

This vision of the white landscape as a magnificent architectural work of art challenges human structures which are built across ages. Emerson here hints at a contrast between the material or the man-made world (exemplified in ‘slow structures’, ‘stone by stone’ and ‘Built in an age’) and the natural, or the spiritual world, (exemplified in ‘astonished Art’, ‘the mad wind’s night-work’ and ‘The frolic architecture of the snow’) articulating his transcendental philosophy of the presence of a higher power. If not identical, Frost’s poem carries at the very least similar implications to Emerson’s. During ‘[t]he thick of a teeming snowfall’, the speaker falls into a contemplative mood and considers his soul and its relation to a higher power. He draws a link between his own shadow on earth and its relation to heaven, questioning ‘the why of everything below’ and suggesting recognition of something greater than himself. This can be further analysed based on what Walter Terence Stace’s Mysticism and Philosophy (1960) calls ‘extrovertive mysticism’ in which a mystic ‘perceives a new relationship – one of unity, reality, between the external world and the self’ (cited in Forman, 1999 :6). Jerome Gellman adds to this definition by elaborating on the meanings of extrovertive experience:

There are, then, mystical extrovertive experiences, as in one’s mystical consciousness of the unity of nature overlaid onto one’s sense perception of the world, as well as non-unitive numinous extrovertive experiences, as when experiencing God’s presence when gazing at a snowflake (Gellman, 2014: n.p).

The appearance of the shadow in ‘Afterflakes’ led the speaker to draw a relationship between himself and a higher power by looking up at the sky to discover a reason. Having considered the possibility of the reason for the shadow as ‘in him’, the speaker turns and looks back upward again, but this time ‘[w]ith the sun shining through’. These contemplative gazes can be referred to, in the light of Stace’s description of nature mysticism as ‘dim feeling[s] or sense of a presence’ of a higher power in nature beyond the physical realm. Despite the darkness surrounding him and the darkness in him, his sense of awareness of a higher power guides him to where he must look for an explanation. This type of experience refers us back to
transcendentalist echoes where Frost’s ‘Afterflakes’ not only hints at the relationship between earth and sky, but also suggests that answers belong to a realm beyond this physical world and thus beyond the grasp of human thinking.

The poem might, of course, be simply read as a nature poem. Frost says we still look to the sky for answers with a rather weary and perhaps sardonic tone. Maybe he stops looking for answers and simply enjoys the sunshine and the snowflakes. This possibility would take us back to the idea of ‘reserve’ and ambiguity in Frost’s poetry as the poet sets up a series of pathways carefully designed to permit approaches to the poem from various directions and perspectives. His self-punning on ‘frost knots’ in the closing lines calls attention to the Greek legend of the Gordian Knot which originally referred to an intricate knot tied by Gordium which was finally cut by Alexander the Great with a sword. The Gordian Knot has also been used as a metaphor for any complicated problems that require deep thinking to solve. In doing so, one can say that the poem suggests the difficulties involved in understanding or attempting to solve the mystery of the shadow.

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that Frost’s spiritual and philosophical position is more complex and less certain than it has sometimes been assumed in contemporary criticism. Informed by the tragedies that inflected Frost’s young adult life, the dualistic metaphysics which are the foundation of the poet’s nocturnal images and dark motifs, signify a laborious process of working through pain, the difficult but inevitable work that, for Frost, is common to all humanity. This is the confrontation of spirit and matter which is the fabric of the human condition.

Darkness, within Frost’s oeuvre, is imbricated with a host of simultaneously interconnected and endlessly evolving meanings. On the one hand, darkness is associated with positionality and the effort to orient the individual in the presence of Stygian darkness. This is an instructive darkness, a darkness in which the individual learns to recognize and submit to the scope of his own limitations. It is precisely at this point of directionlessness that, Frost suggests, the individual begins to be found, begins to become properly oriented, toward himself, his fellow man, toward God, time, and spirit. This affirms the dualism at the centre of Frost’s poetics in that the night imagery which signifies a blinding disorientation, a wandering
in the darkness, also always already implies the co-presence of its opposite: the clarity that settles, defines, and directs.

At the root of this poetics of disorientation, of the wayward darkness, is, for Frost, the endeavour to discover the nature of God and spirit, an attempt to ascertain the quality of the human’s relationship to the eternal. Darkness within this context signifies, for Frost, the inevitable mystery of God, the humbling acknowledgement that there is that in the divine which is forever beyond the human capacity to comprehend, honour, or articulate. This is a recognition of the magnitude of man’s inevitable blindness in the face of the transcendent.

Yet, as has been shown, such a recognition of the benighted state of the human simultaneously signifies the inevitability of enlightenment, illuminating the quest on which man has embarked in his effort to dispel the darkness and in so doing elevating him to the next stage of spiritual development. Again, it is in this nexus of opposing forces, co-existing in tension, that creative evolution and spiritual progress occur, according to Frost’s dualistic metaphysics. Here, then, man’s discovery of his darkness, his blindness, in the face of God and the eternal is at the same time the shining of a light on his spiritual yearning and on the path forward to greater illumination.

This robust dualistic aesthetic imbricates Frost’s dark imagery, as has been discussed, in a potent web of signification that eschews easy binaries, a web in which contradictions not only coexist but also necessitate one another. Thus, at its heart, Frost’s dark poetics are galvanized by an aesthetic in which darkness operates as a locus of extreme potentiality, of unbounded creative possibility. Darkness in the oeuvre both necessitates and predicates the light, but the individual must orient himself appropriately, must evolve, must change, must innovate, in order to see it. This is the work of humanity and society in general and of poets in particular, as we seek to see and to speak the light on the other side of darkness.
Chapter Two

In the Cathedral of the Frost:
Frost and the Woods

‘I’d Rather be Lost in the Woods/Than Found in Church’

(Frost, ‘The Masque of Mercy’, 1947)

This chapter moves away from Frost’s fascination with the skyscape, the Heavens and the interplays of darkness and light to explore a different setting: the forest. The forest in the poet’s corpus is a locus of spiritual struggle and evolution, the site of the contest between belief and disbelief, between mortality and immortality, between the material and the immaterial. This chapter will examine the complex and amorphous functions of the forest in Frost’s work by centering first upon the poet’s engagement with traditional orientations toward trees and woodlands as exemplified first, in Native American mythologies and cultures, as well as in the ideological and cultural paradigms of North America’s European settlers and their descendants. This will lead to a discussion of 19th century American Transcendentalism and its significant contribution to Frost’s forest poetics. The connections between Transcendentalism and its European predecessor, Romanticism, will be assessed in the subsequent section. These analyses will serve as a preamble to the culminating and central focus of this chapter, which asserts that woodland imagery in Frost’s oeuvre both exemplifies and activates a dialectic which is at the core of a complex metaphysic, one predicated, as we have seen in the previous chapter, on the meeting of opposing forces: the junction of spirit and matter, the conjoining of hope and despair, and the simultaneity of annihilation and creation, of death and rebirth.

This chapter features close readings of a host of Frost’s major and minor works, poems which span the writer’s career, in an effort not merely to chart the evolution of his aesthetic but also to exemplify the scope and the persistence of Frost’s philosophical and spiritual investments. For Frost, poetry is not simply a matter of art nor of work. It is, rather, a meditation, both spiritual and pragmatic, a mechanism of ‘sorting through’ the verities of human life. Fraser explains the connection between Frost’s poetry and a sort of imagistic meditateness at play here:
[Frost’s] best poetry invades us viscerally, a hymn in the throat or tune caught in the ear. Ideas, the kind that flicker visibly like swamp fire, are absent. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, he said ‘a poem positively must not begin thought first’. A subject had to be an object, and he sought to hold the object ‘clear outside of me with struts’. He was explaining himself to an academic colleague, who, like the most of them, preferred his thinking neat. Frost's is fortified with images, his nearest way to truth (Fraser, 1998: 52).

Perhaps nowhere is the significance of images as a mechanism for contemplation more evident than in Frost’s woodland imagery. A passage from Frost’s ‘On a Tree Fallen Across the Road’ is illustrative of this:

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey’s end for good
But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so
She likes to halt us in our runner tracks
And make us get down in a foot of snow
Debating what to do without an ax.

Here, woodland imagery does not simply invite meditation; it requires it. The fallen tree here signifies not the denial of progress but its slowing, a temporary stay of forward momentum. Faced with the irrefutable materiality of the fallen tree, its impassive tangibility, the travellers must think—above all, they must reevaluate themselves and the material conditions of their existence. They must consider themselves in relation to the tree, the path, and their own journey, including, and perhaps most important, assessing their own conscious and subconscious beliefs as to the importance and the significance of that journey. The fallen tree demands that the travellers reconsider ‘who [they] think [they] are’, especially in confronting the tree without the instrument of man’s dominion over the forest: the ax.

This preliminary glimpse into Frost’s forest aesthetics, then, signifies a premise to be advanced, extrapolated, and argued in contradistinction to prevailing critical assessments of Frost’s poetry as a corpus of despair. The speaker’s insistence that the fallen tree will only stall the traveller’s journey for a while lies at the crux of this chapter’s argument. Contrary to more nihilistic critical interpretations of Frost’s work, forest imagery functions not to deny the possibility of or opportunity for progress; it is not to serve as a labyrinth of entangling weeds, blocked and overgrown pathways, and imprisoning bars of trunk and bark stretching as far as the eye can see. The forest, for Frost, is occasion, opportunity, and encounter. It is that through
which man meets himself and his universe. The introductions are not always entirely kind; the visitation is not always entirely pleasant. There are hard truths lurking amid the hardwoods and for Frost, it takes a strong man to stand tall while dwarfed amidst an infinity of towering, ancient oaks. This, however, is the function of the forest in Frost’s oeuvre. It is an encounter between wood and flesh, between leaf and limb. The meeting may be bracing; it may chasten and wound, but the severe welcome of the forest in Frost is the welcome of a wise and wizened mentor, one who does not suffer fools but whose cruelty is kindness. This ethos is perfectly illustrated by Frost in his ‘Leaves Compared with Flowers’:

I bade men tell me which in brief,
Which is fairer, flower or leaf.
They did not have the wit to say,
Leaves by night and flowers by day.
Leaves and bar, leaves and bark,
To lean against and hear in the dark.
Petals I may have once pursued.
Leaves are all my darker mood.

This chapter will analyse the complexities, ambiguities, and seeming contradictions (which are, in fact, a manifestation of an agile and dialectical aesthetic) of Frost’s forest imagery and its amenability to the poet’s ‘darker moods’. These moods, like the majestic and sometimes melancholy, the meandering and the miraculous woods are as essential and precious a facet of human experience as are life’s vibrant petals of joy and perhaps even more instructive. Forest imagery in Frost, then, signifies a robust maturity, a recognition of life’s contradictions and its disappointments, and of the capacity to find peace, meaning, and the quieter contentment of experience not simply in spite of life’s sufferings and confusion, but because of and through them. Frost’s tree-packed forests, with their storm-tossed limbs, ice-coated branches, and mammoth, immovable trunks, signify hard realities that bar, redirect, disorient, and dwarf the human. They are the entangling vines and obstructive branches of love and loss, of desire and its frustrations, which simultaneously lay the individual low and lift him high, a sort of finishing school of the human soul, spirit, and psyche.

2.1 Native Traditions and New England Transcendentalism: Re-envisioning the American Forest

Frost’s fascination with the forests echoes, advances and interrogates a long North American tradition aligning its peoples with the vast woodlands amid which they dwelt. MacCleery
argues that ‘American forests and the wilderness they represented . . . played an important role in
the identity of the nation’ yet the cultural resonance of the American forest predates the birth of
the nation itself (MacCleery, 1993: 3). In addition to their myriad utilitarian purposes, for
Native Americans, the forest and the products to be derived from them occupied a central
position in the diverse indigenous cultures. They relied heavily on the products of the forest in
their personal daily life. They depended on wood products to keep them warm in cold climates
and to cook their food. The leaves of certain types of trees, notably the White Pine and its
varieties, were also used for medicinal and healing purposes.

Many Native American tribes subscribed to animistic beliefs which posited the
existence of nonhuman spirits inherent in the natural world around them. They believed, for
example, in spirits known as Thunder Beings who were responsible for inclement weather.
They talked to the stars, the moon, the rivers, the plants, the animals and the trees around them.
Trees, in particular, held special significance for Native Americans, with specific species
granted particular totemistic powers and privilege for particular tribes. Contact with these trees
strengthened the communal relationship with forests in general and, more particularly, with the
potent and plentiful spirits inhabiting them. The significance of trees is evidenced by the
monumental sculptures, known as totem poles, typically carved from the trunks of cedar trees.
Totem Poles contained figures and symbols that represented part of the culture of the tribe.

Between the middle of the 1600s and 1730s significant changes were inflicted on
the wildness of the New World by the arrival of early European colonists. Lumber was plentiful
and had a myriad of purposes in the settlers’ daily lives, from serving as a source of heat to
providing sturdy shelter against the elements. Timber, lumber, and other wood products were
also used as the primary material for building houses, fences, barns, bridges, locks and dams.
Wood was also one of the first exports from the New World. Exports of forest products
become a growing business, upon which the colonists depended heavily.

These wood products were not only essential to rural economics, but also to
transportation, industry and the development of larger settlements in towns and cities. In New
England, large areas were cleared of trees for crops and acres around villages were burned
periodically for various purposes such as travel, pest reduction, and crop productivity. Forests
continued to be socioeconomically significant for centuries after initial settlement. In his visit
to the new American Republic in 1796, a French naturalist observed that ‘the most striking
feature [of the country] is an almost universal forest starting at the Atlantic and thickening and
enlarging to the heart of the country’ adding that he ‘scarcely passed, for three miles together through a tract of unwooded or cleared land’ (cited in MacCleery, 1993: 4) In the late 1700s wood was the energy source for virtually all of the energy consumed in the country.

Beyond meeting domestic needs, wood was also critical for the production of iron, with virtually all iron produced throughout the 18th century in America derived from charcoal wood. In the 1800s most Americans were sustenance farmers and forests were typically looked upon as an obstacle to the agricultural development of the land. As a result, extensive programs of forest clearing, tree removal and wood cutting were conducted to facilitate the expansion of farming between 1850 and 1910. As the process of clearing forests continued, a range of wildlife species witnessed a dramatic decline during the 19th century (MacCleery, 1993: 22).

In the 19th century, growing concerns about the future of forests and damage to the beauty of the American landscape contributed to increased awareness of the need to protect and preserve. The change, which began as a call for forest conservation, emerged during the period between the 1830s and 1860s, figuring heavily in the writings and public speeches of the literary, philosophical, political and spiritual movement known as Transcendentalism. Emerson and Thoreau, the leading figures of the movement, insisted on the sublime aesthetic and spiritual values of nature. This was in part a rebellion against the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ increasing industrialization, materialism, and the economic and utilitarian imperatives of Jacksonian America. The attitude toward nature shifted as American society changed from a rural and agrarian economy to an increasingly urban and industrialized nation. Forests and woods were made available to Americans for exploitation and consumption. Most Americans at that time saw forests as source of fuel; trees were treated simply as raw materials that could be used, exploited and turned into money. All of this expansion put pressure on the woodland homes of American Indians.

The Transcendentalists refused the idea of nature as mere landscaping material that could only be owned for commercial purposes. Transcendentalism shared aspects of the Native American optic which divined a sacred spirit within the natural world. Emerson’s seminal essay ‘Nature’ (1836) encouraged and called for a profound shift in American attitudes toward nature. Emerson writes, ‘[i]n the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets and villages’ (cited in Elder & Nason, 1991: 8-9). The wilderness is a space within which, as Emerson puts it, ‘we also enjoy an original relation to the universe’ (Stocking, 2010: 77). The world of woods as portrayed in Emerson’s writings is always the transcendental
setting for a spiritual quest and the location in which ‘we return to reason and faith’ (Emerson, 1991: 8). Emerson chose to view the woods as a place of self-realization and reconnection with divinity as well as a setting for the reaffirmation of faith. Trees are also often a source of sustenance and delight for Emerson. In ‘The Garden’ (1866), for example:

Many things the garden shows,
And pleased I stray
From tree to tree
Watching the white pear-bloom.

(Emerson, 1954: 343)

In an earlier poem entitled ‘The River’ (1826), Emerson sheds light on the sound of trees and how it affects humans’ inner states, thoughts, emotions and feelings. In describing the Transcendentalist relation to nature in his six long poems entitled ‘Woodnotes’ (1840-1841), Emerson uses the pine tree as the primary symbol.

Henry David Thoreau decided to approach the significance of wilderness differently from Emerson. He chose a long voyage of exploration, of physical and spiritual discovery of nature which eventually was represented in his seminal work *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* (1854). This book documents Thoreau’s journey in nature where he decided to live alone in the woods. It details his two-year inspiring experiences in a cabin in the woods at Walden Pond in Concord. As part of his effort to educate the public about the significance of forests and the use and loss of trees, Thoreau delivered a lecture entitled ‘The Succession of Forest Trees’ (1860) focusing on the history of the American forests and how to respect and preserve the landscape. In 1844 Thoreau accidentally started a major forest fire, resulting in the loss of about 300 acres of the Concord woods near Walden Pond. This was a traumatic incident in the history of Concord and the life of Thoreau. He was mockingly nicknamed ‘Woodburner’. Describing later how the sound of the burning trees affected him, Thoreau writes: ‘I heard from time to time the dying strain, the last sigh, and the fine, clear, shrill scream of agony, as it were, of the trees breathing their last, probably the heated air or the steam escaping from some chick’ (Thoreau, 2007: 57). Notwithstanding this unfortunate single incident in the life of Thoreau, his writings and actions reveal his sensitivity to the beauty of nature. Like Emerson, Thoreau devotes considerable attention to the wilderness surrounding him, the fading of leaves, the sound of trees and above all the tremendous positive impact of the wilderness on the human mind and spirit. Thoreau’s ‘Ktaadn’ (1848), an account of his visit to the Maine Woods in 1846, describes the effects of his encounter with the Maine wilderness:
What is most striking in the Maine wilderness is the continuousness of the forest . . . It is a country full of evergreen trees, of mossy silver birches and watery maples, the ground dotted with insipid, small, red berries, and strewn with damp and moss-grown rocks. Who shall describe the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest . . . where the moss-grown and decaying trees are not old, but seem to enjoy a perpetual youth; and blissful, innocent Nature, like a serene infant, is too happy to make a noise . . . What a place to live, and what a place to die and be buried in! (Thoreau, 1973: 80-82).

In his poetic effort to pattern that experience, Thoreau writes:

Die and be buried who will,
I mean to live here still;
My nature grows ever more young
The primitive pines among.

(Thoreau, 1873: 82)

Elsewhere in his writings Thoreau confirms the spiritual significance of trees because they both literally and figuratively possess special healing properties. ‘It is the living spirit of the tree with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts’ (Thoreau, 1973: 125). The physical and spiritual characteristics of trees also appear in ‘Autumnal Tints’ (1862) in which Thoreau reflects on the changes in colours and shades that leaves undergo from green to brown as both ‘teachers’ and ‘preachers’; the green leaves teach about life while the brown leaves are preachers of death (Wayne, 2006: 18).

Walt Whitman, like Emerson and Thoreau, recognized the intrinsic value of nature at a time when the country was experiencing the rapid growth of commerce and utilitarianism within farming and industry. In ‘Give me the Splendid Silent Sun’ (1865), Whitman describes the wild American landscape as a place of solitude and spiritual renewal:

Give me solitude, give me Nature, give me again O Nature your primal sanities!

Keep your woods O Nature, and the quiet places by the woods,
Keep your fields of clover and timothy, and your corn-fields and your orchards.

(Whitman, 2010: 81).

The poem offers instances of peaceful co-existence with Nature ‘away from the noise of the world’. Whitman opened a new approach to the contemplation of Nature in his poetry and vehemently believed in the sensual and at times intensely erotic unity of Man and the natural world. In his earlier poems, notably ‘Leaves of Grass’ (1855), Whitman praises and presents ‘Nature and Man working together toward the building of America’ (Oliver, 2006: 199). The
soul of Nature or the wood-spirits of Redwood in ‘Song of the Redwood-Tree’ (1874), for instance, realize the value of giving up trees for the sake of building the future of America.

Frost’s conceptualization and representation of the monumental forests of New England may be seen to derive from and pay homage to the potent legacy handed down to the 20th century farmer-poet from the forest’s first occupants. Indeed, in his analysis of Frost’s ambivalent nationalism and, especially, of the tension between the work of memory and forgetting as it relates to the US government’s treatment of the natives, Jeff Westover cites Frost’s letter to a friend, Sidney Cox, in which he asserts that ‘one of his passions in boyhood was angry sympathy with the American Indians’ (Westover, 2004: 216). Frost’s work as an adult would be replete with meditations on the essential nature of nationalism and the mandate for the construction of a discrete American identity, but, as Westover argues, such injunctions, for Frost, are always undergirded with the grim remembrance of the atrocities perpetrated against the Natives in the forging of a new empire, the blood of the vanquished nourishing the new successor. Herein lies the first suggestion of the complex ambiguity of Frost’s forest imagery insofar as it is aligned not merely with the Native Americans and the cultural valences ascribed by them to the forests, but also in Frost’s tendency to align the American Indian symbolically with the animistic forest itself, particularly in the context of the Native peoples’ decimation at the hands of the Euro-Americans. Westover expands on this point in his analysis of one of Frost’s early, unpublished works, the 1908 poem, ‘Genealogical’, in which the poet writes of an infamous ancestor, ‘in his greatness of heart he aspired/To wipe out the whole of an Indian tribe to order,/As in those extravagant days they wasted the woods/With fire to clear the land for tillage’ (cited in Westover, 2004: 217). Westover argues that the passage ‘subtly implies a connection between the cutting down of trees and the cutting down of men’ (cited in Westover, 2004: 217). However, for the purposes of this analysis, what is most salient here is the robust metaphysics emerging even at this early point in Frost’s oeuvre which align the forests not only with their original inhabitants and the cultural investments of the natives, but also with the challenging dialectic at work in the act of memorializing and simultaneous forgetting, and in the conjunction of annihilation and triumph—the inextricable bonds between conqueror and the conquered.

In addition to the cultural investments of indigenous peoples, Frost’s forest imagery is also profoundly influenced by the nineteenth century Transcendentalist writers, principally Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Frost’s indebtedness to the Transcendentalist ethos is
particularly resonant in regard to his deployment of forest imagery. Frost’s short poem ‘Beech’ typifies his Transcendentalist orientations:

Where my imaginary line  
Bends square in woods, an iron spine  
And pile of real rocks have been founded.  
And off this corner in the wild,  
Where these are driven in and piled,  
One tree, by being deeply wounded,  
Has been impressed as Witness Tree  
And made commit to memory  
My proof of being not unbounded.  
This truth’s established and borne out,  
Though circumstanced with dark and doubt—  
Though by a world of doubt surrounded.

(1-12)

There is much to unpack in this short but powerful work, quoted here in its entirety. Foremost, what is evident is the juxtaposition between nature and culture, a tension preeminent in the Transcendentalist ethos. The opening lines suggest an effort to demarcate the woodlands, to impose imaginary boundary lines and to harness the physicality of the forest in the enforcement of these lines (i.e. through the ‘pile of real rocks’ and ‘iron spine’, which may perhaps suggest a surveyor’s marker or the fragments of a signpost).

Significantly, however, the symmetry of the square of the imagined boundary-line is disrupted by the physicality of the woods itself which ‘bends the square’. The text echoes in milder form the sobering and sublime vision of Frost’s literary ancestor, Thoreau, as the latter describes his revelatory journey to Mt. Ktaadn. In her analysis of the poet’s fateful trip, Laura D. Walls presents telling excerpts from Thoreau’s unpublished journal:

Coming down the Mt perhaps I first most fully realized that...this was the unhanselled and ancient Demonic Nature, natura, or whatever man has named it. The nature primitive-powerful gigantic aweful [sic] and beautiful, untamed forever. We were passing over burnt lands with occasional strips of lumber crossing it (cited in Walls, 1995: 112).

The same powerful force, Demonic Nature, which burns the land and fells the lumber on Thoreau’s Ktaadn also bends Frost’s imagined square. Further, it is the force and immortality of the natural world, in this instance, of Frost’s forest, which compels the speaker to designate one of the neighbouring trees a ‘Witness Tree’, owing to its having been ‘deeply wounded’. The speaker affiliates himself with the wounded tree, presumably sensing an identity between
them in this, while also paying homage to the greater power of the tree. It possesses both the capacity and the authority to bear witness, an onus the mortal and mutable human cannot bear. Indeed, it is the human’s ‘proof of being not unbounded’ to which the tree must bear witness. The double negative is significant here. The structure of the sentence seems to efface its true meaning even in the process of declaring it: the phrase, ‘not unbounded’, syntactically, buries the negation. Both the ‘not’ and the negative prefix ‘un-’ are easy to gloss in reading, the true meaning difficult initially to register. What is at play in this sentence is the suggestion of a human freedom that is, in fact, an illusion, and the tree, wounded like the man it affirms but far more enduring, bears witness to the boundedness of the human, to the constraints masquerading as strength, to the frailty underlying the presumption of authority. Like Ktaadn’s scorched earth and scattered lumber, nature, in the consolidated form of the wounded tree, is a testament to the boundedness of civilization and of the men who would presume to drive and expand it – and themselves –beyond their ken, into domains which ought to be the province of nature alone.

Nevertheless, even as Frost asserts human limitation and conscripts the wounded tree into bearing witness of this, there is a profound affirmation of the value of the tree in this process. The speaker twice references a world of doubt, the uncertainty which seems to cast the speaker into darkness. The Witness Tree functions in this context as the antidote, though what it witnesses is the proof of human limitation; in so doing it also functions to dispel the darkness, to call forth the light of truth. In this, Frost, again, powerfully aligns himself with the Transcendentalists, for whom, as Johnson argues, contact with the natural world is a conduit through which the self and other, the world and the cosmos, may come to be known. In her analysis of the trope of ‘enchantment’ in the works of Thoreau and the nature writer Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Rochelle Johnson asserts that

[b]oth writers suggest enchantment as a result of connection, and, more specifically, as a result of mindful commitment to something beyond the self. Both posit enchantment as a means of heightening the experience of life…and both assert enchantment as a valued out-growth of increased consciousness of the inter and intra-relations of all life forms….Thoreau’s work…offer[s] a comprehensive model of what Stacy Alaimo has termed ‘trans-corporeality’—an understanding of the human body as ultimately inseparable from the material phenomena comprising the world….much of Thoreau’s corpus serves as a sustained exploration of how to re-think the self as part and parcel of the material world (Johnson, 2014: 607).
The nuanced reading Johnson provides here of Thoreauvian Transcendentalism applies in significant ways to Frost’s oeuvre as well and is perhaps more in keeping with Frostian aesthetic commitments than are the romantic idealizations of Transcendentalism. As for Thoreau, so for Frost. There is no pure sublimation in the encounter with the forest and, especially, with the Witness Tree. There is no discovery of human unboundedness. There is no escape from wounding. There is, however, a raising of consciousness, and a subsequent dispelling of doubt—all engendered and confirmed by the alignment of wound to wound, of wounded man and witnessing tree, of bounded man and of an unbounded nature that can ‘bend the square’ of man’s imaginings, his desires, his claims, and his presumptions.

2.2 Frost’s Forest Lullabies: Whispers from the Trees

In the fall of 1900, Frost moved with his family to his grandfather’s farm in Derry, New Hampshire, a property surrounded by an apple orchard and a variety of quince trees, pear and peach. Frost later reflected that ‘[t]he farm was an idyllic retreat’ (cited in Monteiro, 2015: 8). Many of Frost’s early poems were written in this rural region and the years spent in this pastoral setting would provide rich fodder for the remainder of Frost’s poetic career. Forty years after he had left Derry, Frost would write a letter to Robert Chace in 1952 describing the significance of those years as the most fertile and intensive of his literary career:

You might be interested to know that during my ten years in Derry the first five of them farming altogether and the last five mostly teaching but still farming a little, I wrote more than half of my first book much more than half of my/the? second and even quite a little of my third, though they were not published till later. I might say the core of all my writing was probably the five years I had there on the farm down the road from Derry Village toward Lawrence. The only time we had plenty of time and seclusion (cited in Sohn & Tyre, 1967: 15).

On another occasion, Frost explained that ‘there was something about the experience at Derry which stayed in mind, and was tapped for poetry in the years that came after’ (cited in Wooten, 2006: 52).

These remarks provide us with important signposts. First, Frost points us toward the intimate link between nature and his art, which implies his intention to establish a signifying relation between the experience of nature and his own situation, and thus affirms the link between the exterior and interior landscape. The Derry sojourn had allowed Frost the freedom to simultaneously immerse himself deeply in nature, read widely in poetry and write his very
own verse. Submerging himself in the natural world for a decade, Frost had written about everything his eyes had seen, his ears had heard and his heart had felt in the Derry woodlands.

Of particular importance to Frost’s philosophy and his forest aesthetic is the auditory sense. As he admitted when writing to John Cournos in 1914, during this period Frost sought above all to ‘cultivate . . . the hearing imagination rather than the seeing imagination though [he] should not want to be without the latter’ (cited in Sheehy et al, 2014: 210). Hearing the voice of Nature as embodied in trees was one of his earliest experiences. This is best exemplified in ‘The Sound of the Trees’, a short lyric from Mountain Interval (1916). The poem, which holds the key to several elements of Frost’s poetics, begins as follows:

I wonder about the trees.  
Why do we wish to bear  
Forever the noise of these  
More than another noise  
So close to our dwelling place?  
We suffer them by the day  
Till we lose all measure of pace,  
And fixity in our joys,  
And acquire a listening air.

(1-9)

Significantly, this passage emphasizes the power of the whispering trees to disrupt the daily ‘pace’ of life. This sets up a tension between modernity’s insistence upon schedule-keeping, upon parcelling the day into hours and minutes, each with their assigned task which was strongly affiliated with the processes of labour and production. Frost’s whispering trees threaten to derail modern progress, taking the individual away from his scheduled duties, removing him from modern ‘clock’ time and situating him instead in the eternal, timeless time of nature.

The voices of the trees affirm not only the immutable and eternal character of the natural world, but also the strength and stability of this realm, as symbolized once again by the trees:

They are that that talk of going  
But never gets away;  
And that talk no less for knowing,  
As it grows wiser and older,  
That now it means to stay.

(10-14)
The poem concludes by moving us from describing the outer landscape embodied in the physical presence and sound of trees to expressing the inner psychological state of the speaker:

My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.
I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

(15-25)

Though the opening lines make no claim to any geographic specificity, the trees are apparently ‘close’ enough to the speaker’s ‘dwelling place’ since he is exposed to their repetitive noise on a daily basis. This raises the possibility of a significant (and an interesting) relationship between the title of the poem and the specific reference to ‘dwelling place’. As L. Tamara Kendig asserts

‘The Sound of the Trees’ was first published in Poetry and Drama (Dec. 1914), then in The Atlantic (Aug. 1915), with the title ‘The Sound of Trees’. Later, it appeared as the closing poem in Mountain Interval (1916) under the title ‘The Sound of the Trees’. Little critical notice has been given to the change in title, although the former title draws attention to trees in general rather than to a particular stand of trees, a distinction that may be of interest since it emphasizes Frost’s growing identification with the importance of the particularity of place or region (cited in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 334).

This significance, which is an essential part of Frost’s profound influence by his New England home, is explicitly referred to in his 1917 letter to his friend, Lewis N. Chase, which was written years after his return from London.

I wonder if coming to New England from as far away as California can have had anything to do with my feeling for New England and I wonder if my having written so much about it from as far away as old England can have helped (cited in Igebretsen, 1994:72).

Johnson’s reading of Thoreau may be usefully applied here to Frost’s treatment of emplacement as a mechanism of transformation:
When we consider Thoreau’s exploration of his place in the material realm, we find an understanding of matter as activity. His writings consistently demonstrate his participation with—and formation through—matter’s agential vitality…. His works explore how a human being senses, experiences, and knows the vibrancy of matter and then is moved in his own becoming in relation to that agency-that-is-being…. Thoreau reveals how nonhuman material agency can make itself felt by/through/within human corporeality (emphasis original) (Johnson, 2014: 608).

Frost’s oeuvre expands upon and modifies this Thoreauvian aesthetic in his forest imagery, and his use of the aural qualities of trees is a particularly important mechanism for his application of such an embodiment. In this poem, the sense of place is profoundly connected to the auditory, an innovative juxtaposition insofar as emplacement is typically rooted in the materially visible, in positionality, while the auditory is invisible and regarded according to conventional sensory hierarchies as ephemeral. The poem highlights the catalysing qualities of the voices of the trees: they ‘scare the clouds along’ exerting a profound and readily recognizable change in the natural world, furthering, and perhaps even making possible, the vast and beautiful cycles of nature. This, indeed, is the ‘agential materiality’ that Johnson describes, activating transformation in the encounter between the human and the nonhuman.

Perhaps even more significant, however, is the impact that the immaterial voices of the trees have both on the material life and the spirit of man, which, in Frost’s corpus are inextricably linked. In her analysis of Frost’s tendency to embed ideological reversals, Paula Kopacz asserts that the refutation of idealistic, nostalgic, and romantic pastoral tropes so frequently evoked in Frost’s imagery, only ultimately to be rejected at the poem’s conclusion. Kopacz writes, ‘Frost asks the awful “why”. In Frost’s diction, there is power and intentionality for these natural living things to come together in this way, to deliberately cause the confrontation of innocence and evil’ (Kopacz, 2011: 185). Kopacz’s analysis here affirms the operation of the meeting of the material natural world and the human as a mechanism for the spiritual development of the human, for the cultivation of the human consciousness of innocence and evil. The emphasis on the sense of place in the poem aligns with a process of emplacement for the speaker. The voices of the trees help the speaker to orient himself, not only in relation to society but also and perhaps even more importantly to the natural world and to the cosmos, the eternal and divine. This confrontation with the transcendent cosmos, with the eternal divine, for Frost, both occasions and necessitates meditation upon the nature of good and evil, of which the cosmos and all things in it—including the human—are comprised.
Significantly, this orienting process is configured as a temporary diminishment of the man’s voice. The speaker asserts that the more, and the longer, the voices of the trees speak, the less he, the speaker, will have to say—at least for a time.

This corresponds in important ways to Frost’s assertion that his capacity to write so prolifically about New England may derive in no small measure from his geographic distance from it in later years, when he lived and worked in California and England. Emplaced amid the whispering of the trees, the speaker has no need of voice. He is one with the speaking natural world at this point. He must move, he must dislocate and disorient himself in order to return to voice, as the poem notes. This exemplifies Frost’s dialectical metaphysics of silence and speech insofar as it reflects his ethos that creation occurs in a state of tension and discomfiture. In an analysis of the resonances between the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson and William Wordsworth, Frost writes:

When Wordsworth said, ‘Write with your eye on the object….’, he really meant something more. That something carries out what I mean by writing with your ear to the voice. That is what Wordsworth did himself in all his best poetry, proving that there can be no creative imagination unless there is a summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked (cited in Newdick, 1937: 294).

While these insights are most often applied to an understanding of Frost’s orientation toward and application of the colloquial human voice, the speech patterns of rural life, they may also be applied as fruitfully to Frost’s instrumentalization or rather orchestration of the voices of the trees. For Frost, every speech act is, first, an act of silent listening. It is a mute encounter with a speaking ‘other’, whether human or natural, which is later transmuted, transcribed, or transformed into poetry. Thus, again, the dialectical emerges insofar as speech is predicated upon and bound with silence, voice with voicelessness. The voice of the natural world here provides the fodder, foundation, and fire for the poet to speak, but he must remove himself from the immanent proximity of its lullaby, at least for a certain time, in order to echo, augment, and re-create what he heard there. In this, voice signifies a certain lack, the silence of the other, whether through loss or distance, that the agent must fill. The poem is the poet’s reply when the natural world has granted him its lessons and now has fallen quiet, as is suggested in Frost’s long poem, ‘The Generations of Men’: ‘Is this some trance you are withdrawing into?’ ‘You must be still; you mustn’t talk.’ ‘I’ll hardly breathe…. ‘You want the truth? I speak but by the voices’ (148-156).
2.3 **Among Friends: Frost’s Companionate Forests**

Importantly, ‘The Sound of the Trees’ does not begin precisely with an auditory description. Rather, the first line of the poem, ‘I wonder about the trees’ introduces us indirectly to the sense of wonder and awe, expressed as a reaction to what goes beyond normal understanding, particularly when confronting a mystery. The key elements, as implied by the title of the poem, are the swaying trees and their rustling leaves. Fred White explains that Frost is using the tree as a natural symbol to express his view of the mysterious nature of being itself:

> For Frost, nature holds profound and often disturbing mysteries of which we can only catch fleeting glimpses. The result as in ‘The Sound of Trees’ is a poetry that poses questions without clear answers, a poetry that tends to leave us more in the dark than before (White, 2009: 17).

This goes against the argument Rajendra N. Mishra makes in *Search for Belief in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (1992) where she describes the hearer’s relationship with the trees in the poem not as specifically mysterious but rather as interdependent in the sense that

> [the poem] speaks about the sound of trees that disturb man. But here the disturbance is complementary to man’s happiness. Perhaps the noise of trees is needed near a dwelling place. It is necessary if someone wants to overcome the feeling of loneliness. Here nature comes to assist mankind in the form of trees. These trees are real friends to us. Because ‘they are that that talks of going / But never gets away’. Like loyal friends they remain forever to offer us company (Mishra, 1992: 37).

One might relate Mishra’s depiction of the trees as complementary in the sense that they provide companionship to humans in a similar fashion to what Emerson and Thoreau expressed in their writings. In ‘Woodnotes’ Emerson had written ‘[w]hoever leaves the pine-tree, leaves his friend’ (cited in Frank, 2015: 90). Likewise, Thoreau had also explained in *Walden: or Life in the Woods* (1854) that he had ‘frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines’ (Thoreau, 2009: 171).

The speaker is not portrayed as a passive and hopeless sufferer, but as one who finds comfort or companionship among the trees. This is emphasized by the closing key line ‘and acquire a listening air’ where Frost offers a clue to how the sound of trees positively affects the
speaker’s mood and responses. The speaker hears the ‘noise’ of trees but decides to listen and pay careful attention to what they say. In this respect, Deirdre Fagan observes that:

The title of the poem may be ‘The Sound of Trees’, but it speaks about the ‘noise’ of trees. Noise is what we hear when our ears are not attuned to the sounds of nature. It is interference, like static on a radio, when we are going about our days, even joyfully. But when we ‘lose all measure of pace’ and become accustomed to a tree’s sense of time, we begin to hear what nature has to say (Fagan, 2007: 312).

The distinction between hearing and listening assumes particular significance here. Hearing is a sensory response to sounds. Listening, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject gives thoughtful attention to what is being heard. This means that listening, unlike hearing, is a choice that involves the effort, volition, and the capacity and willingness to understand. We all can hear the sounds of nature but very few ‘acquire a listening air’. Here, Frost suggests not only the agential capacity of the natural world but also a profound and purposeful shift in the human’s understanding of and orientation to that world. To ‘acquire’ a listening air is to act wilfully, not passively. It is to actively cultivate oneself and one’s relationship with the natural world as a purposely listening agent, not a passive recipient of sound. It is to recognize the sounds of the trees as voice, not noise, constituting a fundamental and profound shift in the speaker’s understanding of nature, of himself, and of his relationship with and orientation toward nature.

A similar implication can also be traced in ‘On a Tree Fallen across the Road’ where, as has been shown previously in the chapter, a tree across the road terminates a traveller’s journey. This metaphor of the fallen tree is intended to create a sense of the inevitability of nature’s power which is part of what ‘The Sound of the Trees’ also implies. In the encounter with the fallen tree, the speaker at last ‘acquire[s] a listening air;’ he no longer hears a ‘noise’ but can understand what it says, a humbling experience when, as in the metaphor of the fallen tree, one finds one’s endeavours thwarted. In his analysis of Frost’s late works, Stanlis describes Frost’s admiration for the human capacity to endure in the face of disappointment and in the humbling recognition of his own impermanence and limitations relative to the awesome powers of nature and the cosmos:

In ‘A Cabin in the Clearing’… Frost praised the ‘sleepers in the house’ for clearing the woods back from around the house, even though this knowledge did not solve the great mystery of their nature or orientation in the universe: ‘And
still I doubt they know where they are./And I begin to fear they never will’ (Stanlis, 2008: 96).

Here, again, the encounter with the woodlands activates a dialectical encounter between knowledge and its denial. It speaks to the human of who we are, what our world is, and how we are to play our role in the universal and eternal flow of life and creation, but only within limits. It is a bounded, finite wisdom, circumscribed by and reflective of the boundedness and finitude of the human—the woods as a mirror into who we are. The lessons we hear may not always be what we expect or desire, but the ultimate intention of these natural homilies is progress, enlightenment, and creative evolution.

This idea of ‘acquiring a listening air’ refers us back to Emerson’s depiction of trees in his poem ‘The River’ where he announces ‘... Oh, Call not Nature dumb, / These Trees ... are audible to me’ (Emerson, 1954: 286). Emerson goes on to suggest that Nature is not only audible to him but is also meaningful: ‘These idle flowers that tremble in the wind, / I understand their faery syllables’ (Emerson, 1954: 286). Key elements in both poems serve to clinch the Emerson-Frost correlation. In both poems, the speaker is located among the rustling whispers of the trees listening to their sounds. Also notable here is that fact that both poems position the speaker in a moment of surrender to the power of nature, where the direct sound of trees and their effects cannot be ignored. If not identical, the images in their poems are strikingly analogous. Frost’s image of trees swaying in the wind recalls Emerson’s image of the leaves ‘trembl[ing] in the wind’. Frost’s speaker can understand the language of the trees. Similarly, in his response to the rustling leaves Emerson writes: ‘I understand their faery syllables’. Nature, Emerson proceeds, ‘hath a sound more eloquent than speech’ - a key line that summarizes the central tenet of ‘The Sound of the Trees’. However, Frost elaborates in considerable detail that ‘Sometimes when I watch trees sway, / From the window or the door’ his feet, like the deep roots of the trees in the earth, ‘tug at the floor’ and his head, like the branches and the leaves moving back and forth in the breeze, ‘sways to [his] shoulder’. The moment the speaker surrenders to the power of trees he starts to define himself with tree-like qualities. Emerson, on the other hand, conveys the same poetic experience, but with a different image:

I feel as I were welcome to these trees
After long months of weary wandering,
Acknowledged by their hospitable boughs;
They know me as their son, for side by side,
They were coeval with my ancestors,
Adorned with them my country’s primitive times.

(Emerson, 1954: 386-7)

Echoing Johnson’s assertion of ‘trans-corporeality’, the transformation of consciousness through an active encounter between the human and the material world, through an interaction that is locomotive, a flowing of force, agency, and consciousness, the moving of the trees back and forth leaves the listener with a sense of belonging. Emerson specifically describes himself as ‘their son’ to express how close and attached he felt to trees. Inspired by the swaying trees, their deep roots and their rustling leaves, both speakers respond to their status in nature and express their sense of place. This essentially characterizes a sense of belonging to trees through a complete and deep identity with them. Moreover, the physical, material shift suggested in the poems’ imagery, such as the speaker’s assumption of the trees’ swaying movements in Emerson’s poem, suggests a return to origins achieved by actively listening to the voice of nature. This returns the human to himself, to the flow of eternal time, and to the ultimate oneness of nature and the universe, as reflected in Emerson’s assertion that the trees welcome him as a son because ‘They were coeval with my ancestors’.

2.4 In the Presence of Beauty: Frost’s Forest Aesthetics

In his long narrative poem, *Endymion* (1818), John Keats describes the physical beauty of nature and its metaphysical and spiritual effects. The very first line of the poem famously declares that ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’ (Keats, 1817: 71). This beauty, as Keats reveals, lies in the essence of the whispering trees and in ‘trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon’. The former is the main thematic concern of Frost’s ‘The Sound of the Trees’ as discussed above, while the latter can be uncovered in ‘A Young Birch’. The poem begins with the description of the early growth of a young birch tree:

The birch begins to crack its outer sheath
Of baby green and show the white beneath,
As whosoever likes the young and slight
May well have noticed. Soon entirely white
To double day and cut in half the dark
It will stand forth, entirely white in bark,
And nothing but the top a leafy green—
The only native tree that dares to lean,
Relying on its beauty, to the air.
(Less brave perhaps than trusting are the fair).

(1-10)
The poem begins by portraying the stages of growth in a young growing birch tree. Unlike ‘The Sound of the Trees’ with its focus on aurality, ‘A Young Birch’ turns to questions of change and permanence. With leafy greens on the top of it, the tree is characterized as being ‘The only native tree that dares to lean, / Relying on its beauty, to the air’. As in ‘The Sound of the Trees’, where the strength and stability of trees were being praised, in ‘A Young Birch’ the same implication is being made.

The characteristics Frost gives to his special young tree are closely related to the symbolic values ascribed to sacred trees. Examining such characteristics may further illuminate our understanding of Frost’s ‘A Young Birch’ specifically and his appreciation of trees more generally. Frost refers to the young birch as ‘there to be admired/….The only native tree that dares to lean, / Relying on its beauty, to the air’. Frost continues, ‘a thing of beauty and was sent / To live its life out as an ornament’. Apart from its common meaning of something that is used to beautify, ‘ornament’ also carries significant religious overtones. In Christianity, an ornament can be a holy or sacred object that is devoted to or associated with religious purposes such as altars, chalices and sacred vessels which are to be found in all churches (Stevenson, 2010: 1254). In addition, the word is also closely associated with Christmas.
the ornamental use of trees predates Christianity and has roots in pagan tradition. Nicolae Sfetcu describes a legend related to the early eighth-century missionary Saint Boniface who:

found a group of pagans worshipping an oak tree and became angry; consequently, he proceeded to cut down the oak tree. Immediately, a small fir tree is said to have sprouted from the middle of the oak stump and reached to the sky. Thus Saint Boniface told the onlookers that this would be their holy tree because it was evergreen, a symbol of everlasting life. Although many versions of this story exist, many authorities believe that the true origins come from ancient Egypt. On December 21, the shortest day of the year, ancient Egyptians decorated their homes with green palm branches to symbolize life’s triumph over death. Before Christianity, plants and trees that remained green throughout the year were believed to hold special meaning for people in winter. Romans used evergreens to decorate their homes during the winter festival of Saturnalia, which honoured Saturn, the god of farming. In addition, ancient Druids, a member of an order of priests in ancient Gaul and Britain who appear in Welsh and Irish legend as prophets and sorcerers, were known to place evergreen branches over doors to frighten away evil spirits (Sfetcu, 2014: n/a).

While bearing in mind that birch and fir are different genus, comparing this legend of Saint Boniface with Frost’s ‘A Young Birch’ one notes some striking similarities with the small holy oak tree of the pagan worshippers. The legend tells of ‘a small fir tree’ and Frost’s poem is specifically about ‘A Young’ Birch’. In addition, both involve the act of cutting down trees. Interestingly, the pagan’s oak tree survived being cut down by sprouting a small fir tree in its middle. Likewise, Frost’s young birch survived its removal (twice) despite its surrounding threatening environment and was spared ‘from the number of the slain’. Indeed, in echoing ancient beliefs and practices aligning evergreens with immortality, the text here seems to invoke Frost’s dialectical metaphysics of life in the face of death, of immortality amid mortality. The birch achieves the same miracle as the pagans’ evergreen bough. It exposes its face to the ravages of time and pain and yet it endures and, in enduring, it helps to deflect the winter darkness, to mitigate the powers of death, and to show that life, once created, can never truly be extinguished; that the gales of suffering and loss may change the face of young beauty but they will never eradicate it.

Jay Parini, in ‘The Lay of the Land in Frost’s Steeple Bush’ (2014), approaches ‘A Young Birch’ from a different angle. He reads the poem in the light of Randall Jarrell’s criticism of the entire volume as a reminder of ‘what was genius’ and of ‘somebody who once, and somewhere else, was a great poet’ (Parini, 2014: 63). Parini describes the poem’s significance, particularly as the opening work of the volume:
‘A Young Birch’ cannot help but remind us of ‘Birches’ and one of the good consequences of being a great poet, with a large body of marvelous work in hand, is that one poem, even a lesser one, often recalls and amplifies another. Frost tells us in his whimsical fashion that it is the ‘only native tree that dares to lean, / Relying on its beauty, to the air’. The courage to hold to the self (so to speak) is a theme that will persist in this book. This tree once, by chance, spared by a person cutting brush along a wall. Of course the number of the slain lay heavily on Frost’s mind as he wrote this . . . The question that arises is this: Why is one ‘thing of beauty’ spared and another suffers defeat, is cut down? This is a huge question that looms throughout Steeple Bush as Frost moves into a contemplation of his key image, the steeple bush (Parini, 2014: 64).

This commentary takes us back to what was explored previously in this chapter: Frost’s invocation of forest imagery as a mechanism for meditating on broader philosophical questions, most particularly questions of mortality and the human’s relation to nature, to God, to the cosmos, and to eternity. These important questions are echoed in Frost’s brief poem, ‘In the Winter in Woods Alone’ (1962), in which the speaker speculates on the contest waged between life and death, conquest and conquering, both as it pertains to man’s relationship with nature and to man’s relationship with time:

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.
I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low.

At four o’clock I shoulder axe
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.

I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree’s overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow.

The human assault may fell one tree, but will not fell the natural world in its entirety. Likewise, the storms and buffets of living may fell a human, temporarily or permanently, but they will not fell humanity.

For Frost, birch trees in particular signify this idea of enduring; the persistence of time, nature, and the human in the face of inevitable adversity.
The tide of evil rises. Your Ark is sailing and you make me a last-minute allowance of a single plant on board for seed. (It would have to be two if animals, or there would be no seed.) Well, let it be a tree – Birches. Do not ask me why at a time of doom and confusion like this. My reasons might be forced and unreal. But if I must defend my choice, I will say I took it for its vocality and its ulteriority (Richardson, 2007: 113).

Frost’s emphasis on vocality and ulteriority, indeed, his alignment of the two, is telling. The implication here and in the oeuvre as a whole is the preeminence of that which is hidden but powerfully significant and eternal, as symbolized by the birch tree. Further, it suggests that such hidden signification, while perhaps invisible to the naked eye, nevertheless will manifest in the ‘vocality’ of nature, at least for those willing to cultivate a listening ear, the capacity to recognize the voice of nature rather than its noise.

Ulteriority is of particular significance in regard to Frost’s work. In 1927, the poet pointed out: ‘I almost think a poem is most valuable for its ulterior meanings’ adding that ‘I have developed an ulteriority complex’ (cited in Thompson, 1966: 314). Jay Parini (1993) elaborates by stating that ‘the quest for “ulteriority” is all part of the Frostian world. On the surface, one finds the sentimentalized view of New England embodied in familiar images: . . . woodlots . . . woods full of snow, [and] fields of flowers. But only a very superficial reading stops there’ (226). ‘Birches’ highlights Frost’s complex ulteriority in the sense that the act of swinging and climbing a birch tree is presented in such a way that requires the reader to move beyond the literal interpretation. In this regard, Howard Nelson observes that:

‘Birches’ emerges as a poem about tree-climbing, one that through its metaphors is also about reaching higher states, whether of physical excitement, emotional abandon, or spiritual vision; it is a poem that for all its resonances remains deeply and wonderfully a poem about birch climbing, ice storms, tree climbing, and swinging (cited in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 32).

Nelson’s remark supports the idea that ‘Birches’ should be read as a symbol of the cathexis linking the physical to the spiritual realm, a link which occupies a central role in Frost’s poetics.

Ellis’s ‘Robert Frost’s Four Types of Belief in ‘Birches’’ is instructive here as well:

‘Birches’ is a poem divided into two parts. The first part celebrates the boy’s sexual growth and the erotic, spiritual dream of climbing ‘Toward heaven’ that accompanies this growth. The boy’s swinging of the birches in pursuit of this dream is a metaphor for masturbation and represents Frost’s concept of ‘self-belief’. The second part of the poem evolves from the boy’s ‘self-belief’ and
describes the mature man who moves from the solitary, erotic dream of the boy to a relationship with another human being, a woman he loves and with whom he joins in ‘the love-belief’ . . . Finally both stages of belief – erotic ‘self-belief’ and procreative ‘love-belief’ – are mirrored in the poem to create the ‘art-belief’ that serves to lead both poet and reader toward ‘God-belief’ and the effort of man ‘to bring about the future’ (cited in Bloom, 1999: 41-2).

Ellis’s interpretation might seem particularly appealing if one takes the view that Frost is not solely a nature poet and that ‘physical ‘nature’, as Peter Stanlis says, ‘is most often merely the background setting for a human drama, rather than the subject’ (Stanlis, 1973: 11). Or, as H. Maxson maintains, that ‘nature is a means, not an end’ (Maxson, 2005: 18). Such readings, however, seem almost wilfully to ignore the frequency with which Frost’s characters return to nature to find peace away from the chaos of society and the modern world. Sometimes, this is a melancholy pilgrimage:

It’s when I am weary of considerations
And Life is too much like a pathless wood
I dream of going back to be.
I’d like to get away from earth awhile,
May no fate wilfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. . .

.....
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more.

(43-56)

The subsequent thought inserted between the speaker’s wishes – ‘Earth’s the right place for love’ - might seem at first to be an irrelevant announcement conforming neither to the previous nor the subsequent thought, but in fact it is most timely since it supports a new understanding of Earth’s love. Oster suggests that love ‘relates to the poem’s concern with climbing, experiencing [and] swinging’ and that love of the earth is indeed love of its birches as well (Oster, 1991: 63). In keeping with Frost’s robust dialectical metaphysics, however, this is a love and joy of Earth that also acknowledges the pang of the human encounter with it. In his analysis of Frost’s poetics, Wormser argues:

The poems stem from discomfort, the marvellous nettle of the world, be it phoebes or old men or lonely wives or woodchucks—that was continuously lodging itself in the integument of his identity. He refuses to pluck the nettle out even as he acknowledges it. Frost prefers to present the situation, which is to say the drama of opposition or indifference. As a contrarian he allows for the
other—be it a representative of the human world or the supernatural world or the natural world—to indulge its own presence in his poem (Womser, 2011: 78).

Taking into account that the Earth is the totality of both nature and human society and the space in which both worlds meet, the speaker’s announcement that ‘I’d like to get away from earth awhile’ could be taken to refer the possibility of the desire to get away from the ‘doom and confusion’ of ‘life’ or the material world towards the ‘vocality’ and ‘ulteriority’ of the natural world. In a sense, then, ‘toward heaven’ could be translated as a migration towards nature or signify a metaphorical trajectory towards an Edenic landscape, physically separate from and opposed to the social world as a material manifestation of Heavenly ulteriority.

2.5 ‘Through a Tree / Toward Heaven’: The Ascension of Frost’s Forest Travellers

‘The Sound of the Trees’, ‘Birches’ and ‘A Young Birch’ are not the only early Frost poems in which trees are the central image and a primary thematic concern. ‘After-Apple Picking’ and ‘Sycamore’ also give prominence to trees as the tangible expression and embodiment of a spiritual realm. The image of climbing a birch tree towards heaven in ‘Birches’ is exactly mirrored in ‘After Apple-Picking’. Significantly, both poems use ‘toward heaven’ to signpost the direction to which their respective climbers would like to escape. ‘After Apple-Picking’ opens with an image of a farmer climbing into a tree to pick apples:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree 
Toward heaven still, 
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill 
Beside it, and there may be two or three 
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. 
But I am done with apple-picking now. 
Essence of winter sleep is on the night, 
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off. 
……………. 
I have had too much 
Of apple-picking: I am overtired 
Of the great harvest I myself desired. 

The image of the ladder in the opening lines is intimately connected to the image of the tree. That is, Frost combines the image of an apple-picker being suspended as he is between two
realms, an earthly realm where the ‘ladder’s sticking through a tree’ and a spiritual realm where the tree is pointing toward heaven. This hearkens, once again, to the complex philosophical system that informs Frost’s poetics, the valorizing of the tension in the space between two ostensibly binary and incompatible forces, the locus of the meeting of incompatible elements as the site of progress, of creative and spiritual development. This image of being neither wholly one place nor the other, of being in a liminal position, oriented simultaneously toward heaven and toward earth, characterizes Frost’s assessment of the human condition, a condition that is tenuous, discomfiting, and humbling, but that is also rife with possibility, enabling—and, indeed, requiring change: ascension or declension. Richard Poirier’s analysis provides further insight:

The ladder . . . is quite graphically vertical, and it points to a destination beyond itself. It is, also, a ladder that is not ‘pulled in’; it is ‘still’ - ‘still’ there, ‘still’ to be climbed again, and ‘still’ pointing as if, despite its being ‘long,’ it merely directs us to a place toward which it provides the initial steps. It sticks ‘through’ a tree and not against it (Poirier, 1990: 295).

At the point where these two realms meet, the apple-picker’s fullest awareness of his physical and mental state is realized. The idea of sleep becomes a preoccupation and a single thought for him before the task of apple-picking is even yet completed.

The symbols Frost uses, especially of the tree and the ladder, make it difficult to resist turning to religion to solve the poetic riddle. In his analysis of the poem, David Sanders remarks that ‘it is theological from the start’ (cited in Timmerman, 2002: 177). Some might argue here, however, that these interpretations ignore the artistry of the poem, the activity of apple-picking itself, and the preoccupation with the idea of sleep and its connotations, which link to important themes operating within the corpus, including questions of the nature of perception/reality and work and tradition and melancholy. Some critics such as Joseph Ferrandino consider the act of apple-picking as symbolic of writing poetry itself (Ferrandino, cited in Serafin & Bendixen, 2003: 407). In his explication of the poem, Mordecai Marcus observes that ‘the poem’s title suggests humanity expelled from Eden but treats the aftermath of almost-tragic knowledge so gently that the biblical allusion is muted’ (cited in Seitz, 1999: 216). Marcus correctly maintains that the apple-picker is not depicted as ‘an old man on the verge of death’ so the allegorical interpretation of seeing the poem as about ‘someone thinking more about the writing of poems than about life’s fulfillments’ is a possible explanation (cited in Seitz, 1999: 216). However, if we dig deeply enough beneath the surface of the poem’s title,
we see that Frost’s careful imagery gives the poem deeper layers of religious interpretation related to the biblical Fall of Adam and Eve after eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Frost’s tree, then, grows in different directions. There is the spiritual and the soporific. By setting out at the beginning with the description of the two main symbols (the tree and the ladder), the poem combines the description of the physical and mental state of the apple-picker suggested by the sense of restlessness and then by referring in particular to his form of dreaming and his troubled sleep. This tells of the apple-picker’s physical exhaustion and his concern with what he desires ‘after apple-picking’. The reference to the word ‘sleep’ six times in the poem compels any reader to pay considerable attention to it indeed. At this point, it could easily be claimed that the speaker refers to ‘the escapism of sleep’ (Little, 2010: 159). Or rather, the poem itself, as Donald J. Greiner says ‘suggests rest’ (Greiner, cited in Gerber, 1982: 236). But the comparison the apple-picker makes by the end of the poem between the woodchuck’s long sleep and ‘just some human sleep’ seems to indicate a deeper meaning than merely the tendency to seek relief and distraction from the physical action involved in the process of apple-picking. To interpret such references as only a desire to avoid work through taking time out may not be sufficient for reaching a full understanding of the poem; matters of uncertainty about the kind of sleep he might have should also be addressed alongside the artistic value of such a depiction. The metaphor of hibernation conveyed by the reference to the woodchuck’s long sleep can be interpreted as a metaphor for death since by the end of the poem the apple-picker conveys his concern over the kind of sleep he might have when he is done with apple-picking. The question of the nature of the apple-picker’s sleep aligns with the imagery of the ladder through the tree insofar as this image suggests the clash of irreconcilable elements which often make sense only in dreams. This is the juxtaposition of natural and ideal worlds, once again affirming the nexus between conflicting elements which for Frost is essential to spiritual and social progress. Sleep is, in itself, representative of just such a clash of elements: a sort of death in life, a place where the real and unreal, the fantastic and the familiar mingle in phantastic forms.

As has been noted, the opening image of ‘After Apple-Picking’ is quite similar to that of ‘Birches’ where ‘the subject is literally the swing between earth and that which is higher – toward heaven’ (Oster, 1991: 61). The most salient imagery at work in the poem, however, is of the tree’s frozen branches. Here, Frost presents an alluring metaphor in the image of the ice falling off (and melting on) the birch on a winter’s morning:
They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-coloured
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground.

The description of the falling ice ‘evokes a mythical catastrophe’ suggested by the falling of
‘the inner dome of heaven’ (Paton, cited in Cady, 1991: 128). In these lines, Frost not only
conveys but also acknowledges birch trees: they are ‘bowed’ yet ‘seem not to break’. In
addition, one may even see those birch trees years afterwards ‘trailing their leaves on the
ground’. The evocative images extend the affiliation of tree imagery with the hybrid state that
lies at the heart of Frost’s aesthetic and philosophical system. Trees, after all, are objects both
of the air and of the ground with deep roots and lofty branches. Trees possess that which is
eminently visible, the undeniable robustness of their trunks, leaves, and limbs, and that which
is hidden but perhaps even more essential—their expansive, penetrating, and powerful root
systems. The leaves which flutter in the breeze can also trail upon the ground. The trunk that
appears broken will rise proud and straight again. The ice that coats the branches is in itself
neither fully solid nor liquid; it exists in a perpetual state of imminent change, and in its
changefulness it changes the branches from which it falls, in one moment crystallizing them in
its shimmering frozenness, in the next freeing them to become something else, something
other—not dissimilar to Frost’s speaker, vacillating between heaven and earth, desiring both
but renouncing neither.

2.6 ‘Into their Vastness, I should steal Away’: The Pleasures of Smallness
in Frost’s Forests

So far this chapter has examined the theme of aurality/visuality in connection to Frost’s
ubiquitous trees, emphasizing the spiritual characteristics which Frost ascribes to these natural
objects through these sensory elements. To fully understand the position of forest imagery in
Frost’s oeuvre, however, it is essential to move beyond the material and into the aesthetic,
focusing in particular on Frost’s affiliation with romantic tropes as they echo the Transcendentalist mode of writing. More specifically, Frost’s deployment of romantic aesthetics in his forest imagery provides a new valence to his poetics, adding a dimension of social critique to his spiritual and aesthetic model. The use of romantic elements in Frost’s aesthetic enables the poet to examine modern oppositions between the social and the natural at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Guy Rotella explains the special attention Frost gave to the woods in his poetry arguing that in addition to representing ‘the howling wilderness’ Frost depicts ‘other aspects of nature’s role in American mythology’ (Rotella, 1991: 58). Rotella convincingly maintains that woods ‘are sometimes a place of freedom from the oppressive constraints of too much civilization’ (Rotella, 1991: 58). John T. Ogilvie makes a similar point about the recurrent imagery of dark woods and trees believing that ‘the world of the woods . . . a world offering perfect quiet and solitude, exists side by side with the realization that there is also another world, a world of people and social obligations’ (Ogilvie, 1959: 64) The wish of the speaker in ‘Into My Own’, the opening poem of Frost’s first volume of poetry A Boy’s Will, provides a clear statement of such themes:

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as ’twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.
I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land.

(1-8)

A core theme in this text is the desire to lose oneself in the infinite dark chaos of the trees. As has been noted, forest imagery operates in Frost simultaneously to grant the human self-knowledge and to affirm and enforce the limits this knowledge. The imagery here suggests a jouissance in the limitations of self-knowledge, in disorientation and the state of being profoundly lost. This aligns with the Gothic fascination with self-erasure, an entrapment in a labyrinth of confusion that is, in fact, the satiating of a masochistic desire and even a death drive.
Nevertheless, the Gothic rapture of being lost is only a temporary reprieve, as the imperatives of modern society quickly reassert themselves. This tension between the sensual, primitive Gothic and a progressive, civilized modernity is evident in the juxtaposition within the text of the forest and a key symbol of modernity - the highway being laid to service the needs of a car culture. The attraction of the forest, in part, is that it is not the highway. Once this explicit wish is established at the beginning, the rest of the poem affirms the speaker’s determination to be unchanged, to continue on his journey, to be as firm and durable as the trees themselves and to renounce the pleasures of self-loss and self-forgetting:

I do not see why I should e’er turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me, who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

(9-14)

The speaker – a Frostian archetype – is depicted as a solitary figure in the dark and gloomy woods, but also beckoning to others, to those he has left behind to follow him into the trees.

You have to get lost to find yourself—and, specifically, you have to leave behind industrial modernity and return to nature. Wakefield describes the cultural *zeitgeist* of the period, to which Frost’s aesthetic in general and his forest imagery in particular gave voice:

Looking back to an earlier time, men thought they saw a now-vanished kinship with nature, a lost world where the rhythm of life came from within and found a matching rhythm in nature: days and seasons, not hours and weeks; the beat of the heart, not the clanking of a machine. No doubt the nostalgic art, literature, music, and drama that pervaded popular culture had less to do with remembering than with forgetting the reality of the past, yet it arose in response to a sense of loss. Men weighted their present dissatisfactions more heavily than the old discomforts, and while few or none would have returned, they chafed at their new regimentation and yearned for something different (Wakefield, 2000: 354-5).

This eschewing of the forces of modernity gives rise to a Gothic yearning for self-annihilation, or, more precisely, for the destruction of the social self, the modern identity, in exchange for absorption, diffusion, and forgetting in the dark labyrinth of the forest.
This poem has attracted a considerable body of critical literature since its first publication with the title of ‘Into Mine Own’ in *New England Magazine* in May 1909. One of the most significant early studies in this respect is James M. Dabbs’ ‘Robert Frost and the Dark Woods’ (1934). Throughout his reading of ‘Into My Own’ along with other ‘woods’ poems, Dabbs specifically identifies and labels a cohort which includes ‘Now Close the Windows’, ‘The Sound of Trees’ and ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’. Dabbs writes that they symbolize ‘nature itself with its challenges and its fascination’ (Dabbs, 1934: 515). Richard Poirier in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1979) makes a related argument in his analysis of the poem by acknowledging the poet’s ‘disavowal of the world and pursuit of the otherworldly’ demonstrated throughout his wish to be overtaken by the darkness of the woods and the vastness of trees (Poirier, 1979: 95). Poirier explains the reasons behind the poet’s underlying attitude towards the woods:

He [Frost] was always in some sense running away in the expectation that the road would somehow lead him back to a more acceptable ‘home’. Such is the point, essentially of the first poem [‘Into My Own’] in his first book, *[A Boy’s Will]* (Poirier, 1979: 95).

Poirier considers the speaker to be running away in search of an acceptable home which implies the insufficiency or unacceptability of the current home. This longing may be extrapolated to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the products of modern civilization itself. The preeminence of apocalyptic imagery in Frost’s corpus supports such a reading. From ‘Directive’ and ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’ to ‘A Fountain, A Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and Some Books’, Frost’s oeuvre is replete with images of a ruined civilization, of the works of man and progress destroyed by the awesome power of nature, of the human eradicated or consumed by the creeping but no less overwhelming forces of time and nature. The speaker’s desire to flee into the woods and be lost in it, therefore, suggests a flight toward that which is inevitable and indomitable, an abandonment of that which is impermanent and insufficient.

George F. Bagby, however, argues that this poem must be read as establishing a dialectic between the desire to be lost and a desire to be found, which necessitates that audiences read the poem as ‘an echo of an earlier tradition’:

Like Thoreau, Frost wants the woods that are ‘infinitely wild’, ‘mysterious’, ‘unfathomable’, precisely so that he can lose himself in them. Had he such ‘a pitch-dark limitless grove’ of trees, as he puts it elsewhere, Frost wants to wander beyond the restraints of domestic society, the measured space of open fields and the measured time associated with well travelled-roads, because he is
convinced that by losing himself in the natural vastness, he will in a deeper sense find himself . . . The self is lost or overwhelmed in order to be clarified (Bagby, 1993: 30).

Bagby persuasively acknowledges the impact of Thoreau’s thought on Frost’s poem in relation to their mutual treatment of the experience of being lost and found and its relation to finding oneself. Thoreau believed that the individual needed to separate from society and immerse himself completely in the world of the woods to gain insights into the self. Thoreau addresses this experience in Walden in a chapter entitled ‘The Village’ as follows:

In our most trivial walks, we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighbouring cape; and not till we are completely lost, or turned round, – for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost, – do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. . . Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations (Thoreau, 2004: 136).

This belief is underscored in ‘Wild Apples: The History of the Apple Tree’ (1862), in which Thoreau states that ‘you must lose yourself before you can find the way’ (Thoreau, 1893: 388). What makes the world of ‘Into My Own’ even more like that of Thoreau’s is the manner in which the speaker is depicted alone in the woods looking to find a new self. Like Thoreau, who withdraws from society to be in the company of the trees and to lose himself in ‘the vastness and strangeness’ of the woods, Frost’s speaker here is also depicted not only as expressing his praise for the darkness, stability and firmness of the trees and his wish for the trees to be stretched away all around him, but also as expressing desire for contact, closeness and immersion: ‘Into their vastness, I should steal away’. That the speaker seeks fearlessly to enter into the woods and be overtaken by their darkness, ‘vastness, and strangeness’ makes the woods synonymous with the Thoreauvian experience and also makes the trees, again, in this context, a friend by offering companionship to the speaker and yet, in the prospect of self-annihilation inherent in the retreat into the woods, there is at least an element of latent threat. To seek the companionship of the forest, one must lose oneself—or at least the social identity and the relations of human kin and companionship, which comprise the modern self. The risk of this self-abnegation and abandonment is that, once shuffled off, the self one once knew may be lost forever.
It is true that the woods and trees the speaker portrays and praises are described as dark and gloomy, yet this gloominess is desired, as has been seen, by the speaker. For Emerson, darkness ‘brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays . . . The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily’ (Emerson, 1994: 45). Similarly, for Thoreau, the joy of nature, its wonder, its mystery, its depth, lies hidden deep in the dense gloom of the woods. ‘When I would recreate myself’ Thoreau further explains, ‘I see the darkest woods the thickest and the most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp’ (1993: 63). There is a dark side to some Transcendentalist writing as Emerson and Thoreau’s writings suggest, but this darkness, as also suggested by Frost’s ‘Into My Own’ is usually accompanied by moments of spiritual awakening, a sense of joy, peace and inner light. This, once more, connects to the metaphysical dualism which informs Frost’s poetics, situating creation at the juncture of contradictory elements, finding in one thing not the exclusion of its opposite but the inevitability of the opposite: light in darkness, life in death, beginnings in endings.

In *A Boy’s Will* (1913), Frost presents the speaker returning to the world of the woods. In ‘A Dream Pang’ the escape takes the form of a dream where the speaker, as in ‘Into My Own’ ‘had withdrawn into a forest’ and imagines himself to be inviting his lover to come ‘to the forest edge’. In ‘The Vantage Point’ the speaker is depicted as withdrawing into his own world again, but, unlike ‘Into My Own’ the speaker is retreating from the world of men as well:

If I tired of trees I seek again mankind,
Well I know where to hie me – in the dawn,
To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.
There amid lolling juniper reclined,
Myself unseen, I see in white defined.

The poem begins with the speaker describing his vantage point. He initially appears to confess that ‘If I tired of trees I seek again mankind’, but what he does instead is entrust himself to trees, for the trees to hide him away from mankind and protect him. The world of trees with which the speaker associates is a place of peace, light and calm exemplified in words like ‘dawn’, ‘slope’, ‘lolling’, ‘juniper’ and ‘reclined’ which all connote pastoral positivity. Dawn is linked with light as it refers to the earliest light of day, but also carries connotations of new beginnings, of promises and potential as yet not fulfilled, and of uncertainty and expectation as
to what the new day will bring. A slope is in itself a place where contradictory elements coexist: that which rises occupies the same space and time as that which falls, and the determination of the nature of the space depends upon the individual’s positionality and movement, whether one faces the up-slope or the down-slope, whether one chooses to climb or to descend.

Frost’s verse during the middle and later phase of his life continued to revolve specifically around the spiritual value of the woods in juxtaposition with the social realm. The reader of one of his most well-known works, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ (1923), encounters two worlds: the world of people and the world of woods, representing two entirely different modes of thought. The poem’s central narrative is uncomplicated, at least on first reading. It depicts a night traveller stopping by woods to express his familiarity with the woods and the owner of the place before moving on to meditate on the ‘lovely, dark and deep’ woods. The significance of the poem lies in its closing lines inviting us away into a land of choices with ambiguous revelations and ulterior endings:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

(13-16)

‘The woods are lovely, dark and deep’ is the key line of the poem insofar as this description creates a vivid image of the place. However, the reference to sleep, with its possibilities for abrupt termination, creates tension, but also simultaneously forces us towards an interpretation that attempts to resolve the tension. Michael Little believes that the poem does not mention the destination of the speaker, yet the key is the word ‘sleep’ in the above lines, which carries the primary meaning of home as a domestic comfortable setting (Little, 2010: 189-202). This idea, as Little argues, is reinforced by the preceding reference to promises which indicates an eventual re-Engagement with the human realm (Little, 2010: 189-202). Little’s argument is supported by a number of critics who claim that although Frost’s speaker stands at the crossroads between the two worlds, the world of humanity ultimately takes precedence over the attractions of woods. Roberts French comments:

Turning away from nature, he chooses the world of humanity . . . Human obligations, human responsibilities, must take precedence; and besides, the attractions of the natural scene promised no revelation, but only stasis, a
cessation of activity suggestive of death. In the woods, there is darkness; the better journey, the poet decides, is toward the lights of the town. (French, 1982: 161)

While Frost’s use of ‘promises to keep’ might be taken as indicative of the poem’s definite ending or as a metaphor for the continuity of the journey of life, Ogilvie, on the other hand, argues that ‘we are not told, however, that the call of social responsibility proves stronger than the attraction of the woods, which are “lovely” as well as “dark and deep”; the poet and his horse have not moved on at the poem’s end’ (Ogilvie, 1959: 69). Ogilvie’s argument rests on the assumption that ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ establishes a balance between the two worlds and on that basis his conclusion can be considered justified. Some critics, however, have claimed that the repetition of the last two lines with their emphasis on the word ‘sleep’ is more likely to suggest a contemplation of death. As Richard Gray comments:

The last line is repeated, however; and while at first it seems little more than a literal reference to the journey he has to complete (and so a way of telling himself to continue on down the road), the repetition gives it particular resonance. This could, after all, be a metaphorical reference to the brief span of human life and the compulsion this puts the narrator under to take risks and explore the truth while he can. Only a few 'miles' to go before 'I sleep' in death: such a chilling memento mori perhaps justifies stopping by the woods in the first place and considering the spiritual quest implicit in the vision they offer (Gray, 2012: 181).

These readings allude to Frost’s overarching scepticism regarding the presumption of modern man to define and contain, let alone to own the natural world. The pause the speaker takes here may well signify the deliberation of a choice between the world of men and the quietus of the woods, but the reality is that this is a choice which is not a choice. Contrary to the fate of the woods the speaker contemplates, eternal sleep will come for the speaker, whether he wishes it or not, and the import of this resonates powerfully here, the quiet, enduring immutability of the woods giving the lie to the presumptions of man’s endeavours, including his hubris in presuming proprietorship over that which has seen generation upon generation of men pass in a handful of seasons from cradle to grave.

This juxtaposition appears again in Frost’s later poems. ‘The Middleness of the Road’ (1947) represents the desire to transcend the chaos of modern civilization to find peace in a woodland that is more representative of man’s true nature and his position within the flow of time, nature, and the cosmos:
The road at the top of the rise
Seems to come to an end
And take off into the skies
So at the distant bend

It seems to go into a wood,
The place of standing still
As long the trees have stood.
But say what Fancy will,

The mineral drops that explode
To drive my ton of car
Are limited to the road.
They deal with near and far,

But have almost nothing to do
With the absolute flight and rest
The universal blue
And local green suggest.

(1-16)

In his reading of the poem, Parini raises the possibility of transcendence that demands the speaker address the beauty of the woods:

[The speaker] wants to get beyond ‘near and far’ and he seeks ‘the absolute flight and rest/The universal blue/And local green suggest.’ That is, he is not giving up on ideas of transcendence; all nature is an invitation to go beyond the physical world, reach for something more. To a degree, he wants a release into infinity (if not some kind of mystical union with the divine) (Parini, 2014: 69).

Parini’s comments take us back to the speaker’s wish in ‘Into My Own’ and allow us to relate ‘The Middleness of the Road’ to the alluring invitation of the woods in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ In ‘The Middleness of the Road’ Frost makes it too obvious that the road that leads into the woods is a place of tranquillity and beauty while civilization (iconicized by the car) is a realm of anxiety, pollution and threat. Frost’s mapping of the forest thus includes an implicit critique of modernity which aligns his poetry with that of his transcendentalist forebears. If we look closer, however, the map becomes a palimpsest with even deeper layers of tradition and mythology.
2.7 In Search of Pan: Modernity and Tradition

The central role of forest imagery in Frost not only indicates his engagement in the natural world of New England, but also points to the continuity with the Transcendentalists in terms of a potentially utopian relationship with the wilderness. This continuity can be traced back further to mythic origins. In ‘Pan with Us’ (1913) Frost accentuates the idea of modern man’s growing estrangement from the primordial wilderness by drawing attention, in particular, to the changing perspectives of wilderness and its spiritual possibilities. The poem centres upon the ancient God of the woodlands and the speaker begins by describing the sudden appearance of Pan in the woods:

```
PAN came out of the woods one day, —
His skin and his hair and his eyes were gray,
The gray of the moss of walls were they, —
And stood in the sun and looked his fill
At wooded valley and wooded hill.

He stood in the zephyr, pipes in hand,
On a height of naked pasture land;
In all the country he did command
He saw no smoke and he saw no roof.
That was well! and he stamped a hoof.

His heart knew peace, for none came here
To this lean feeding save once a year
Someone to salt the half-wild steer,
Or homespun children with clicking pails
Who see so little they tell no tales.
```

The woodlands depicted in this scene are abandoned; the throngs of pagan worshippers have departed. Pan pipes for the trees, the grasses, and the hills alone. The final lines of this passage are particularly poignant insofar as the children here are represented not only as infrequent visitors to the site but also, and perhaps even more significantly, as visitors who are blind to its true nature - the elements which render it sacred. They are incapable of seeing, let alone of comprehending, the ancient god who dwells there and they are deaf to the music he plays. Such imagery is significant because, traditionally, it is children whose innocence gifts them with the capacity to recognize wonders. Whereas maturity, the cynicism born of growing up, is often that which brings about such blindness, these children are precociously blind. They are strangers to the very woodlands in which human children from time immemorial used to play.

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These are the children of civilization, city children, born and reared to the sidewalk and the schoolhouse. Domesticated, their capacity to recognize and to value the wilderness has been lost.

It is little wonder, then, that Frost would depict the ancient pagan god as a gaunt and graying figure. This is not the potent deity, lithe and limitless, who, according to lore, could drive hordes of living beings to their panic-stricken deaths with just a few notes of his flute. The children’s ignorance, the blinded, civilized eyes, is the fatal wound inflicted on the now mortal god. Modernity, in this poem, is one disease that the antediluvian wilderness cannot cure. Frost writes,

He tossed his pipes, too hard to teach
A new-world song, far out of reach,
For a sylvan sign that the blue jay’s screech
And the whimper of hawks beside the sun
Were music enough for him, for one.

Times were changed from what they were:
Such pipes kept less of power to stir
The fruited bough of the juniper
And the fragile bluets clustered there
Than the merest aimless breath of air.

The piper has put away his pipe; he no longer has the strength to rouse the boughs to dance. Now it is the ‘aimless breath of air’ which strikes them into motion, not through any will or purpose, but through the merest fiat of chance. This is, for Frost, the ascendance of modernity’s techno-scientific episteme, which finds in the unfolding of the cosmos and the machinations of the natural world not the manifestation of design, but the indifferent operations of happenstance, the freak fusion of elements that just-so-happened to create a universe.

The poem ends after it poses an unanswered question through which Frost points toward a conceivable answer:

They were pipes of pagan mirth,
And the world had found new terms of worth.
He laid him down on the sun-burned earth
And ravelled a flower and looked away—
Play? Play? —What should he play?

(17-26)
In *Going by Contraries: Robert Frost’s Conflict with Science* (2002), Robert Bernard Hass acknowledges the influence of the nineteenth century writers on the poem’s language:

Despite his own awareness that the poet has to find a language more appropriate for the times. Frost continued to exploit in ‘Pan with Us’ a vocabulary more characteristic of the nineteenth century. One cannot help hearing the ghosts of Longfellow, Tennyson, and Keats lurking behind such hackneyed phrases as ‘stood in the zephyr’, ‘sylvan sign’, ‘pagan mirth’, or ‘heart knew peace’ . . . Frost . . . felt compelled, in the absence of any other plausible alternatives, to use the language that had worked so well in the past (Hass, 2002: 134).

Hass argues that it is unclear whether ‘traditional aesthetic resources are still available to any poet who has lived long enough to see the beginning of the modern world’(Hass, 2002: 133) Hass’s analysis, however, though insightful, is problematic. Even the most cursory glance at Frost’s corpus and his voluminous writing outside of his poetic works suggests that he is among the poets least likely to be found at a loss for words, particularly in the absence of any compelling evidence supporting this assumption (which Hass fails to satisfactorily provide).

Rather, as has been shown repeatedly throughout this study, Frost is above all a strategic poet. His choice to populate the poem with antiquated words and phrases, I would argue, does not reflect an inability to discover—or create—a viable alternative. Rather, in keeping with his technique of deploying the poem with particular words and phrases, Frost echoes and affirms the theme of the poem: that modernity has vanquished the wilderness; Pan is as outmoded, as useless, as dead to the modern civilized world as the language in which he is described.

Hass’s commentary takes us to the following passage which is worth quoting at some length since it expresses Frost’s own views related to the enormous changes in modern poetry in his age:

It may come to the notice of posterity (and then again it may not) that this, our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served. Science put it into our heads that there must be new ways to be new. Those tried were largely by subtraction – elimination. Poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eyes; and a loud general intonation had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear, those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto the better half of poetry. It was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. . . It was tried without ability. It was tried without feeling or sentiment . . . (cited in Richardson, 2007: 116)

Frost characterises and perhaps somewhat caricatures the key component of modern poetry as elimination: a systematic process of removal and exclusion and hints that all of the formal
experimentation was in danger of producing poetry which was purely a body without a soul. Frost proposes that science is responsible for eliminating the old ways in quest of the new ways, but in so doing, in the sphere of poetry, it has severed language from its ancient source, eschewing the dualistic relationship between spirit and matter which, for Frost, is the locus of vitality and dynamism. Thus, in this formulation, modern poetry is form without substance, symbols without referents. The source, the natural world, remains, but like the blind children and the absent adults, there is now a fundamental division between it, civilization, and those who inhabit it. Thus, the language of the woodland is an archaic language because modern civilized man, separated from his material source, is incapable of speaking of the old wilderness in the new language, the artifice and emptiness of modern discourse and civilized aesthetics.

In addition to the invocation of Pan as representing the fundamental shift in modern man’s relationship to nature, Frost’s use of mythology also speaks to the poet’s idiosyncratic theology and, in particular, to Frost’s complicated orientations toward organized religion in general and Christianity in particular. In an account that addresses the above passage, Roger Mitchell (1991) writes that

Robert Frost . . . lived long enough into the twentieth century to have been not only premodern in his literary learnings but vocally antimodern. Frost’s rejection of the new poetry . . . is stated forcefully in his review of Robinson’s *King Jasper* in 1935, [Mitchell refers to the above passage] shortly after Robinson’s death. It is a succinct and witty definition of the new poetry by a disbeliever (Mitchell, 1991: 34).

These general commentaries are all useful in providing more understanding and in-depth insights into Frost’s poetics but also suggest the profound links between language, philosophy and theology in Frost’s work. Mitchell’s remarks underscore Frost’s faithful commitment to the tenets of the New England Transcendentalism which simultaneously implies his disbelief in the practice of modern poetry. Having been brought up under the auspices and influences of Emerson’s pantheistic faith in Nature, Frost’s ‘Pan with Us’ reflects his concern with how the image of Pan, as a once revered figure, has changed. Put more precisely, Frost invokes the iconography of Pan to signify a primordial, individualistic and experiential faith, born of the individual’s experience of God through immediate encounter with His/Its creation. Through Pan, Frost suggests that this ancient understanding of a personal, immanent deity has been hijacked by the dogmatism of organized religion, in which the understanding of God is now
mediated, circumscribed, and, all too often, exploited. In altering man’s relationship to nature, Frost’s Pan narrative suggests, modernity has also altered our relationship with God.

Pan has frequently been described not simply as a woodland god, but also as a personification of Nature in its totality. Although it was not until the eighteenth century that the term ‘pantheism’ came into use, pantheistic ideas can be traced in a variety of classical and religious traditions. An example of this is found in Milton’s Paradise Lost in his description of the Creation: ‘Universal Pan/Knit with the Graces and the hours in dance,/Led on the eternal Spring’ (Milton cited in Scott, 2005: 118). In another poem, ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’, Milton writes:

The Shepherds on the Lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sate simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they than,
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

(Milton cited in Orgel & Goldberg, 2003: 3)

From the time of the Renaissance onward, two paradoxical portrayals of Pan emerged: Pan the great god of wild places; and Pan as the absent god (either disappeared or dead). Both of these repeatedly inspired and fuelled the writings of a large number of the Romantic, Victorian, Edwardian and Transcendentalist artists, including Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, the Brownings, and Emerson (Stormer, 2015: n.p). The New England Transcendentalists who ‘encountered the pantheistic ideas and spirituality in the 19th-century Idealism of Friedrich Schelling’ were ‘heavily influenced by the pantheistic traditions’ and Pan was a particularly fruitful source of inspiration (Wayne, 2001: 208). In his early poem, ‘Eternal Pan’, Emerson offers an image of Pan as a god:

He hides in pure transparency;
Thou askest in fountains and in fires,
He is the essence that inquires.
He is the axis of the star;
He is the sparkle of the spar;
He is the heart of every creature;
He is the meaning of each feature;
And his mind is the sky.
Than all it holds more deep, more high.

(Emerson cited in Frank, 2015: 379)
In another poem which was originally entitled ‘Pan’, Emerson offers another positive image:

O what are heroes, prophets, men
But pipes through which the breath of Pan doth blow
A momentary music . . .
Their dust, pervaded by the nerves of God
Throbs with an overmastering energy.

(Emerson, 2014: 404)

Pantheism, in essence, is seen as antithetical to Christianity due to the fact that its ‘overmastering energy’ ‘challenges biblical morality’ (Wayne, 2001: 208). Pantheism is a faith that equates God with nature whilst the biblical Christianity, in contrast, ‘teaches that God is not only separate from but creator of and therefore above nature’ (Wayne, 2001: 209). As Nicholas Berdayev comments:

‘The great Pan,’ who had been revealed to natural man of antiquity, was driven to take refuge in the uttermost depths of nature. A gulf now separated the natural man from the men who had entered upon the path of Redemption. The effect of Christianity was to divorce man from the inner life of nature, which, as a result, became deanimated. This was the reverse side of the Christian liberation of human nature (cited in Faggen, 2003: 259).

The depiction of the demise of the pantheistic and pagan sacred traditions goes back to Plutarch’s *Moralia* and its often-quoted story of a pilot who was ordered by an invisible voice to announce a message that reads ‘Great Pan is dead’ while making his way towards the Greek island of Palodes. This story, writes Rafel Lepez-Pedraza (2003), ‘has often been considered a turning point in Western history, later leading to the legend of Pan dying in the moment Jesus was mounted on the cross’ (Lepez-Pedraza, 2003: 137). The death of Pan, observes Gordon MacDonald Kirkwood ‘is a motif of late antiquity and later literature connected with the rise of Christianity’ and it also ‘symbolizes the fading of the influence of pagan deities’ (Kirkwood, 1995: 74). This provided great inspiration for some Christian writers. Wordsworth’s ‘The World is too Much with Us’ expresses regret for the overthrow of the pagan tradition: ‘Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!’ (cited in Pearce & Asch, 2014: 155).

The similarity in Wordsworth’s and Frost’s account of disconnection from the natural realm can be explained by the perspective each poem adopts: the fact that the modern world has distracted humans from some essential truth. Frost depicts the ‘gray and old’ Pan in the modern world as a weak, powerless figure who has lost his authority over the natural world.
The Pan of antiquity corresponds to ancient animistic perspectives central to pagans and in many respects this echoes the belief systems of the indigenous peoples of North America, who saw trees and forests as vital, sentient entities rather than dead commodities. The death of Pan, thus, mirrors modernity’s murder of the natural world, its remaking of the forest into product not providence.

Two key lines of the last two stanzas are particularly telling here: ‘Times were changed from what they were’ and ‘the world has found new terms of worth’. The ‘new terms of worth’, as Robert Faggen rightly states in ‘Robert Frost and the Question of Pastoral’, ‘may include both science and modern Christianity’ (Faggen, 2001: 57). Faggen suggest here that Frost’s forest poetics, particularly his invocation and revision of the myth of Pan in the modern world is a method of questioning the twin forces of modern science and organized religion in ‘banishing of some of the pagan mysticism’ (Faggen, 2001: 57). The ‘Play? Play?’ in this reading could be a reference to the poet’s attempt to call forth the pantheistic resources or the more ancient (and more potent) images of Pan. This leads us to consider that the poetic voice in ‘Pan with Us’ suggests a search for the voice of nature, or the pantheistic vision of nature that had been lost and forgotten, leaving not even a bodily felt sense of its presence.

‘The Demiurge’s Laugh’, a companion poem to ‘Pan with Us’, echoes this call of a return to the Pan of the ancient world and, in the process, a restoration of man’s intimacy with the natural world. The poem depicts a speaker seeking in the forests what he thought was a god:

IT was far in the sameness of the wood;
I was running with joy on the Demon’s trail,
Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.
It was just as the light was beginning to fail
That I suddenly heard—all I needed to hear:
It has lasted me many and many a year.

The speaker then realizes that he was being mocked:

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

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And checked my steps to make pretence
It was something among the leaves I sought
(Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).
Thereafter I sat me against a tree.
Taking place ‘far in the sameness of the wood’ in an attempt to seek or understand a god, the poem would be viewed as ‘a symbolic equivalent of being lost in the search for truth’ (Squires, 1969: 49). The search for truth here is equivalent to the search for God. As a spiritual seeker, Frost’s speaker is depicted as hunting for god but ultimately what he ‘hunted was no true god’.

The Demiurge, or ‘the untrue god’, as Reginald Cook points out, ‘can stand for any suspect motivation; for example, the fashionable doctrines of a lesser faith, hedonistic appetite, or possibly devotion to Darwinian science as the key to the universe’ (Cook, 1964: 73-4) Robert Hass suggests more precisely that Frost’s demiurge embodies science and ‘how this early belief in science’ which was viewed as ‘a guide to a better life’ led to ‘despair and profound inability to find evidence of a divine spirit’ (Hass, 2002: 3). The poet’s spiritual belief seems to conflict with science and this, according to Hass, led to the realization that:

Science can never lead to utopia nor justify humans’ spiritual needs. The material world that science explores is not just indifferent to the human condition in a post-Darwinian universe; in Frost’s early poetic imagination it is a malevolent force that mocks and abandons human beings in their dire circumstances (Hass, 2002: 3).

The portrayal of the Demiurge as the Demon, therefore, does not show Frost’s interest in the Platonic myth of creation nor does it, on the other hand, imply praise for Darwinism. Rather, such a portrayal goes beyond to give rise to broader questions regarding one’s relationship to the sacred or transcendent modes of understanding the divine in a period defined increasingly by scientific discoveries and technology.

In this regard, Deirdre J. Fagan remarks that the poem represents ‘the most terrifying versions of the flight into the wilderness from a fear of god’ (Fagan, 2007: 80). However, the way the speaker is depicted as being laughed at by the Demiurge and caught for attempting to ‘hunt a true god’ suggests that the poem is not a Gothic expression of terror so much as an allegory concerning distractions from the search for true faith. Here we might take into account what Frost himself commented on ‘The Demiurge’s Laugh’: ‘He [who is he?] resolves . . . to know definitely what he thinks . . . about science’. The poem can also be seen as expressing disappointment in science for its inability to give answers to the mysteries of nature that might guide one’s spiritual quest. The last stanza: ‘And therefore I sat me against a tree’ announces the speaker’s return to trees: and, as Hass neatly puts it, ‘cling to it in the hope that somehow it can shelter [him] from the “demon” of uncontrollable scientific knowledge’ (Hass, 2002: 3-4)
Frost’s forest imagery plays a vital role in the corpus, invoking the poet’s robust metaphysical aesthetic by signifying and catalysing change in the individual in regard to his relationship with the eternal divine, with himself, and with his society. Frost achieves his aesthetic vision here through a systematic augmentation of American Transcendentalist tropes, while simultaneously deploying older mythopoetic systems, from indigenous American epistemes to pagan European iconographies of the forest. The result is an innovative poetics through which Frost’s forest images reflect, problematize, and further develop his dialectical metaphysical philosophy. The poet’s insistence upon granting—or acceding to—the trees’ possession of voice promotes the more optimistic reading of Frost’s oeuvre that has been offered throughout this study insofar as the act of affirming the vocality of these iconic natural elements always already affirms their positionality within a material, spiritual, and temporal space that is iterative, purposeful, and meaningful. The trees possess what Frost describes as ‘ulteriority’, a precedence that is powerful and propulsive, driving matter and spirit simultaneously toward a higher state of being.

This refutes more common contemporary readings of the corpus, which assert that Frost, in alignment with the Gothic, is pre-eminently a poet of futility and randomness. The whispering, sighing, speaking, and singing trees that populate Frost’s oeuvre signify the existence of the alternative discourse, the poetics of innovation that is itself the product of the tension between contradictory forces. This discourse, as has been shown, is one which the poet devotes his life and work to seeking, whilst operating within the knowledge that there will always be that which defies articulation and comprehension. Frost’s trees speak the language that the poet seeks, affirming that there does, indeed, exist both an alternative discourse and the locus of the clash of spirit and matter, the juxtaposition of opposites, wherein this discourse is formed.

The onus, then, falls upon men, and poets in particular, to reorient themselves in relation to these iconic trees, as they learn to recognize voices where once only noise was heard. This constitutes a fundamental shift in the individual self, actuated through contact with the trees (and, more precisely, with the sound of their ‘voices’), which enables the human to recognize meaning and intentionality in what had once been, for them, only random clamour, a freak and senseless cacophony.
In order for the individual to transition from hearer to listener, in order for the sounds of the trees to be recognized as voice rather than noise, however, the shift which must occur is in the human auditor who must operate on the level of both the spiritual and the material. Above all, forest imagery in Frost’s symbolic economy signifies that which catalyses creative and spiritual evolution by situating the individual at the nexus of the tangible and the intangible, represented by the juxtaposition of the trees’ ineffable ‘voice’ against the immovable and undeniable physicality of their material being.

Frost’s dialectical metaphysics operate at precisely this junction of matter and spirit, where both the delimiting dogmas of organized religion and the hubristic presumptions of positivist science fall away. Ladders can penetrate the centre of Frost’s trees and still prove useful to the climber for apple-picking. Birches can lift an Earth-repudiating, heaven-seeking man to the skies and bend him back down to Earth again as a rejuvenated and life-embracing boy. Thus, trees encompass not only the juxtaposition of forces but the transformation of the individual in relation to them, imbuing the human with a corollary capacity to accommodate the inassimilable, to exist both in time and outside of it, to simultaneously eschew and to embrace life, to concomitantly spurn society and to seek it.
Chapter Three

In the Classroom of the Mountains:

Frost and Mountains

‘The Mountain Stood there to be Pointed at’

(Robert Frost, ‘The Mountain’, 1915)

This chapter continues to expand on the theme of wilderness to include the role of the sublime mountain-landscapes in Frost’s poetry. After briefly tracing the cultural history of the sublime, the chapter will then proceed to narrow the focus to study Frost’s mountain verse, showing how at times he employs Transcendentalist conceptualisations of the sublime, but then elsewhere he moves beyond these into new philosophical and scientific territory. The centrepiece of my argument will build on work in preceding chapters by homing in on the extent to which Frost’s poetry can be approached as part of a lifelong spiritual quest and cartography. Finally, the chapter will conclude by discussing the ways in which Frost represents the relationship between humans and mountains as symbolic of the complex relation of the human to both the natural world and to the cosmos, which in Frost’s poetics may be seen materialized in the natural world and, more precisely, in Frost’s strategic use of nature imagery. More specifically, this chapter refutes prevailing critical affiliations of Frost’s poetic landscapes with Gothic tropes, arguing instead that Frost’s mountain landscapes echo a more positive and redemptive Transcendentalist model wherein the mountain landscape, and mountain peaks in particular, exemplify sacred spaces, unblemished and sacrosanct. Significantly, however, this chapter argues that Frost’s affirmation of the sanctity of mountainscapes does not presuppose or require their idealization. Frost’s corpus acknowledges not only the existence but the inevitability of suffering, and it is this acknowledgment which often frequently erroneously aligns him with a Gothic gloominess. However, Frost’s poetics mandate a much more nuanced reading of human suffering, one which not only allows for but is predicated upon the coexistence of the pure and sacred amid the wounded and the despondent. Mountainscapes, in Frost’s corpus, play a unique and powerful role in working out this tension. In Frost’s poetics of space and place, mountains operate through a complex mechanics of positionality, withholding, and denial to galvanize the evolution of the individual. The evolution of the human centres upon a process of strategic emplacement in the relationship
between the individual and the natural world, even as it fosters processes of human individuation through the emergence of desire and the discovery of voice through the love of and yearning for a natural world that is never fully within the grasp of the human. This chapter will centre upon a range of major and minor mountain works, including ‘The Mountain’ (1915), ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, Donkey’s Ears, and Some Books’ (1923), ‘Time Out’ (1942), ‘The Birthplace’ (1923), ‘The Bearer of Evil Tidings’ (1936), ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’ (1947) and ‘Two Look at Two’ (1923). The aim will be to assess the deployment of mountain imagery and its significance both within Frost’s aesthetic and within the complex spiritual and philosophical metaphysics of which his art is representative. Together, the poems and the discussions of them should provide the basis for a figurative map of Frost's sense of place as it is revealed in his poems, exemplifying the significance of literal and symbolic emplacement in Frost’s poetics.

3.1 The Symbolic Economy of Mountains

Due to their grandeur, mountains have a natural tendency to evoke a sense of awe, wonder and mystery. In prehistoric times, primitive societies viewed mountains as the homes of both deities and devils and they were only to be approached for religious purposes. In volcanic regions, eruptions were seen as signs of divine displeasure and anger. Accordingly, human sacrifices were offered in times of natural disasters in order to pacify the anger of the gods. In non-volcanic areas, mountains were also viewed with some degree of fear. The summits of mountains were terror-evoking and were often viewed as the home of dangerous beasts (Price, 1986). While such features were mostly negative and deathly, primitive peoples also regarded mountains as having positive and life-affirming traits. They were considered the vital source of life and a major source of fertility linked with water, streams, rainfalls, and rivers. They also had a religious dimension as a sacred site associated with physical and spiritual healing.

In the New World, long before it was known by that name, mountains played an important role in the mythology and sacred practices of American Indians. Many American mountains originally had Indian names like Mount McKinley (Denali) and Mount Rainier (Tacoma). Some mountains such as Bear Butte and Mount Shasta were deemed to be supremely sacred sites by Native Americans and were revered in rituals and commemorated in teachings. For the Hopi and Navajo, The Black Mesa Mountains in Arizona are sacred due to their association with the centre of the universe for the former and the balance of nature for the
latter. In the Apache emergence and creation narrative, the people were instructed by the Hactcin (supernatural beings) to make a sand painting of a land surrounded by mountains in order to reach the upper world, which they subsequently achieved by building ladders (Lynch, 2010).

Over the course of early western civilization, attitudes toward mountains changed, shifting from the ambivalent to the largely negative. It was not until the Enlightenment that mountains were looked upon again positively. Ideas associated with the usefulness of mountains and their intrinsic values for wildlife preservation were beginning to emerge by the end of the seventeenth century. By the late 18th and early nineteenth century, however, there was another shift in general cultural attitudes toward mountains. During this period, appreciation of the sublime beauty of mountains was a common theme for artists, philosophers and poets throughout the United States and Europe (Price, 1986).

In the United States, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the literature of the White Mountains. The grandeur of the American land and specifically the hilly and mountainous landscape of New England attracted American writers and consequently celebration of their beauty and dominance in the landscape found its way into the works of the early American landscape artists such as Thomas Cole, the founder of The White Mountain School, also known as Hudson River School, whose masterpiece painting, ‘The Notch of The White Mountains’ (1839), provided an inspirational model for much landscape work in the nineteenth century. Other painters identified with the art of the White Mountain School included Thomas Doughty, Alvan T. Fisher, and John Frederick Kensett. Oral literature in the shape of folk tales and legends served as inspirational sources during this period. Mountains were also vigorously valorised in Romantic art and poetry. They served as an inspirational source to writers and poets such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lucy Larcom, John Greenleaf Whittier, as well as the Transcendentalist triumvirate of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. After several visits to the White Mountains, Irving used three words to describe such wild landscapes: ‘beautiful beyond expectation’ (Irving, cited in Bennet, 2003: 70). Mountains provided Nathaniel Hawthorne with the setting for three different tales: ‘Ambitious Guest’ (1835), ‘The Great Carbuncle’ (1837) and ‘The Great Stone Face’ (1850). Hawthorne’s description of the Notch of the White Mountains as a ‘Romantic defile’ after his visit in 1832 ‘offered not only a neat typology of nineteenth-century visitors to the region but also a map of their differing responses to the landscape through which they travelled’ (Cenkl, 2006: xv).
Many other American writers including Emerson and Thoreau began to make regular visits to the White Mountains of New Hampshire and these places became a touchstone for their writings.

Emerson’s first book *Nature* (1836), itself a literary mountain on the landscape of nineteenth-century American literature and beyond, opened the door to a new way of thinking about the aesthetic and spiritual value of natural landscapes. In his visit to the White Mountains, Emerson acknowledged the advantages gained from climbing to higher ground. To Thoreau, mountains represented the sublime, the beauty of nature, an escape from the pressures of civilization, and a favourite refuge. Climbing mountains captured Thoreau’s interest from his first mountain trips to the White Mountains in 1839 until his death in 1862. Mountains also figure prominently in Thoreau’s works. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Thoreau traces the route up to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. *The Maine Woods* (1864) is basically ‘a collection of three separate essays [. . .] recounting three different wilderness excursions (1846), (1853), (1875)’ (Wayne, 2006: 175). These essays, which show Thoreau’s profound passion for and curiosity about mountains, were in fact inspired by various trips he made to the mountains where, in his first trip, he climbed Mount Ktaadn, the highest peak in Maine, and returned in his second and third trips, reveling in the harsh beauty of the landscape and, above all, the aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual fascination it inspired. These essays are not just a detailed explanation of Thoreau’s physical journeys, but also offer an evocative allegorical association between the physical ascent of mountains and the spiritual journey of the individual.

From the Romantic era onwards, mountains have held a special place in the history of American literature. They are regarded as the embodiments of spiritual values and cultural traditions reflecting the beliefs and values of Americans. Today, the Appalachian Mountains in Eastern North America and the Rocky Mountains of the West signify basic cultural and spiritual values to the American society, symbolizing what can be interpreted as ‘the original and unsullied spirit of the nation’ (Byers & Price, 2013: 2). Other mountains figure prominently in the US sense of national identity, as is evident in spaces such as Mount Rushmore, located in South Dakota, which, with its heroic images of the nation’s greatest presidents, is considered to be a symbol of the nation itself, and the San Francisco Peaks, a volcanic mountain range located in the southwestern United States, which are singled out as a
place of special evocative significance and sanctity for the indigenous peoples residing there, who ascribe to the range profound religious significance.

### 3.2 Into the Sublime: Lofty Heights and Immovable Presence in ‘The Mountain’

‘Mrs. Frost’ as Thompson’s *Robert Frost: The Early Years* (1967), reports, ‘was the first to arouse [Frost’s] enjoyment of geography, and she did it by calling his attraction to the natural wonders and beauties of those physical features they could actually see from the lookout points of three hills they climbed in their walks: Telegraph Hill, Russian Hill, [and] Nob Hill’ (Thompson, 1967: 26) Frost’s sense of place, however, goes beyond his earliest encounters with the seven hills of San Francisco. He spent most of his life in New England whose mountains inspired his poetry. New Hampshire, Vermont and Derry in particular, held a special place in the life of Frost. After the publication of his two volumes of poetry *A Boy’s Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914) in the United States and their success in England, Frost moved with his family to New Hampshire where he purchased a farm at Franconia. The farm, reports Thomas C. Bailey ‘had (and has) a fine view of the Presidential Range in the White Mountains’ (cited in Tuten & Zubizarreta, 2001: 123). Set in the White Mountains, Franconia is a small picturesque mountain town located north of Franconia Notch, famous for its splendid mountain view. Frost’s relation to New Hampshire goes even further and deeper than a retreat in her mountains to include deeper psychological and spiritual attachments. Frost touches upon this in his letter to the editor of his fourth volume of poetry, *New Hampshire*, subtitled ‘A Guide to the Granite State” (1938):

> Not a poem, I believe, in all my six books, from ‘A Boy’s Will’ to ‘A Further Range’, but has something in it of New Hampshire. Nearly half my poems must actually have been written in New Hampshire. Every single person in ‘North of Boston’ was a friend or acquaintance of mine in New Hampshire. I lived, somewhat brokenly to be sure, in Salem, Derry, Plymouth, and Franconia, New Hampshire, from my tenth to my forty-fifth year. Most of my time I lived out of it. I lived in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on the edge of New Hampshire, where my walks and vacations could be in New Hampshire. My first teaching was in a district school in the southern part of Salem, New Hampshire. Four of my children were born in Derry, New Hampshire. My father was born in Kinston, New Hampshire. My wife’s mother was born in New Hampshire. So you see it has been New Hampshire, New Hampshire with me all the way. You will find my poems show it, I think (cited in Richardson, 2007: 128).
Like his New England precursors, Frost was also known for his love of New England’s wild landscape and his enthusiasm for climbing her mountains. Thomas Baily’s ‘Reading Robert Frost Environmentally: Contexts Then and Now’ neatly summarizes the poet’s mountain excursions in New England as follows:

[Frost] was an avid botanizer and hiker, and, at the age of 48, once attempted, with children, the 261-mile Long Trail in the Green Mountains, shortly after it was opened in 1922. In 1921, he and his friend Charles Lowell Young, professor of English at Wellesley College, hiked some eighty miles from Upton, Maine, to Lake Willoughby, Vermont, in the northeast Kingdom - a region in which, incidentally, the poet had earlier gone hunting for rare ferns. He often climbed peaks in the White Mountain range while he lived in Franconia, New Hampshire, sometimes accompanied by his friend Morris Tilley – a professor of English at the University of Michigan – whose family summered there (cited in Richardson, 2007: 244-5).

Influenced by the same New England landscapes that inspired his precursors, Frost in his earliest narrative poem entitled ‘The Mountain’ (1915) echoes Transcendentalist tropes, at once reflecting and problematizing the aesthetics of sublimity, the import of the height and mass of the mountainscape, particularly in relation to the human. ‘The Mountain’ which was written in New Hampshire and inspired by the Granite Mountains located there, appeared in Frost’s second volume *North of Boston*. ‘The Mountain’ is Frost’s first poem dealing specifically and explicitly with human interaction on a mountain landscape. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between a man who finds himself a wanderer on the mountain and a farmer who is a resident of the area. The opening lines introduce the main theme and setting:

The mountain held the town as in a shadow
I saw so much before I slept there once:
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.
Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.

(1-6)

Thoreau’s description of a mountain’s shadow in his first chapter in *Walden* as ‘the Shelter of the forest’ might have been the source of inspiration for the above lines. That the geographic proximity of the mountain should exert such an effect on the town as to cast into darkness that which would otherwise have been bathed in sunlight is significant insofar as it suggests a Transcendentalist antipodal binary between the urban and the rural, with the latter operating as the privileged term. True to the Romantic origins of the Transcendental movement, the
juxtaposition of the stately, sun-drenched mountain and the benighted city in its shadows implies a reversal of Enlightenment-era progressive narratives wherein the march of civilization, signified most notably in the advent of the modern city, is all. Frost’s mountain looms large, and the town is cast into darkness by its ineradicable, undeniable, and immovable physicality. The mountain is an ancient and immutable reality in contrast to which the wonders of the modern American town appear ephemeral and anemic indeed. Wakefield asserts that, above all, Frost’s poetry

[t]ells us what it costs to be a natural man in a man-made world. He must redirect his gaze and often as not he must satisfy the demands of the gaze directed at him…. Frost’s man who stops to gaze longingly at the woods is Everyman, turned so insistently to the demands of the artificial world that he cannot let himself indulge his wish…. Finally, the rural workers must make demands that a boy’s nature cannot fulfill, and when he dies, they must turn prematurely, unnaturally from their mourning in order to tend once again to their machine. All of them, despite their vastly different circumstances, hear the tick of the clock and feel the gaze of Emerson’s all-conspiring society (Wakefield, 2000: 368-9).

Wakefield’s analysis speaks to the tension inherent in Frost’s poetics between man’s orientation toward modern society and his orientation toward the natural world. The ‘clock time’ of modern society remakes the man, mutating him into something ‘unnatural’ in the most literal sense of the word. This remaking creates not only an estrangement between the man and nature, but also an estrangement between man and himself. He can no longer do what he yearns to do. He is beholden to the clock and to the artificial obligations of modernity. These manmade duties, moreover, alienate the human from deeper, more primordial, and more potent obligations, such as the proper work of mourning. Even life is cheapened by the clock time of modernity, as men are forced to turn prematurely from honoring the human dead in order to ‘honor’ the modern workday.

The mountain as a central symbol of this poem serves as a corrective in the social critique Wakefield identifies above. While the word ‘shadow’ can be associated with negative connotations, in this context the shadow cast by the mountain, as in Thoreau’s formulation, implies an intrinsic awareness of the mountain as a constant companion to the town, for which the mountain serves as firm boundary and protective barrier. The shadow cast by the mountain also transforms its environs, including the town, into a gigantic sun-dial which tells the cyclical time of nature that predates the segmented chronology of the industrial clock. The picture of the mountain here is strongly suggestive of Frost’s affiliation with Thoreauvian
Transcendentalism because of the emphasis on the triangulation of the individual, a fallen world of machines and a protective and potentially restorative natural world. It is important to note that the town itself is not envisioned in this passage as providing any form of protective barrier for the individual in need. This town is not a fortress. In comparison to its mountain neighbour, the town is a paltry thing, ill-equipped to provide for the needs of its human residents, as is suggested in the farmer’s remarks to the stranger:

There is no village—only scattered farms.  
We were but sixty voters last election.  
We can’t in nature grow to many more:  
That thing takes all the room!

(24-27)

Conversely, the mountainscape functions in this scene as a corrective for the unmoored human, for the solitary self who, by chance or choice, has escaped the thralls of modern civilization (i.e. the modern town) only to be brought into the sheltering, if adamantine, embrace of the ancient, lofty mountain.

Significantly, however, the sentiments linking Thoreau and Frost in this regard are not the wholly redemptive and laudatory models frequently associated with the Transcendentalists and their forebears, the European Romantics. Eric C. Link argues for a more cautious reading of both Frost and Thoreau:

Although Thoreau and Frost are traditionally seen as relatively optimistic in their exploration of nature, both are in many respects dark romantics; they both question at times the optimistic and comparatively monistic vision of Emerson, and they both express a certain skepticism concerning the ability of the poet to reconcile man and Nature or subject and object. (Link, 1997: 183)

This more complex view of Frost’s aesthetic vision is essential to sufficiently assessing the recurring themes, motifs, and symbols which populate the poet’s oeuvre, and particularly those structures which inform his representation of natural spaces in general and mountainscapes specifically. Link is correct insofar as Frost’s deployment of nature imagery exemplifies a conceptualization of nature that is not entirely gentle, beautiful, or rhapsodic. The Nature of Emerson is an idealized materialization of a benevolent cosmos, an almost pre-lapsarian Eden. Frost’s nature, on the contrary, has within its scope a power to inflict great pain and a capacity for vast impassivity, Frost might even suggest indifference, in the face of human suffering. This is the more nuanced view of Frost’s nature aesthetic that Link calls for here, a view which

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may remediate critical tendencies to ‘overcorrect’, aligning Frost with the Gothic when they simply can no longer affiliate him with the Emersonian ideal. However, it must be emphasized that Frost’s cognition of the darker forces of nature does not suggest that he subscribes to a view of the natural world as malevolent, as a wholly Gothic or even as a Dark Romanticist perspective might. Rather, as this chapter will show, Frost’s nuanced ideological and aesthetic systems accommodate images of nature that are both punishing and indifferent and yet also benign. The natural world, as an eternal and, largely, immovable force has the long view of the cosmos and of the place of human endeavour and human pain in relation to that timeless sublime. To deny human pain would, for Frost, be at once deceptive and foolish. Rather, Frost’s corpus seeks to acknowledge, confront, and aestheticize pain and the natural world is, for Frost, not merely a potent tool for that process but perhaps the only real tool the human being has for this endeavour. A brief passage from the short lyric, ‘Time Out’ reflects Frost’s frequent imaging of nature as text:

   It took that pause to make him realize
   The mountain he was climbing had the slant
   As of a book held up before his eyes
   (And was a text albeit done in plant).

The ‘slant’ of the mountain is significant here. It is no easy going for this speaker to climb this ‘slant’ and yet the alignment of the slant with a book reveals Frost’s conviction that the struggle, particularly a struggle activated by immediate contact with the natural world, is instructive. The text done in plant here is, for Frost, a vast metaphysical textbook, instilling in the human through the harsh rubrics of endeavour, pain, and disappointment the hard but most essential lessons of life.

These ideas are more thoroughly developed in ‘The Mountain’. The detail with which Frost describes the landscape surrounding the eponymous peak is telling:

   And yet between the town and it I found,
   When I walked forth at dawn to see new things,
   Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields.
   The river at the time was fallen away,
   And made a widespread brawl on cobble-stones;
   But the signs showed what it had done in spring;
   Good grass-land gullied out, and in the grass
   Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark.
   I crossed the river and swung round the mountain.
This curiosity ‘to see new things’ highlights the narrator’s eagerness to explore and discover the place. Fagan observes that the narrator appears to be ‘unconcerned about his predicament, however, simply curious about where he finds himself’ (Fagan, 2007: 227). Indeed, on reading these lines the reader’s attention is immediately moved from imagining a character who seemed to be lost to someone who might probably be called, as Robert Faggen notes, ‘a naturalist or a geologist’ (Faggen, 2004: 136). This becomes even clearer as the poem advances through its shift from a description of the mountain and its physical characteristics and surroundings to the metaphysical, from the seen to the unseen:

That looks like a path.
Is that the way to reach the top from here? —

‘I’ve heard say
Right on the top, tip-top – a curious thing.

The sense of mystery and the moments of awe in the poem are created in large part by the farmer’s discussion about the top of the mountain, the path that leads to it and the vision of climbing. The farmer’s description of the top of the mountain as ‘a curious thing’ reminds us that the tops of mountains have long been associated with mystery and obscurity. After his climbing experience of Mount Lafayette in ‘Ktaadn’ Thoreau remarked that ‘[t]he tops of mountains are . . . sacred and mysterious tracts’ (cited in Cenkl, 2006: 59). What adds to its curiosity is that the one climber referred to in the poem ‘never got high enough to see’. Likewise, Thoreau who had climbed several high mountains including an attempt to climb Mountain Washington, New England's highest peak and Ktaadn, the second highest mountain in New England, declared that ‘the summit of a mountain . . . is not, after all, the easiest thing to find, even in clear weather’ (cited in Cenkl, 2006: 59). Frost, like Thoreau, refers to the aura of inaccessibility that people attribute to mountains which forms an essential part of a mountain’s mystique.

Throughout the description of the top of the mountain, the farmer speaks with confidence and assurance about the existence of a spring on its summit, despite the fact that he has neither ascended the mountain nor even ever attempted to:
[Farmer] there’s the spring,  
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.  
That ought to be worth seeing.’

[Narrator]: ‘If it’s there.  
You never saw it?’

[Farmer]: ‘I guess there’s no doubt  
About its being there. I never saw it.  
It may not be right on the very top:  
It wouldn’t have to be a long way down  
To have some head of water from above,  
And a good distance down might not be noticed  
By anyone who’d come a long way up.  
One time I asked a fellow climbing it  
To look and tell me later how it was.’

[Narrator]: ‘What did he say?’  
[Farmer]: ‘He said there was a lake  
Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top.’

[Narrator]: ‘But a lake’s different. What about the spring?’  
‘He never got up high enough to see.

As someone who lived in the shadow of the mountain most of his life, the farmer was supposed to be the knowing guide. Instead, he turned out to be surprisingly uninformed about and, perhaps most importantly, unconcerned with the mystery of the mountain. The elder’s lack of concrete knowledge about the physical geography of the mountain, the nature of its topography and its features, parallels Wordsworth’s trope of the unlettered rustic and again hearkens back to Romantic binaries opposing empirical and experiential knowledge. The hale and hearty visitor, seemingly galvanised by a rationalistic ethos, subjects the elderly native to a litany of questions which the latter addresses with sometimes baffling and not infrequently contradictory answers. This is a clash of epistemes. The newcomer seeks to understand this unfamiliar terrain by deploying the hermeneutics of the modern, industrialized world. His is the discourse and the episteme of the schoolhouse, of the geographer, the surveyor, and the conventional (as opposed to the creative) cartographer. For the visitor, the mountain can be quantified. It can be defined—and in the process contained—by scientific measurement. Its features can be mapped and classified, and in the process, the mountain can be domesticated, brought into subjugation to the harsh because irrefutable machinations of empirical knowledge.
Not so, however, for the rustic farmer. His is the episteme of the Romantics and their
descendants, the Transcendentalists. It is the episteme of the spirit, of the Emersonian Over-
Soul, of the intuition of the human soul that resounds to the music of nature and aligns in
mutual understanding and sympathy with the call of the mountain landscape. His mountain is
not to be known. It is to be experienced. It is not to be measured. It is to be felt, brushed up
against through contact without study. It is not to be defined, dissected or explained. It is to be
lived. Gene W. Ruoff’s analysis of Wordsworth’s ‘radical poetics’ in which the critic
emphasizes the poet’s famous assertion that poetry is nothing more than ‘a man speaking to
men’ is instructive here. Ruoff writes that

[t]he program which Wordsworth suggests for poetic language—that it would
rediscover its roots in spoken language and aspire to the expressiveness of the
language of ‘real’ situations—is a shocking inversion of the priorities of
formalist poetics, which in both their Neoclassical and Romantic formulations
find in the written word a greater truth and precision. It would be unwise to
dismiss Wordsworth’s discussion as simply a restatement of the venerable
quarrel between nature and art: he is thinking seriously about the source of the
expressive and communicative powers of language, and his fundamentalism
should not be confused with primitivism (Ruoff, 1972: 204-5).

The juxtaposition Ruoff elucidates between Wordsworth’s models of spoken versus written
language may be fruitfully applied here to the opposing ways that the farmer and the newcomer
encounter, perceive, and, ultimately, speak of the mountain. This assessment is beneficial in the
explication of Frost’s aesthetic inasmuch as Frost may be seen here to carry on the
Wordsworthian aesthetic, the ‘radical poetics’ which eschews the strictures of formalism and
Classicism, associated with the academic episteme represented by the newcomer in the
narrative of ‘The Mountain’. Like the image of Wordsworth that Ruoff posits above, Frost, too,
advances a poetics of the real, of lived, not theoretical, experience, a poetics of contact, not of
speculation. Significantly, when Ruoff makes a distinction between Wordsworth’s poetics and
the poetics of primitivism, he invokes a difference which likewise applies to Frost. Frost’s
farmers and peasants are not the ‘noble savages’ so frequently ascribed to Romantic thought.
They are not the atavistic and amoral, the unschooled and unreflecting children of nature. As
will be explored in detail later in this chapter, the farmer here expresses a sound knowledge of
natural, physical laws as he explains the seemingly strange phenomena of the water
temperature at the mountain’s peak. He is no primitive man-child, but, rather, he suggests a
reprioritizing of values, an episteme which substitutes modern, empirical progressivism with a
new schema, one which rethinks the use-value of the natural world and of the human’s
relationship to it. The farmer’s reply when the newcomer questions whether he had ever climbed the mountain is representative of this important ethos: ‘T’wouldn’t seem real to climb for climbing it’. As the farmer states, he has lived in the shadow of the mountain his entire life. He has farmed at its feet since he was a boy. He has taken its measure in the form of his own labours, in his cognizance of its presence, and in the speeding years of his one and only life given over to its immortal shade. The farmer does not need to climb—or to measure—the mountain to make it real. It is already real, through the realness of long experience, not academic speculation.

Tim Kendall has also provided important insight into the ideological and aesthetic connections between Frost and Wordsworth. He writes:

‘The Mountain’ is the most Wordsworthian poem in *North of Boston*, not just in its everyday diction but also in characterization. The slow-moving farmer who describes the locality is a direct descendant of Wordsworth’s old Cumberland and especially his leech-gatherer figures whose intimacy with their environment grants them an intuitive wisdom . . . Frost interrogates this tradition as he inherits it: ‘The Mountain’ explores the limitations as well as the depths of the farmer’s knowledge; and explores ultimately the nature of knowledge itself. (Kendall, 2012: 68)

Kendall rightly relates the poem to the Romantic appreciation and perception of mountains, but risks missing the mark when he considers the farmer’s lack of knowledge as a reflection of his limited knowledge of nature (at least insofar as ‘knowledge’ is used to denote empirical, positivist knowledge, as represented by the newcomer; as we have seen, the farmer’s ‘knowledge’ is of a vastly different, and, Frost might suggest, far more profound type). The farmer’s accurate description of the spring on the top of the mountain and his belief in the existence of ‘a curious thing’ exemplify his faith in the existence of the unseen. The interplay between certainty (exemplified in ‘There is a brook’, ‘there is the spring, Right on the summit, almost like a fountain. / That ought to be worth seeing’, ‘I guess there's no doubt / About its being there’) and uncertainty (exemplified in ‘It may not be right on the very top’ and ‘He never got up high enough to see’) underscores the issues of faith and belief conveyed through the character of the farmer whose basic knowledge of the landscape is not based on empirical evidence, but on faith. In this respect, Elaine Barry briefly comments that ‘both the towering, inscrutable mountain and the Grail-like spring are rich in metaphysical association, and the poem has much to say about the nature of faith and scientific knowledge’ (Barry, 1973: 11-12). Barry goes further to suggest that the mystery of nature is something eternally beyond the
scru tin y of the scientific optic. Indeed, the farmer’s invitation to follow the metaphysical reality, his belief in the unseen as well as the unrevealed ‘curious thing’ on the top of the mountain, suggests that science can provide no real, meaningful insight into the true metaphysical realities of the natural world.

Nevertheless, though Frost argues for the pre-eminence of faith in mankind’s relation to the natural world, there remains an important experiential component to the development and sustaining of this trust. The farmer’s faith is based upon his intimate and enduring experience with the mountain. He tells the newcomer, ‘It doesn’t seem so much to climb a mountain/You’ve worked around the foot of all your life’. Once again, this scene is suggestive of the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘vital’ experience and theoretical, speculative knowledge – the values, languages and epistemes of the academy versus the rude grammar of nature. It is the mountainscape, and the years devoted in working at the mountain’s feet, which teach the farmer what he needs to know. Of Frost’s representation of rural laborers, Richard Poirier writes, ‘the correspondence between physical work and mental work, between manual labour and writing…is expressed with an eagerness that effectively blurs the cultural and social distinctions known to exist between these different kinds of activity’ (Poirier, 1992: 81). This vital theme will be explored at greater length later in this chapter. Of interest to our purposes now, however, is the suggestion of the process of work as it occurs in the natural landscape as dismantling social hierarchies, erasing boundaries between means and modes of knowledge, and, indeed, of privileging experiential knowledge and discourse.

3.3 The Metaphysics of Knowledge and of Faith in ‘The Mountain’

As has been suggested, the farmer’s amorphous and enigmatic mountain is not merely an object of both knowledge and of faith, it is their instrument. The mountain’s resistance to scientific quantification is, for the farmer, instructive in matters of faith, a catechism which eschews orthodoxy, whether this be the orthodoxy of organized religion or the orthodoxy of scientific empiricism. If the mountain is to be understood as a liturgical force, its sublime physicality inculcating in the rustic farmer a neo-Transcendentalist metaphysics, then the imagery of ladders prevalent in this poem takes on a particularly important resonance. It is significant to mention that special prominence is given to the ladder as a symbol of ascension: ‘I don’t advise your trying from this side./ There is no proper path, but those that have/ Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd’s’ (38-40).
It has already been established in the previous chapter that the ladder is a strong spiritual symbol in Frost’s verse, but one may ask here: why is it given such prominence in this poem? The image of a ladder has long been used to signify spiritual transformation. It is usually linked with the biblical image of Jacob’s Ladder, representing the staircase by which the angels ascended to the summit of the sky and descended to Earth. They ‘ascended with petitions and descended with answers’ (White, 2009: 88). The image of the ladder in the poem suggests, by implication, that there is a connection between climbing a ladder and revealing ‘the curious thing’ or the mystery on the very top of the mountain. Frost here symbolically connects climbing the ladder to uncovering the mystery of the mountain, a journey of laborious ascension from ignorance to enlightenment.

The characteristics Frost gives to the mountain further reinforce the idea that his relationship with the sublime is not the result of either imagined or analytical experience but rather is based on description of places suggestive of real experience, as can be inferred from the precise choice of the name of the mountain:

[Narrator] What’s its name?’
[Farmer] ‘We call it Hor: I don’t know if that’s right.’

[Narrator] ‘Can one walk around it? Would it be too far?’

[Farmer] ‘You can drive round and keep in Lunenburg, But it’s as much as ever you can do, The boundary lines keep in so close to it.
Hor is the township, and the township’s Hor—
And a few houses sprinkled round the foot, Like boulders broken off the upper cliff,
Rolled out a little farther than the rest.’

(90-99)

In ‘Going and Coming Back: Robert Frost’s Religious Poetry’, Floyd C. Watkins maintains that ‘the name of the mountain, Hor, is biblical, and it is a major key to the interpretation of the poem’ (Watkins, 1974: 446):

There are two Mount Hors in the Bible. In the twentieth chapter of Numbers the children of Israel come to the desert of Zin, where they have no water for the cattle and the congregation. (Compare the stream on the side of the mountain in Frost’s poem). Here Moses smote the rock: ‘And the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank’. But Moses and his brother Aaron offended the Lord, and on the top of Mount Hor, Aaron ‘in the sight of all the congregation’ was stripped of his priestly garments (compare the overall in
Frost’s poem), which were put upon his son Eleazar, ‘and Aaron died there in the top of the mount’. The other Mount Hor (Numbers 34:7-8) marks the northern boundary of Israel. Either passage may serve as a short commentary on the poem: one Mount Hor is the place of the passing of the priestly garments, the boundary between life and death; the other divides the land of the children of God from the land of the unbelievers, the children of the world. There is enough evidence for a religious or aesthetic theme in the poem to be convincing, but neither the characters nor Frost achieves a real mountain-top experience (Watkins, 1974: 446-7).

Watkins’ argument is appealing and consistent with Kendall when the latter remarks that by calling the ‘Mountain’ ‘Hor’, Frost ‘gives [it] a biblical antiquity and authority’ (Kendall, 2012: 69). However, Watkins also suggests that ‘The Mountain’ is a poem without a religious vision. This is important because Watkins’ assertion that Frost lacks a cohesive revision in fact aligns with the poet’s repudiation of religious dogma and orthodoxy. As we have already seen and will be explored at greater length later in this chapter, Frost’s orientations toward religion are highly idiosyncratic, advancing a fragmented, highly subjective and deeply individualized model of religious experience. Spurning any organized religious system—or vision—in favour of flashes of insight, contact, and connection, of the individual spontaneously butting up against or plugging into the divine, most often through the conduit of nature.

Frost’s description of Mt. Hor in his 1891 notes gives us ample evidence that ‘The Mountain’ might indeed allude to the biblical Mount Hor. He writes, ‘On the summit of Mt. Hor lie the bones of the priest, Aaron’ (cited in Richardson, 2007: 7). As Frost continues in his description of the place:

It is a place of the wildest grandeur – one worthy the last resting place of the Israelitish orator, overlooking as it does the mountain fastnesses of the warlike sons of Esau, through whose country the Jews strove so long in vain to force a passage. Mountains rise on every hand; to the north, to the west as far as the great desert, and south and east as far as the eye can reach. From Mt. Hor the view is one of magnificent sameness; but not until the cliffs have towered above, not until the storm has crowded its overwhelming torrents down the ravines, can the grand sublimity of the situation be felt (Richardson, 2007: 7).

Frost’s description here implies a provocative tension between blindness and insight. The sense of a ‘magnificent sameness’ which can only be dispelled through the advent of the storm’s ‘overwhelming torrents’ magnifies the Old Testament allusions in this scene in general and in the naming of the mountain in particular.
In the Old Testament story, after decades of travail, and on the cusp of reaching the promised land, Moses commits an act so offensive to God that he is prohibited ever from seeing that toward which he had strived, that to which he had led God’s Chosen People. Moses would experience only the ‘magnificent sameness’ of the desert. There would be no glimpse of the new Eden for him. The sin which barred Moses from the promised land was that of hubris. He defied God’s Commandment to strike the rock only once to bring forth water, striking twice instead. The second strike usurped the power of God. The waters which flowed from the rock were not, then, the waters of God’s Grace, the manifestation of His dominion over the natural world, His beneficence in unleashing the powers of nature to bless His people. Rather, Moses’s proud—and wrathful—act was the trick of a magician, the waters were the product of a cunning tactician, not the replenishing torrents of divine nature. Link’s analysis of Frost’s ‘dark Romanticism’ is once more useful here, insofar as he views both Frost and Thoreau as exemplifying a transgressive ‘Extra-vagance’ which ultimately leads to a crisis of doubt:

The key to Extra-vagance is the attempt on the part of the poet to journey beyond conventional boundaries in an attempt to uncover hidden truth. It is both a literal wandering and a figurative questing; it is an attempt, in Frost’s words, to say ‘spirit in terms of matter.’ In the works of Thoreau and Frost, Extra-vagance is used both as a structural device—in which the poet actually sets forth on a quest, or a wandering—and as a thematic device, in which the poet attempts, by pushing beyond conventional boundaries, to reconcile the subject and the object, to unify man and Nature, to find a ‘true expression.’ As French has suggested, for Frost and Thoreau, the object is to ‘go not into nature but to go beyond nature’ (156). For both Frost and Thoreau, however, the quest to go beyond Nature results in an epistemic crisis of belief and ultimately fails (Link, 1997: 184-5).

This analysis posits that Frost’s aesthetic is one which insists upon respect for these boundaries of Nature and Link’s analysis is persuasive in its emphasis on Frost’s preoccupation with the dire ramifications for those who fail to exercise this due respect.

Frost’s complex but subtle allusions to the Old Testament story of Moses and Aaron imply a fundamental division between the human and the divine, a division humans ignore at their peril. More salient for our purposes, however, is Frost’s implication that this division operates and manifests most clearly through geographies of natural space. The mountain peak is, in its essence, a sacred space. It defies quantification and eludes empirical understanding because, quite simply, this is a knowledge of the divine to which human beings have no right, no capacity, and no claim. Presumptions to know and to speak knowledgeably of the mountain’s peaks are as false and dangerous as the waters from Moses’s second strike. Moses proves
himself unworthy of entering—or casting his eyes upon the Promised Land—because he presumes a power over and knowledge of the natural world which belongs only to God. For the Promised Land to have been subjected to the gaze of one who would foolhardily presume claim and to control it would have been a defilement.

Significantly, neither the farmer nor the visitor reaches the peak of Mt. Hor in the poem. There remains in the poem an air of sacred elusiveness and, perhaps even more importantly, a general humility in the sublime presence of the mountain. The men speak of the mountain. They speculate on it. However, neither actually endeavours to climb it because, as Mircea Eliade notes, the sacred space is ‘the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, something that does not belong to our world’ (Eliade cited in Relph, 1976: 15). For all the stories, and for all the plans, the humans in the poem maintain a respectful distance because the mountain, particularly at its peak, belongs to this different order. It is the nexus of the heavenly, earthly, and, perhaps, also of the infernal, realms and it is possessed of boundaries which humans may not cross. Thus, the townspeople populate the base of the mountain. The town settles at the mountain’s feet, and houses dot its base. Beyond a certain level of ascent, however, roads and footpaths do not go.

In invoking the Old Testament story and paralleling this with the careful, systematic movement of the humans in relation to the mountainscape, Frost suggests that it is precisely in this process of emplacement, of maintaining proper positioning, that the sacred is maintained. There is in this regard an aspect of ritual. In Frost’s description, cited above, the poet notes that the divinity of the mountain cannot be fully appreciated, and indeed is not revealed, until certain events occur: the deluge must come and the cliffs must loom from behind. This echoes the Old Testament story insofar as Moses is denied the opportunity to glimpse the Promised Land because of his violation of divine protocol. He usurps the divine order; he defies sacred mandate; he violates holy ritual, and in the process he misaligns himself, positioning himself before God, rendering himself out of place in regard to the divine order and in the process ensuring that the divine, the Promised Land, cannot be revealed to him.

In his study of futility in Frost’s work, Arthur M. Saltzman describes this essential loss of the ‘promised land’ as fundamental both to the human condition in general and to that of the poet in particular, a theme which Saltzman finds especially resonant in the poet’s oeuvre: ‘Frost tends to concentrate on the provisionality of creating what he cannot positively perceive…. Ironically, impenetrability seems to be not only a result of the poet’s own
benightedness but a fundamental quality of nature’ (Saltzman, 2000: 297). Impenetrability, however, is not necessarily linked to impossibility for Frost, nor is it aligned with the injunction to despair. In ‘The Bearer of Evil Tidings’ for example, Frost’s narrative centres upon the close affiliation between divine grace, earthly trouble, and new creation. The title figure chooses to lose himself in the mountain woods rather than face bringing bad news to the now overthrown king. In his desperate efforts to flee, he encounters a princess who herself was turned aside by unfortunate news, the news that she was with child, though she had been en route to marry a prince. The child was of divine origins, but its existence would nevertheless have threatened the alliance and the lives of the princess, her child, and her company. So instead she, too, sought refuge in the mountain wilds and there she gave birth to a semi-divine ruler, who reigned over the village the princess and her army established with supernatural beneficence and wisdom. Frost writes,

And that was why there were people  
On one Himalayan shelf;  
And the bearer of evil tidings  
Decided to stay there himself.  

At least he had this in common  
With the race he chose to adopt:  
They had both of them had their reasons  
For stopping where they had stopped.  

(33-40)

The princess, her army, and the bearer of evil tidings were motivated by their own personal reasons for seeking solace and safety on the mountain, but the unifying thread is the experience of trouble—of fear, danger, and doubt—that precipitates a flight to nature. There is no redemption to be found. The original plans are not salvaged. The princess does not marry her prince. The messenger does not reach the throne and find reward for his efforts. Nevertheless, there is both survival and progress, even in the face of thwarted hope and effort: a new village is founded. A child is born. The messenger finds a new home. Frost seems to suggest, in this way, that the divine is most active and apparent not only when there is trouble but where the divine is the source of the trouble, inciting change through affliction.

As has been shown already and as will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, however, Frost’s aesthetic is neither fundamentally pessimistic nor unremittingly optimistic. ‘Nature’ may be oblique; it may deny humankind full access to its mysteries, and in this Saltzman’s analysis is instructive. However, Frost’s poetics do not allow for a reading of the
natural world as wholly ‘impenetrable’ or ‘benighted’. There is, as Saltzman himself suggests, a vast poetic fecundity in this space between access and denial, in the space between knowing and unknowing.

For this reason, the symbolic significance of Mount Hor takes on even greater import. Mount Hor is not only a Biblical borrowing but in fact an actual mountain in New England located on the side of Lake Willoughby in Vermont where Frost in fact camped with his family in 1909. After he had purchased Gully Farm in South Shaftsbury, Vermont and settled with his family there in 1929, Frost announced ‘Vermont as his chief state of residence’ referring to himself ‘as a Vermonter’ (cited in Duffy, Hand and Orth, 2003: 131). Frost had also purchased the Homer Noble Farm in Ripton, a small town in Vermont, where he ‘spent about half of each year, from early May to late October’ (Duffy, Hand and Orth, 2003: 131). In 1941, Frost encouraged his friend Louis Untermeyer to ‘save [his] money and buy a farm in Vermont’ (Duffy, Hand and Orth, 2003: 131). Finally, in 1961, just one year before his death, ‘the state legislature named Frost as the Poet Laureate of Vermont’ (Duffy, Hand and Orth, 2003: 131). While the two biblical Hors provide convincing explanations for the name of Frost’s mountain, his first-hand familiarity and closer intimacy with the region should not be underestimated. In this respect, Laurence Perrine speculates about place name in the poem as follows:

Since the name Hor is given some prominence in the poem (it is not introduced casually, simply in the course of talk, but is given in direct response to a question, three-quarters of the way through the poem), one may speculate as to why Frost chose this name, but no compelling reason suggests itself except that Frost spent some pleasant weeks there at the time, or not long before the time, that he wrote the poem (Perrine, 1971: 11).

Either directly or obliquely much of what Frost says in his quest narratives stems from a strong attachment to the New England tradition. In his lesser-known narrative poem ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears, and some Books’ (1923) also from New Hampshire, the reader encounters Frost’s reflections on his life in New England. The poem, as its title suggests, is about four different topics in which the opening part presents a wanderer and a guide setting off up a mountain together in search of ‘a stone baptismal font’. The opening lines introduce the setting where the guide resides:

Old Davis owned a solid mica mountain
In Dalton that would someday make his fortune.
There’d been some Boston people out to see it:
And experts said that deep down in the mountain
The mica sheets were big as plate-glass windows.
He’d like to take me there and show it to me.
As in ‘The Mountain’ the poem depicts a guide, Old Davis, and an outsider who is curious to discover the place and find ‘the stone baptismal font’:

‘I'll tell you what you show me. You remember
You said you knew the place where once, on Kinsman,
The early Mormons made a settlement
And built a stone baptismal font outdoors—
But Smith, or someone, called them off the mountain
To go West to a worse fight with the desert.
You said you'd seen the stone baptismal font.
Well, take me there.’
‘Someday I will.’
‘Today.’
‘Huh, that old bathtub, what is that to see?
Let's talk about it.’
‘Let's go see the place.’

Once again, the narrative of the poem establishes tension between a newcomer eager to explore the secrets of the territory and the ancient native, cognizant of the land’s treasures but largely indifferent to them. For Old Davis, the presence of the territory and its riches is enough. It is only when his obligation, as a guide, is invoked that he becomes once again actively, intimately engaged with the land. This contrasts with the newcomer who, much like the figure in ‘The Mountain’ exhibits an eager, if academic, interest in the territory. At stake for the newcomer is the scene’s historic resonance, a fact that the guide ridicules as a misalignment of priorities:

For God’s sake aren’t you fond of viewing nature?
You don’t like nature. All you like is books.
What signify a donkey’s ears and bottle,
However natural? Give you your books!

It is at this moment that the guide executes an intriguing reversal, substituting the newcomer’s privileging of empirical, authorized knowledge with localized wisdom in the form of the unpurchased books of a departed shut-in and lifelong resident of the mountain.¹ It is no coincidence that Frost shifts the focus immediately from the images of the empty Bottle and

¹ In his search of the font, the speaker comes across a dead poetess’ house, Clara Robinson, who was “shut in” for life. She lived her whole Life long in bed, and wrote her things in bed. (91-92).
lost fountain to the image of the long-lost shut-in’s abandoned books. This is a volume, the
guide notes, composed from a sick bed and written to commemorate and record the denizens of
the mountain, the natural world which the infirm poetess could only view from her window. In
this, the verses of the bedbound poetess represent a form of naturalist study emblematic of
Frost’s own orientation toward the study of nature. Stanlis writes,

Frost was always skeptical of ideological system-builders, whether in science,
or in religion, or in politics or anything else . . . In comparing Frost’s responses
to Thoreau and Darwin, it is good to remember his assertion that among the
works he most cherished were Walden and Darwin’s The Voyage of the H.M.S.
Beagle. Both books were to Frost perfect examples of how naturalists could
explore the external world as empirical and rational observers while
subordinating science to the discipline and values of the humanities (Stanlis,
2008: 84).

Stanlis’ insights suggest a double valence for the interpretation of Frost’s introduction of the
shut-in and her poetry in this scene: on the one hand, the shut-in’s sequestration from the
natural world she celebrates in her poetry reiterates the preeminence of emplacement
previously discussed. Unlike Moses, who usurped his proper position and thereby lost his
glimpse of paradise, the shut-in, by necessity, must retain her position. She occupies a distal
position in regard to the land she reverences and with this distance comes deference. She
cannot presume too much of her mountain. She is unable to exploit or abuse the land, and as
such she will never experience a loss through it, as in the newcomer’s loss of the baptismal font
or his discovery that the Bottle had run dry. Thus, empirical analysis is subordinated to the
imperatives of human desire, care, and feeling. She creates or builds upon what she cannot
experience first-hand. The yearnings of the shut-in are transubstantiated into language, echoing
what Russell Fraser has described in relation to Frost’s own experience of pain: ‘He called
grievances a form of impatience, grief a form of patience, and took satisfaction in a sadness
that didn’t fish for consolation. “Give us immedicable woes,” he said, “woes that nothing
can be done for”’ (Fraser, 1998: n.p).

The shut-in’s ‘immedicable woes’ educate her on life and nature, and it is this
instructive orientation, this forced stasis, that enables the invalid to discover her own voice.
This speaks to a preeminent attribute of Frost’s vision of place and space, which is the
connection between space and writing. Frost’s oeuvre is replete with juxtapositions between
nature imagery and the imagery of books. However, unlike Frost’s frequent invocation of the
rustic native and his foil, the erudite newcomer, the twining of nature imagery with the imagery
of writing/books is complementary rather than contradictory. These books are not the books of
the university. These are not the books that prompt the newcomer in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a
Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ to seek the Mormon baptismal font or that prompt the
stranger in ‘The Mountain’ to presume to quantify and survey the land. Rather, these are the
outpourings of spirits inflamed by sublime nature. These are musings akin to those uttered by
Wordsworth’s unlettered rustics. These books originate from those who themselves originate
from the land about which the books speak, as though the land itself were envoiced, and its
pastoral authors little more than the instruments, the voice, of the territory. Viewed in this light,
the trajectory of Frost’s narrative in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’
assumes new resonance. The poem begins with a request to discover the Mormon baptismal
font, a place the stranger undoubtedly learned about in some academic text, university
classroom, or lecture hall, and it ends with both men carrying home with them the largely
forgotten life’s work of one of the mountain’s own.

That the shut-in would write about a landscape she could glimpse only through the
rigidly confined space of her windowsill is significant insofar as it helps to orient Frost’s
aesthetic in regard to his representational schema. In analysing images of horizontal and
vertical movement in Frost’s oeuvre, Robert McPhillips argues that Frost’s aesthetic
exemplifies a metaphysics of space and place in which the real and the imaginary operate in
tension with one another. Thus, according to McPhillips, ‘Frost is less concerned with the
image than with the imaginer, less concerned with the house than with the “dreamer of houses”
less concerned, finally, with the perception than with the act of perceiving’ (McPhillips, 1986:
87). The shut-in is the iconic figure for the act of perceiving in contradistinction to perception
itself, an emblem of the act of imagining as distinct from but not subordinate to the reification
of the image. Indeed, when the men discover the abandoned books, each takes one for himself
and begins to read. Frost writes, ‘He read in one and I read in another/Both either looking for
or finding something’. Here, Frost conflates perceiving (looking) and the perceived (finding)
without privileging either term. The unique positionality of the shut-in, a nature poet barred
from nature, a passive subject assuming the agency of voice, Frost marries through the labour
of the creative imagination what are in the epistemes of modern rationalist empiricism
diametric oppositions: the subject and the object, the agent and act, the seer and the seen (or, as
McPhillips argues, the poetics of movement that is at once vertical and horizontal) (McPhillips,
1986: 87).
3.4 To Hear the Mountain Speak: Voice in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’

Though the search for the fountain has been abandoned, the shut-in’s books have been discovered in its place. The poem’s concluding scene speaks to the Transcendentalist orientation of the poem insofar as it posits the close connection between the natural, earthly realm and the territory of the spirit. The deceased poetess makes an appearance here. Her spirit is quickened with the awareness that others are reading her poems. In the poem’s concluding lines, the departed, but awakened, poetess feels a burden of responsibility to speak, and the two men feel an equal and opposite burden to listen. When this is accomplished, the speaker describes the poetess’ heart as having been ‘eased…of one more copy’. These are not, however, the vainglorious yearnings of a failed poet craving recognition. These are the implorings of the land itself. In ‘Claiming Place’ Paula Kopacz describes Frost’s strategy of giving voice to the landscape: ‘In Frost’s poems, he, or rather the persona, uses final lines to give the regional perspective, which comes across sometimes as hard-edged, stonily resigned to loss and disappointment, ironic, dry’ (Kopacz, 2011: 183). Kopacz continues to describe Frost’s unsentimental description of a homestead after it had been destroyed by fire:

‘There was really nothing sad,’ the poet concludes, ‘One had to be versed in country things/Not to believe the phoebes wept’. That is, only a country man could look on the scene and accept that the birds are not saddened by the fire’s devastation and the loss of a human home with its wealth of sentiment. It’s a tough message. One wants to sentimentalize that the birds sympathize with the loss, but Frost won’t let us (Kopacz, 2011: 183).

Here, Kopacz’s analysis helps to modulate our understanding of the shut-in and her verses. The land does indeed speak through her tomes, but that does not mean that the message is unequivocally positive or redemptive. Frost’s steadfast refusal to sentimentalize nature as revealed in Kopacz’s description above is echoed in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ through the volumes of unsold and unread books lying abandoned in the shut-in’s home. The land can and does speak, in Frost’s oeuvre, but few humans are conditioned or equipped to hear it.

As we have seen, a preeminent motif in Frost’s oeuvre is the juxtaposition of the natural and human worlds. The natural world, in Frost’s schema, is not the eternally beautiful world of the Romantics. Nature is changeful and capricious. This, again, aligns with Thoreau’s image of
nature, as exemplified most notably in his writings on Ktaadn, in juxtaposition with Emerson’s
telepathic brand of Transcendentalism. The overwhelming power of nature subsumes all of
human endeavour into its simultaneously destructive and transformative grasp. Hence Frost’s
ubiquitous imagery of abandoned homes given over to the encroaching forest - of roads and
bridges, millworks and masonries abandoned to the imperatives of natural overgrowth. Frost’s
vision is in certain respects post-humanity (though this does not preclude, for Frost, the
continuation of the human in spiritual form, the transmutation, as will be seen, of matter into
energy): he presents a natural world pocked by the vestiges of abandoned civilization and the
decay of human endeavour, but nevertheless solemnly steadfast in the assurance of its own
immortality. What connects these two cosmos, what links the roiling natural world and the
impermanent human one (or, in the symbolic economy of Frost’s poem, what connects the
fountain and the donkey’s ears) is the book—more exactly, the ‘unlettered’ book of the rustic
writer and the shut-in sonneteer. Jeff Frank notes,

Frost’s poetry attends to the ruins of New England towns, helping the reader to
see that growth is often accompanied by loss….Frost’s poems are full of ruins:
ruined lives and the ruins of homes, farms, and towns….His poetry highlights
ruins as a means of tempering progressive hopes with the reality of lives lived in
the wake—or at the margins—of progress. (Frank, 2011: 58)

Frank argues that Frost’s characters contend with the inevitability of loss, the looming danger
of ruin, through the painstaking and uncertain work of ‘moral repair’. However, as this chapter
shows, for Frost the most vital and, indeed, perhaps the only mechanism for such a process of
‘moral repair’ is through creative work, the rumination on matter and spirit, and, above all, the
transmutation of those meditations into language. In her analysis of what she deems the
aesthetics of anxiety at play in Frost’s oeuvre, Lisa Hinrichen (2008) writes,

[Frost’s] structural self-reflexivity can thus be seen not merely as a formal
means of linguistic play but as a technique by which he explored and expressed
emotional disturbances, creating via the formal and rhetorical structure of his
poems a ‘momentary stay against confusion’ (Hinrichen, 2008: 45).

Ruins operate symbolically in Frost’s oeuvre as the material manifestation of those ‘emotional
disturbances’. They are a centrepiece of Frost’s ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and
some Books’ and, as Frank’s analysis shows, this motif suggests that the current stage in
American history is one in which the voice of nature, as transcribed by its most eloquent
instrument, the rustics who live amid it, has not yet assumed preeminence. The shut-in’s verses
are unbought. They fill a box in her old abandoned home in numbers great ‘enough to stock a village library’. Nevertheless, the tomes command respect. The speaker refers to the bad hunters and naughty schoolboys whose antics have wrought havoc on the abandoned house, and yet the books themselves have remain unmolested, lying undisturbed in the publisher’s box, awaiting the readers who will surely find them. Indeed, the final lines of the poem presage a time to come in which the verses not only will speak, but in which they will be heard. The poem concludes, ‘In time she would be rid of all her books’. This suggests the ineluctable reality of sublime nature, a reality which may be delayed through the presumptions of human endeavour, but which ultimately cannot be denied. Peter James Stanlis argues that for all its seemingly apocalyptic imagery, Frost’s oeuvre tends toward an evolutionary apotheosis through the creative renewal of language. He writes,

One of the most significant interpretations Frost ever made was to link creative power in literature and the arts with the Puritan modification and renewal of language. This vital connection permeated his whole dualistic philosophy. It also was the basis of his conception of creative evolution….At Oberlin, he noted that ‘the whole function of poetry is the renewal of words, is the making of words mean again what they meant’ (Stanlis, 2008: 45).

The concept of the ‘renewal’ of words, of making the words ‘mean again what they meant’, is significant in as much as it suggests a poetics that does not deny suffering or the loss of meaning in a world of pain, but one which also affirms the possibility of renewal and restoration. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the suggestion of a profound teleology at play, of the existence of a point of origin and, if not of destination, then at least of progression. The words, for Frost, have a definitive originary point, a significance and meaning that transcends the individual human. It is the work of the poet to retrace those lost origins but, in the process of renewing language, the poet and his audience are also renewed. The symbolic significance of Frost’s mountain imagery is potent here insofar as the mountain suggests that tangible, immovable presence that evokes the originary point of words, while contact with the mountain, the struggle of the ascent, is akin to the struggle of this process of the renewal of language after suffering the loss of meaning.

Thus, it must be underscored here that Frost’s program of renewing language is intimately and directly connected to contact with the natural world. Baron Wormser argues for the preeminence of encounter, of the buffeting of the poetic imagination against the hard
surfaces of matter, the grappling of spirit and substance which creative evolution and the renewal of language require. Wormser notes,

[t]here is a strain of American poetry that is stoutly dramatic and revels in what can’t be resolved, what assails and doesn’t back off. Its chief proponents are Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost…The dramatic impulse that each evinced was part of the Puritan heritage of relentless inward scrutiny amid outward engagement with a world [emphasis added] that spoke each moment to the wayfaring soul (Wormser, 2011: 77-78).

This outward engagement with the world is exemplified in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ through Frost’s linking of the shut-in’s books with the natural world, particularly in the poem’s final images, in which Frost likens the books to birds struggling to take flight. The speaker momentarily fantasizes about tossing a book from the window, if only for the thrill of watching it briefly soar before crashing to earth. Reverence restrains him, but the lyricism with which Frost describes the speaker’s impulse is telling:

To send it sailing out of the attic window
Till it caught wind and, opening out its covers,
Tried to improve on sailing like a tile
By flying like a bird (silent in flight,
But all the burden of its body song).

(110-114)

It is this last line which is most significant: the book, like the bird to which it is compared, is freighted with meaning. There is nothing that human endeavour can do to make it ‘improve on sailing’. It exists for what it is, an articulation of the natural world, burdened with signification, demanding reverence, treated diffidently when not in use, an instrument for seeking and finding meaning.

That Frost would be inspired to base his philosophical nature narrative on real geographic spaces that were personally meaningful to him is part and parcel of the poet’s strategy. In both ‘The Mountain’ and ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears, and some Books’ the juxtaposition of the stranger’s knowledge of place with that of the native is absolute and unforgiving. While the stranger in the latter poem seeks in vain for an irrelevancy learned about in books, the stranger in the former searches for that which has likely never been there at all (the fountain and the lake, respectively). The natives, however, deploy their intimate knowledge of place as an opportunity for and instrument of articulation. The poetess in ‘A
Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ derives inspiration and poetic authority from the landscape. The guide in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ legitimizes his journey with the stranger by substituting the lost fountain and empty bottle for the poetess’s verses (i.e. replacing academic knowledge with native knowledge). Likewise, the native in ‘The Mountain’ privileges colloquial epistemes and discourses above the empirical and academic. He ascribes a rational, physical cause for the strange phenomenon of the mountain’s lake temperatures, only to assert the greater value of local narrative and ways of knowing. The old man says,

I don’t suppose the water’s changed at all.
You and I know enough to know it’s warm
Compared with cold and cold compared with warm.
But all the fun’s in how you say a thing.

(101-104)

The native’s privileging of an idiosyncratic and localized knowledge here is somewhat more light-hearted than in other examples of Frost’s work, including ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’. Saltzman’s description of Frost’s aesthetics can help to elucidate this scene: ‘the poet proposes a conceit whereby he might exchange what he knows for what he needs, to circumvent impasse with artistic prerogative’ (Saltzman, 2000: 293). In ‘The Mountain’, the old man’s remark suggests a jouissance, a profound pleasure that is almost physical, or sensual, in language, a pleasure grounded in a sort of creative play, with the natural realm, exemplified here by musings on the phenomena of the mountainscape, operating as the instrument for the exploration of the creative imagination, for the constructive interplay of the tangible and the fantastic.

3.5 The Narrative of the Failed Quest: The Mountain Withholds

As has been shown, mountains in Frost’s poetry exemplify the sublime in regard to their awe, their terror, their mystery, and their creative potentiality. Iconic spaces, however, also serve another important function in Frost’s poetry: they help to initiate one of Frost’s most important themes—that of the failed quest. While the sublime mountain, then, may be the instrument of transcendent wonder, spiritual enlightenment, and creative articulation, it may also be an instrument of deprivation, the locus of denial. In her analysis of Frost’s relationship to Wordsworth’s poetics of the sublime, Sydney Lea (1980) argues that the former, while conceding admiration and a debt of gratitude to his Romantic predecessor, nevertheless
strategically reverses the Wordsworthian sublime through an aesthetic of denial. She argues that in the transition from Wordsworth to Frost ‘pastoral retreat concomitantly collapses into stingy timber-land, belief in a possible sublime into stubborn earthiness, poem as redemption into poem as “rigmarole”’ (Lea, 1980: 84). Here, Lea suggests that Frost’s corpus dismantles the quixotic vision of Wordsworth, the idealization of the poetic impulse as an effusion of beautiful language flowing effortlessly and without limits from contact with the natural world. Instead, Frost presents a rough-hewn poetics, one in which contact with the natural world just as readily baffles as it inspires, in which the poet as frequently falls mute, stammers, or lapses into absurdities as launches into the heights of transcendent poetic beauty. Nowhere is this more evident than in Frost’s ubiquitous narratives of the failed quest.

One of the most prevalent images in Frost’s works is that of the unfound fountain. Time and again, Frost’s narrative poems feature characters seeking fruitlessly for a fountain, one typically imbued with spiritual signification, as with ‘A Fountain’s’ Mormon baptismal font. Despite the most valiant efforts of the searchers, however, quests in search of these fountains almost always end in naught. That time and again Frost chooses to centre upon a narrative of failure is significant, particularly in light of the fact that his poems are populated by characters for whom failure should not be a possibility. If it were only the learned strangers who were frustrated in their efforts to discover these elusive, paradisiacal spaces, then it would be easy to read Frost’s poems as a repudiation of the presumptions of class, education, and origin, a comeuppance for those outsiders who presume to tame a land not of their birth or birthright and to make it their own. Keat Murray describes Frost’s oeuvre as a sort of mythopoetics of the modern mind, writing:

He places the careful reader in direct, candid confrontation with mysteries, such as those of the human conscience, of philosophical barricades, and corridors, and of our mythical depths….Frost’s persona imaginatively enacts an attempt to penetrate the mysteries of his own nature (Murray, 2000: 370).

Frost’s narrative poems typically end in denial not only for the ignorant usurper but also for sage insider. Even those characters possessed of the most intimate knowledge of and profound respect for the land still find themselves thwarted by it. Saltzman’s analysis is instructive here:

Granting Frost his wry dissent from wholesome absolutes, his complication of the conditions under which moral agency may be established can nevertheless be interpreted as exhibiting a greater dauntlessness still. In short, it is the virtue of maintaining the pursuit in spite of barren faith and cold leads which engender all others. (Saltzman, 2000: 290)
The quest for the stone baptismal font refers back to a significant part of American religious history pertaining to Joseph Smith. Smith, the founder of Mormonism, established the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints in 1830 which attracted thousands of followers and was the largest growing church in the US in the 1980s and beyond. In 1841, Smith ‘called for a temple with baptism font to be built at Nauvoo’ (Reeve, 2010: 244). Along with this came the announcement of ‘baptism for the dead’. This was a distinctive rite which ‘gave those who had died before hearing the Christian message the ability to accept it in the afterlife if their descendants performed the key rituals on their behalf in earthly temples’ (Clarke, 2008: 125). When all these factual accounts are considered, it cannot be a matter of surprise that the stone baptismal font symbolizes a sacred symbol in the history of the US. Accordingly, the seeker’s curiosity (exemplified in such expressions as ‘take me there’, ‘today’, ‘let’s talk about it’ and ‘[l]et’s go see the place’) and his strong identification with the altar directs us toward the possibility that the Church might be positioned as the route to some kind of spiritual truth in the poem and that mountains are seen not only as a natural sacred site linked with religious symbols, but also as the direct route for spiritual reconciliation and reunion with the past.

While some critics maintain that the opening story about Davis’s mountain may or may not be based on fact, Frost had also relied extensively in this poem upon his own personal experience of quest while living in New Hampshire. Frost’s hiking companion in Franconia, Raymond Holden, recalls the poet’s curiosity about the same quest in their trip through the mountains of Grafton County, New Hampshire, providing some relevant biographical details:

[Frost was] fascinated by the half-known, half-forgotten relics of New Englanders of an earlier day . . . [and] often told me of the legend he had heard when he lived in Derry . . . that the Mormons had once built a stone temple in the forest somewhere in New Hampshire, the ruined altar or font of which was sometimes stumbled upon by hunters . . . [Frost] and I never took a walk without the sometimes spoken and sometimes tacit understanding that we were looking for that altar. We never found it . . . The only reference to this romantically illusive spot in [his] work, so far as I know, is the poem ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ (cited in MacArthur, 2008: 53).

The passage does not only support a biographical reading of the poem but also demonstrates the connection between Frost’s real experiential life and work, between his personal search for spiritual reality and his quest for meaning in his poetical works. However, as has already been
suggested in this chapter and as will be elaborated on in below, it is not the successful completion of the quest but the process of questing that is, for Frost, of paramount import.

But, like the guide of ‘The Mountain’, Old Davis here turns out to be a misguided guide:

I'll find that fountain if it takes all summer,  
And both of our united strengths, to do it.'  
'You've lost it, then?'  
'Not so but I can find it.  
No doubt it's grown up some to woods around it.  
The mountain may have shifted since I saw it  
In eighty-five.'  
'As long ago as that?  
'If I remember rightly, it had sprung  
A leak and emptied then. And forty years  
Can do a good deal to bad masonry.  
You won't see any Mormon swimming in it.  
But you have said it, and we're off to find it.  
Old as I am, I'm going to let myself  
Be dragged by you all over everywhere—'

(18-30)

And ‘the stone baptismal font’ remains an elusive target just like the mystery of the mountain itself:

‘I thought you were a guide.’  
‘I am a guide,  
And that's why I can't decently refuse you.’  
We made a day of it out of the world,  
Ascending to descend to reascend.  
The old man seriously took his bearings,  
And spoke his doubts in every open place.  
We came out on a look-off where we faced  
A cliff, and on the cliff a bottle painted,  
Or stained by vegetation from above,  
A likeness to surprise the thrilly tourist.  

‘Well, if I haven't brought you to the fountain,  
At least I've brought you to the famous Bottle.’

(32-42)

Frost then reaffirms the narrative of the failed quest in the exchange which follows the discovery of the empty ‘Bottle’: ‘I won't accept the substitute. It's empty.’/‘So's everything.’/‘I
want my fountain''. There are important dynamics at play here in regard to the narrative of the
failed quest and the nexus between space and place. In the opening lines of this scene, the
guide expresses reluctance to embark on the journey to find the baptismal font. His relationship
to the mountain has been codified by time, familiarity, and positionality: he is cognizant of the
mountain’s features. He is respectful of its presence. He is reverent of its mutable immortality,
and he positions himself in accordance with this cognizance. He has no need to molest or
disturb the sacred space. It, for the guide, is not an instrument of fascination, exploration, or
discovery. It simply is. Paul Jamieson takes this a step further, asserting that in Frost’s corpus,
‘that the natural world has an existence of its own independent of man’s practical, aesthetic, or
spiritual needs is the theme or implication of many of the poems’ (Jamieson, 1959: 473).
Nevertheless, this relation of the individual with the natural also exists in tension with the
relationship between the individual and the social, the dynamics inherent to relationships
among human beings. The imperatives of the social instantiate an inevitable shift in the
interdynamics of the human and natural worlds. More precisely, the seeker appeals to the
native’s social role as guide, invoking an array of social responsibilities that the guide is unable
to refuse. There is, in this sense, a sort of code of hospitality which seems to infringe upon the
personal, private, and reverential relationship between the individual and the landscape. This is
particularly true, as Wakefield notes, of humans in the modern world, where the obligations of
the social threaten to undermine the individual’s connection to the natural. Wakefield writes
that,

[r]eputation still mattered, but a society that is mobile geographically and
economically is a society of strangers. In taking another’s appearance as
substance, a man knew his own would likewise be taken as substance…. A man
faced the contradictory impulses of standing out and fitting in. Where his father
and grandfathers had labored with and against nature, he now labored in a man-
made world in which the very rhythm of his work was artificial. He had to
conform to that artificial pace—be in the right place at the right time, do his
work in such a way as to fit seamlessly into a process involving many other
men. Even on the farm, which was likely to be mortgaged, a man was beholden
to other men (Wakefield, 2000: 355).

This speaks to the decided shift in tone when the stranger invokes Old Davis’s role as ‘guide’.
Though not his principal occupation, presumably, the injunction is nevertheless freighted with
social obligation and status, the denial of which would constitute a loss of reputation. The
guide concedes reluctantly to the onus of hospitality and of his own native knowledge, and in
the process positionality shifts, from the static to the mobile. The guide speaks of being
‘dragged’ though he is the one to physically lead the quest. The ‘dragging’ is the force of the seeker’s misplaced and perhaps unwise desire, which transforms and undermines the guide’s relationship to (and use of) the mountain. In acquiring a use value, a locus of exploration, the mountain becomes the tool, rather than the totem. Frost writes:

We made a day of it out of the world,  
Ascending to descend to reascend.  
The old man seriously took his bearings,  
And spoke his doubts in every open place.  

(33-36)

It is this formulation of the trek up the mountain as a ‘day of it out of the world’ which is particularly significant, speaking to the mountain’s status as a transcendent, unworldly space, where doubts may, and indeed, must be spoken and bearings gathered—a place of rising and falling, of doubting and questioning, of losing and finding oneself.

In the process of this spiritual exploration, the mountain exacts a punishing price. The men are chastised physically for their presumptuousness, as evidenced in the guide’s reference to the pain in the knees, to the need to struggle and race in order to avoid falling. The mountain resists disturbance. It afflicts those who presume too much, who take liberties not appropriate to them. The mountain affirms itself as a sacred space by subjecting usurpers to a rigorous, painful initiation. Only the stalwart, only the faithful and steadfast, will prevail to access the sacred space—and even then, the fruition which they seek is not always fulfilled. This signifies the ultimate, transcendent authority of the mountain. Humans bend to its will. It does not bend to the will of humans. Of the poet’s relationship to the implacable will of life and of nature, Russell Fraser writes,

In poems like ‘The Ax-Helve’, ‘Unharvested’ (a sonnet in tetrameters), ‘I Could Give All to Time’, Frost keeps up an enigmatical posture. Like Michelangelo’s figures struggling to emerge from stone, his truth is only partially realized. ‘After Apple-Picking’, his first great poem, tells of a literal harvest. There is more to say than this, and close readers will point to the ladder sticking through the tree, saying how it points ‘toward heaven’ etc. But, if the poem communicates ulterior truth, you see it through a glass darkly, or through a pane of ice ‘skimmed this morning from the drinking trough’. As the poet holds it against the world, it melts, and he lets it fall and break. (Fraser, 1998: n.p)

Fraser’s image of the poet’s broken glass is a corollary to the failed quest narrative, which is, in essence, a narrative affirming the primacy of the natural world. This narrative opposes
modernity’s progressive schema, which posit that all things are within the grasp of the human, provided s/he is cunning, bold, and determined enough.

A brief examination of Frost’s ‘The Birthplace’ affirms this alignment between the natural world, and particularly mountainspaces, and the denial of human ambitions:

Here further up the mountain slope
Than there was every any hope,
My father built, enclosed a spring,
Strung chains of wall round everything,
Subdued the growth of earth to grass,
And brought our various lives to pass.
A dozen girls and boys we were.
The mountain seemed to like the stir,
And made of us a little while-
With always something in her smile.
Today she wouldn't know our name.
(No girl's, of course, has stayed the same.)
The mountain pushed us off her knees.
And now her lap is full of trees.

The speaker’s father presumes to tame nature, to unleash the forces of modern progress (the enclosing of the spring) in terrains that are beyond the province and power of the human. For a time, the speaker’s father appears to succeed. The earth appears to be momentarily ‘subdued’, but this is a temporary and circumscribed victory. The father passes away; the walls he laboured to build have crumbled, and the children he raised have now grown up and the mountain has ‘pushed [them] off her knees/And now her lap is full of trees’. The mountain here signifies the thwarting of human desire and the frustration of the presumptions of modern civilized progress. Humans are co-opted into the cycle of nature; they may triumph for a while, but only for as long as the natural world permits. Ultimately, however, all humans must acquiesce to the cycle of nature, and of the cosmos and spirit of which, for Frost, like his Transcendentalist forebears, nature is the materialization. The human will be born, will mature, and will die. And in the meantime, the natural world will return to and restore its own.

The seeker in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ exemplifies a similar ethos: even after being thwarted in his goal, he refuses to give up his ambition. The guide endeavours to counsel him to submit to the lessons the mountain has endeavoured to provide, substituting a natural wonder for an elusive man-made one. At this stage, however, the seeker remains undeterred. The failed quest has not yet proven instructive for him. It is only
when the men discover the abandoned house and the shut-in’s poetry that the seeker at last abandons his quest. The discovery of the book replaces the search for the fountain.

The transformation chronicled in this failed narrative resounds throughout Frost’s corpus. One of the most significant examples is in his haunting narrative poem, ‘Directive’ (1947). The poem begins with Frost’s ubiquitous image of a ruined house and of a town given over to the devouring mouth of nature. He then transitions into a description of the natural world, at once enormous and eternal. Here is a New England countryside scarred by a glacier that ‘braced his feet against the Arctic Pole’. This is a forest in which flora and fauna alike keep wary watch over the usurpers. Their vigil is one, the speaker notes, which the newcomer and the uninitiated will mistake ‘for the woods’ excitement over you’.

However, those who are initiated into the secrets of nature, the speaker asserts, will come to recognize the position of the human in regard to it: the towns and its human inhabitants are lost, the speaker warns, and for those who remain, such as the poem’s unnamed travellers, the speaker issues this stern reminder: ‘Your destination and your destiny’s/A brook that was the water of the house’. Here, the speaker cautions against the folly of celebrating the achievements of man, the presumptions of civilization which would unwisely claim to ‘tame’ nature. Like the crumbled walls that once presumed to harness the spring in ‘The Birthplace’, in this poem, the destroyed road and the trees that now tower in its midst symbolize Frost’s critique of modernity, the reckless and ultimately hollow ambitions of civilized progress. In this poem, edifices crumble under the weight of snaking vines, and the source which once gave life to the house—the brook—has in the end out-endured all.

Despite the images of ruin, however, the vision is far from apocalyptic. Rather, Frost presents here a complex cosmology that marries human finitude to the natural infinite. In his analysis, Roy Scheele writes,

The mountain exemplifies the idea of man’s small powers being set against the enormous forces of nature that dwarf and defeat them, but the speaker is not thwarted or discouraged by this; rather, he is hopeful, at least in the presence of the reader, for he has a sort of worldly and time-bound salvation in his gift (Scheele, 2015: 119-120).

The poem describes a ruined children’s playhouse, from which the speaker recovers a ‘broken Goblet’. The speaker places this goblet in the arch of an ancient cedar tree. The speaker here imbuers the goblet with rich symbolic significance, equating it to the Holy Grail and to Saint
Mark. According to scriptural tradition, Saint Mark is the disciple said to have carried water for the Last Supper, and the Holy Grail is the cup from which Christ drank as He performed the act of transfiguration, transforming the wine into His own blood which the disciples drank as the first communion. This ties the children’s plaything into a symbolic economy which speaks to immortality, even in the face of seeming ruin.

However, the fact that the goblet is broken is significant insofar as this suggests the limitations of human power. The goblet may once have been useful for holding water, for capturing and retaining the life-giving waters of the brook. Now, however, that capacity is limited, if not entirely lost. Some, perhaps all, of the water will be lost from the goblet—and yet the water endures. This is the reason that the speaker equates the forest travellers’ destiny with the brook—not with the house, the playhouse, or their trappings. The speaker asserts that here the brook is mild. It is ‘near its source’ and ‘original’. This, indeed, may be the true font denied the seeker in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’. Because of its proximity to origin, the brook has no need to rage and roil, as may the waters downstream, which grow increasingly turbulent, the speaker notes, as proximity to origins decreases. When the speaker positions the broken goblet in the crook of the cedar, a tree itself nourished by the same waters as the children who owned the goblet once were, he invokes an incantation which ensures that the goblet will never be discovered or disturbed by ‘wrong ones’. These wrong ones, presumably, are the uninitiated, the foolish, those incapable of recognizing or properly reverencing the sacred space. The goblet, as a water holder, combines in materiality the natural and the manmade, while its mingling with the ancient tree signifies the union of the human and the natural in a transcendent form. There is here a return to the source, and it is necessitated by the failure of human endeavour. The ruined house and the broken goblet make possible the return of the cup to the tree. Human endeavour must follow its natural course to the end, to ultimate loss, the poem suggests, before a return of the mortal human to the eternal natural can be effected. Indeed, in Stanlis’ analysis of Frost’s evolving dualism, the critic asserts, ‘Matter was for Frost not physicalistic and mechanistic; it interacted with, and was, in a sense, even indistinguishable from spirit’ (Stanlis, 2005: 99).

Another of Frost’s poems, ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’ (1947), speaks poignantly to the limits not only of human endeavour but also of human knowledge, particularly in the face of transcendent nature. Once again, the verse narrative centres upon a quest for origins, and specifically for the source of a river that is said to be the end of the earth. And, once again,
what transpires is a failed quest narrative, but this time the failed quest is met with a recognition that is delayed in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’. Frost writes, ‘[t]he truth is the river flows into the canyon/Of Ceasing-to-Question-What-Doesn’t-Concern-Us/As sooner or later, we have to cease somewhere’. Frost’s formulation of this sentence and his use of mock-heroic capitalization speaks to the presumptions of the human, the hubris of the human ambition to ‘question-what-doesn’t-concern-us’. The next line, significantly, returns to the lowercase, to the humility of the return to the workaday world, chastened, perhaps, but wiser for having lost one’s sense of one’s own ‘heroic’ proportions or significance.

Additionally, the meaning of ‘cease’ here is twofold. On the one hand, it implies human mortality: all human life must inevitably cease, in contradistinction to the river, the canyon, and the mountain, which may change form but never cease entirely. The second sense of the term refers to the cessation of a quest that is, ultimately, futile. There is that which the human cannot know or understand. There is that which simply ‘does not concern’ the human. This is a humbling recognition, and it is for some a harsh lesson. Jamieson argues that Frost’s insistence upon the recognition of and respect for ‘that which does not concern’ the human is simply another manifestation of appropriate positionality. He writes,

Frost’s love of earth is the impartial love of one who expects no return, no special favours or exemptions. He decries the ‘tenderer-than-thou-collectivistic regimenting love’ by which reformers try to impose their nostrums on society and sentimentalists make free with the natural world. He respects the separateness of every creature and thing, each obeying the laws of its own nature (Jamieson, 1959: 474).

For Frost, this essential pedagogy of the natural world, in which everything obeys ‘the laws of its own nature’ revises Transcendentalist metaphysics, which posit access to and identity with a seeming infinitude of spiritual knowledge with nature as the conduit for this knowledge. Here, as in so many of Frost’s poems, nature defies expectation, understanding, and quantification. It is at once shapeshifting and unyielding, yet there is no malice in its stern instruction. Though many critics, such as Fraser, Saltzman, and Frank, align Frost’s images of ruined habitations and frustrated human desires with the Gothic, the metaphysics at play in Frost’s oeuvre are far from that of a sinister Gothicism. Nature is not a malevolent force. It does not withhold or frustrate human desire out of spite. There are no dark (super)natural forces bent toward the destruction of the human interloper.
Nature operates in Frost’s corpus instead as an instructive grammar, one not bound or directed by human will, but pre-existing and superseding that will. Because it is transcendent, it is unswayed, if not indifferent, to human suffering—to the pangs of frustrated desire or ruined effort—but only insofar as such frustrations precipitate a necessary process of human evolution. The mountain is at once changeful and immovable. It is both immanence and unknowability. So too the rivers. So too the canyons. It is only the human who is buffeted by desire. It is only the human who weeps over his broken toys. The encounter with the withholding mountain and the lost origins of rivers teaches the seeker the language both of loss and of reverence. It is life’s most important and enduring primer.

The first four lines of Frost’s 1942 poem, ‘Time Out’ are particularly instructive here. Frost writes,

It took that pause to make him realize
The mountain he was climbing had the slant
As of a book held up before his eyes
(And was a text albeit done in plant).

Scenes like these connect the evolution of human wisdom, the reconciliation with the natural world through nature’s pedagogy of human limitations, with the scene of reading and of writing. Frost intimately and directly connects the human’s humbling encounter with nature to the discovery of language. The powerful final lines of ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’ exemplify the language of loss and becoming in the face of the encounter with the transcendent:

And how much longer a story has science
Before she must put out the light on the children
And tell them the rest of the story is dreaming?
‘You children may dream it and tell it tomorrow.’
Time was we were molten, time was we were vapor.
What set us on fire and what set us revolving,
Lucretius the Epicurean might tell us—
‘Twas something we knew all about to begin with
And needn’t have fared into space like his master
To find ‘twas the effort, the essay of love.

This passage contravenes associations of Frost’s oeuvre with the Gothic insofar as at the heart of the encounter, at the root of effort, is the impetus of love—of life, of God, of nature, of humanity. Frost’s imagery here advances as a cosmology of the ultimate lack of differentiation, a moltenness that is also a denial of individuality. It is in the pursuit of love—and, for the
Epicurean, pleasure is the ultimate manifestation of love—that differentiation occurs. This is not to suggest hedonism at the heart of Frost’s corpus, but instead to insist upon the pre-eminence of desire in its myriad and evolving form, in Frost’s aesthetic and his metaphysics. Longing is a propulsive force and this longing is the product of love and the desire to possess and be at one with the beloved, whether in the form of God, of nature, or of another person. There is pleasure in pursuit of the love object, but pursuit presumes, and, indeed, requires, the absence. This is the source of the effort. We do not seek that which is already requited. We do not labour where we are already fulfilled. We long to reach the mountain summit because we are at its base.

It is not only the human, however, who is loving. Though the natural world can, in its passivity, appear indifferent, for Frost, nature is intrinsically loving, though in far different form than the Emersonian ideal. This is at the heart of Frost’s dualistic metaphysics, for nature’s seeming indifference to human suffering and its denial of human ambitions is, for Frost, at once the manifestation and the instrument of that love. The mountain beckons and in beckoning it kindles a desire that leads to differentiation: the seeker becomes desirous and in the process becomes a seeker. The seeker enlists the guide, who becomes—or becomes again—a guide because he, too, is desirous to fulfil a need, a role, an obligation.

That Frost would use the word ‘essay’ to describe the effort of love here is particularly telling because ‘essay’ refers not only to the academic text but also to the verb meaning ‘to try’. The mountain, then, is an occasion for effort, an opportunity for the demonstration of desire for the love object (fountain or spring or river’s source, or simply for the knowledge of the natural world) and the mechanism through which that exercising of desire can be transmuted into language, from effort into text. The shut-in’s poetry in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ exemplifies this important theme. Of the bedbound poetess, the speaker says, ‘She never tended anything herself./ She was “shut in” for life. She lived her whole/ Life long in bed, and wrote her things in bed’ (83-85). Unlike the character in ‘Time Out’, the shut-in cannot read the full text of nature, the grammar of the mountainside, so she has her windowsills extended so that she may better observe her flowers and the birds at her window and then she transforms her necessarily limited effort into the language of yearning, of pursuit, and of limitation.

Here, once again, one can find the significance of positionality, particularly of emplacement in relation to the natural world, playing a vital role. The shut-in recognizes the
boundaries of her world, the curtailed scope of her own endeavour and knowledge. She lives, by choice perhaps as well as by necessity, within the boundaries of cessation. Like the speaker in ‘Too Anxious For Rivers’, she has ceased to be concerned with that which does not concern her and living in this space, in this tension between the distal and proximal positionality to nature, she writes. The withholding mountainside, forever eluding her physical grasp, forever evading the encroachment of her corporeal presence, nevertheless yields up its own grammar, manifesting itself in an idiosyncratic, localized language, a language which enables differentiation from the ‘molten’ state of non-being that precedes the experience of love, yearning, and denial.

3.6 The Mountain as Boundary and Meeting Place: ‘Two Look at Two’

One of Frost’s most famous and acclaimed poems, ‘Two Look at Two’, begins with invocations of love. It is love that drives the couple up a mountain, propelling them unwisely forward, despite the uncertain path and the encroaching night. Frost writes, ‘Love and forgetting might have carried them/A little further up the mountainside/With night so near, but not much further up’ (1-3). Even in these opening lines, however, one finds a tension between desire and limitation. A clear boundary is being established, and it is this staking of territories that is the text’s principal concern.

Critics often erroneously romanticize Frost’s text here, reading the encounter between the human and the animal (a buck and doe) as a transcendent commingling of two worlds. However, the poem eschews such an interpretation insofar as it insists time and again upon the demarcation of boundary lines, not only the establishment of limits but the submission to them. The human couple may not want to turn back with the approach of night, but they do. They may not want to keep to the path they tread, but they do. There is an insuperable barrier, both physical and metaphysical, which mandates that each keeps to his or her own.

Frost’s poem is replete with images of barriers, from the ‘tumbled wall/With barbed-wire binding’ to the ‘failing path, where, if a stone/or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;/No footstep moved it’. Even more significant are the scenes of the acquiescence to these boundaries. The human travellers are described as ‘Spending what onward impulse they still had/In One last look the way they must not go’ while the buck and doe, too, adhere to the limits ascribed to them. Of the doe, Frost writes, ‘She saw them in their field, they her in
hers…. She sighed and passed unscared along the wall’. Moments later, a buck follows the same inquisitive, but independent and tranquil course.

Significantly, the encounter between the human and the animal in this scene sets up a totemistic model in which the crossing of boundary-lines would equate with the breaking of a taboo. Frost writes of the temptation to usurp these borderlands that the sight of the buck prompts in the human travellers: ‘Thus till he had them feeling almost dared/To stretch a proffering hand—and a spell breaking’. The travellers, ultimately, do not stretch forth their hands. They do not break the spell and this, for the speaker, is an approbation. Nature rewards the humans’ restraint, their respecting of boundaries, according to the final lines of the poem:

Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from
‘This must be all.’ It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

(38-42)

This is not the sublime union of the human and the natural world. The reward here is in the maintaining of appropriate boundaries, in the acknowledgement and honouring of limits. Here at last are travellers who do not presume too far, who do not seek to violate the integrity of the mountainscape or presume (wrongly) to bend it to their will. This is not the imperative of the geographer or the historian. This is not the modus operandi of one seeking a baptismal font or presuming to take the empirical measure of the mountain. This is the effort of love, a galvanizing force which drives them up the mountain, but only so far, which tempts them to touch the sacred, but restrains them in the end. The ultimate outcome, as in ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’, is differentiation. The figures both assume and preserve their identity through a process of reverent separation. Madsen and Ruderman assert the role of boundaries in Frost’s oeuvre as a mechanism for identity formation and differentiation.

The loco-descriptive poem, or romantic and post-romantic ode, links eternal nature (phenomenological awareness of the environment, scenes of nature, etc.) to the general structure of subjectivity….the ability to occupy and locate oneself provisionally in space—is an essential aspect of becoming a political subject (Madsen and Ruderman, 2016: 84).

Nature here has set up a corollary in which one comes to know and be known through the encounter with the Other, but, even more significantly, in this encounter with the Other, the human (and perhaps, who knows, the animal as well) comes to know itself.
Stanlis asserts that Frost’s prophetic vision for mankind, while acutely cognizant of the afflictions which thwart individual and collective progress, the irrefutable existence of evil and the inevitability of loss, is nevertheless temperamentally optimistic. At the core of Frost’s vision, significantly, is the role of social order in driving the progressive evolution of mankind. Of Frost’s perspectives on the destiny of mankind, Stanlis (2008) writes, ‘[h]is response was in terms of what he perceived as human originality and creative power, of what he called the “energy and daring” shown in establishing law and order in the recorded history of mankind’ (Stanlis, 2008: 285). Boundaries, borders, walls, and fences – those key liminal icons from the symbolic geography of Frost’s landscapes - are the ultimate material manifestation of the establishment of law, of the imposition of order.

That the mountain should serve as the locus of the process is telling insofar as it exemplifies both the establishment and the superseding of limits. The wall in ‘Two Look at Two’ is obviously a manmade object, signifying the imposition of order, of ‘law’ by human effort. Nevertheless, the mountain has claimed it as its own. The wall has tumbled down. The mountain, through earthslides not made by human feet, has redrawn the wall’s original boundaries. The mountain functions as the canvass for the testing of human limits, for the exertion of human will and the affirmation of the finitude of human powers. This is how the human travellers come to know themselves both as agents, including in their exercise of free will in turning back when the footpath grew too dark and in resisting the impulse to reach out and touch the sacred, the deer, and as objects, helpless in the face of a natural world far more powerful and enduring than they.

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Since antiquity, mountains have served as powerful symbolic, ideological, and aesthetic forces, transfixed and inflaming human curiosity. The greatest civilizations ever to emerge in the annals of human history have constructed their sacred and secular epistemes upon iconographies of mountains, from the pantheon of Mount Olympus to the sacred peaks of the Native American peoples. In the poetry of Robert Frost, similarly, mountains occupy a unique and pivotal place. At once nurturing and unyielding, at once sacred and profane, at once generous and denying, mountains feature pre-eminently in Frost’s aesthetic, his dualistic vision which seeks to unify spirit and matter, the natural and the human, the mortal and the immortal.
Frost’s use of mountainscapes signifies an important re-envisioning of the Romantic and Transcendentalist schemas to which he was heir. Frost echoes his most significant predecessors, Thoreau and Wordsworth, but he does not duplicate them. Frost’s mountain sublime exists in contradistinction to the sublime of Wordsworth and Thoreau in that his mountains are grittier, more ‘stony’. For all of Frost’s modulated optimism, there is at the same time a steadfast refusal to blink away the stark realities of fact, the adamantine truths of the human condition in the early twentieth century. The mountain, then, is a corollary for the truth which cannot be wished away. It is hard, immovable, and undeniable. Its shadow looms large.

Nevertheless, for those who remain undeterred in the bristling ‘realness’ of the mountain, the stern lessons mountains have to offer, there is also much consolation to be found. For mountains, in Frost, are teachers above all. Their most ubiquitous and important lessons are the lessons of positionality, of teaching the human both the scope and the limits of his or her powers. It is on the mountainside that the creative genius of the human spirit can find occasion to impose order on a seemingly chaotic natural world, as exemplified by the presence of the wall on the mountainside in ‘Two Look at Two’. Yet it is also on the mountainside that man learns precisely how miniscule are his capabilities when contrasted with the breath-taking powers of mountains, as illustrated in ‘Directive’.

As the mountains instruct the human in their ancient wisdom, the grammar of endeavour and humility, they also instantiate a process of differentiation, as spirit and matter resolves, defines, and integrates itself according to its own nature and laws. The natural barriers of the mountainside and the manmade barriers appropriated by the mountain as its own enable the human to define itself and its others, and in the process the human learns his/her proper place, the rights and responsibilities appropriate to the human in relation to nature and spirit. Thus the human travellers in ‘Two Look at Two’ learn not to presume to touch the sacred deer. Thus the stranger in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ learns to privilege the shut-in’s nature poetry above the futile search for a lost fountain.

One of the most important mechanisms through which mountains teach the laws of identity, differentiation, and positionality is through the machinations of denial, represented most often in Frost’s oeuvre through the narrative of the failed quest. The capacity of mountains to withhold favour is as great as their capacity to grant it, if not greater. Time and again, mountains are represented in Frost as agents frustrating human desires. The eponymous
feature in ‘The Mountain’ refuses to give up its secrets about the lake. The fountain in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’ is never found, and the mountain scene in ‘Directive’ is one of desolation and thwarted human endeavour.

Nevertheless, whilst they may at times teeter on the brink of an apocalyptic tenor, Frost’s mountainscapes also underline the immutability and ineradicability of love in its many forms. The mountain does not withhold because it does not love. There is nothing malevolent in the mountain’s refusals to grant human desires. Rather, the strategic and steadfast refusals of Frost’s unyielding mountains give rise to something even more significant than the fulfilment of a momentary human desire: they predicate the discovery of voice, of the idiosyncratic, localized, and generative language of yearning and of loss. This is the poetry of the shut-in in ‘A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey’s Ears and some Books’; this is the imagery of the mountainside as a book to be read by the wary and reverent traveller in ‘Time Out’.

Mountains, in short, teach humans not only who and how to be but also how to speak, even as they occasion the act of speech itself. For Frost, creative evolution, the discovery of language and of voice, is a mechanism of the experience of love and of the pursuit of the love object. Mountains, perhaps more than any other natural feature in Frost’s corpus, exemplify both the object of love and the occasion for its pursuit. They function both as the uncontainable object which is beloved and the territory upon which the beloved must be sought. Mountains, in short, are for Frost’s characters, a grammar of desire and the song book through which they sing their longing.
Conclusion

Faith and Meaning in the Poetry of Robert Frost

The rain to the wind said
‘You push and I’ll pelt.’
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged—though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt.

(Robert Frost, ‘Lodged’, 1924)

This study has examined the significance of nature imagery in the poetry of Robert Frost. Its central concern was to problematize and refute prevailing critical assessments of Frost’s oeuvre as one characterized essentially by Gothic or Dark Romantic sensibility. While conceding Frost’s significant alliance with and affinity for the Romantics and their Transcendentalist descendants, this study has demonstrated that Frost’s corpus represents a significant shift in aesthetic, transforming the ideological and stylistic investments of his predecessors into something entirely innovative. As has been shown, prevailing readings of Frost’s aesthetic which privilege the ostensible ‘darkness’ of the poet’s imagery and thematics are operating according to an essentializing binaristic typology which is inapplicable to Frost’s work. This typology invokes the hierarchical hegemonic frameworks of modernity, in which lightness exists in incompatible contradistinction to darkness, in which evil operates as that which renders the good obsolete, in which hopelessness annihilates faith.

This study has endeavoured to demonstrate, however, that an accurate reading of Frost’s oeuvre as a whole and of his nature imagery in particular must not only be sensitive to but must be entirely informed by the recognition of Frost’s complex and robust dualism. As has been shown, Frost’s system evolved across a span of decades; it was a project of spiritual exploration which engulfed his life. Above all, this was a project which powerfully informed, motivated, and galvanized his poetics. The fundamental misreading of Frost’s corpus by some contemporary critics, this study has shown, derives in large measure from the failure to filter their analyses through the lens of his fundamental and fecund dualism. When the corpus is read from the perspective of Frost’s profound and constantly evolving dualism, vast new valences of
meaning unfold, as modernity’s hegemonic binaries collapse. No longer does the juxtaposition of ostensibly incompatible elements signify the annihilation of one or both elements. Rather, in Frost’s dynamic and ambitious metaphysics, contrary elements coexist without cancelling one another out. Further, their meeting point, the nexus at which opposing forces join, or collide, becomes the locus of innovation, the junction at which creative evolution occurs. This is the spiritual, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic habitation of the evolving human in general and the striving poet in particular.

**Faith in Sunshine and in Shadow**

Faith in Frost’s poetics is, at its core, a provisional act, a respecter of experience and a student of that experience. Nowhere is this more evident than in the analysis presented in Chapter One of this study, in which Frost’s aesthetic of darkness is problematized. As was shown in this chapter, Frost’s nocturnal imagery is perhaps the strongest source of evidence cited by some scholars to confirm Frost’s status as a poet of the Gothic. However, as this chapter demonstrated, the function of his dark images is far more nuanced and ambitious than simple, established binaries would suggest. Imbricated in the dualism that motivates Frost’s aesthetic as well as his worldview, the invocation of nocturnal images always already necessitates the coexistence of the light. In Frost’s complex play of the junction of opposing forces, the darkness, with its web of associations, is yoked to and dependent on the light and all that that signifies. Once again, we have a poetic space in which the collision of incompatible forces occasions not annihilation but creation—or, to position the aesthetic more precisely within Frost’s own philosophical and stylistic framework, this meeting point is the locus of both creation and annihilation, a simultaneous erasure and emergence. As has been shown, this junction where creative evolution occurs mandates the death of the former state of being and birth into a new identity and consciousness.

This study has shown the significance of Frost’s largely tragic life history in shaping both his philosophy and his aesthetic. Frost’s adult life was marred by the tragic illnesses and deaths of those he held most dear. As he endured the searing stripping away of his family, Frost found himself grappling with questions of faith, contending with a God in whom He believed but whose motives and compassion Frost could scarcely begin to comprehend, let alone trust and acquiesce to. Frost’s devastating life story, as has been shown, provides ample support, according to many critics, for the prevailing reading of the poet’s dark imagery as
essentially Gothic in character. The heartrending details of Frost’s personal life, theorists and audiences contend, necessitate the characterization of Frost as a dark Romantic.

The readings presented in Chapter Two of Frost’s dark imagery, however, illustrate that quick and ready alignments of these images of hopelessness and despair are a gross and misleading oversimplification of Frost’s poetics. Likewise, those who would situate Frost’s personal life story wholly under the ill-omened star, those who would characterize the poet’s biography and, even more important, his perspective on his own life story in these Saturnine terms, are perpetuating a profound misreading. Frost’s own life and work are informed by the metaphysical leanings he harbored since childhood and, in particular, by the philosophical perspective on his own pain that such metaphysical investments enabled him to cultivate. Frost was no slave to his heartache. Rather, he was an active agent, striving to make meaning where meaning seems most elusive, driven to articulate that which is beyond language. This, for Frost, is no more and no less than the essential nature of the human condition. This is the ultimate human fate: to confront the abyss and to learn to speak its name, humbled in the knowledge that the abyss has many names and incarnations, that it transcends time, speech, and human understanding. And yet, for Frost, the abyss is not all. For all its terrifying sublimity, there is that which exists outside and beyond it. There is that which not only encompasses but also supersedes pain, fear, loss, and failure. This is where the ineffable and inarticulable God lives. This is the juncture to which the abyss leads us. This is the grail toward which the quest of faith beckons us. However, in the dualism that saturates Frost’s poetics, to achieve the pleasure of requiting and discovery, one must also endure the pain of denial and loss.

This study has shown that Frost’s dark imagery plays a vital role in this dualist aesthetic, suggesting a highly-nuanced understanding of faith and the human condition. Like the mountainscapes that instruct the human of his own limits, darkness in Frost’s poetics performs a pedagogical function, forcing man’s recognition of his own blindness, the necessarily limited scope of his vision and understanding. The experience of such blinding darkness is, as a matter of course, profoundly disorienting. In a poetics in which positionality figures heavily, such loss of direction carries with it a host of key valences, the most significant of which, perhaps, is the implication of a cosmological reordering. This reordering is a realignment of sorts, a repositioning of the mortal and finite individual in relation to the immortal infinite.
There is, perhaps, no greater darkness than the darkness of a parent casting about in grief for their dead child. Frost, the man, found himself in this fumbling, groping, gaping darkness more than once. Frost, the philosopher poet, learned across the span of years and decades to transmute that lived experience into a repositioning, the charting of a new cosmological cartography in which the man, the father, and the poet learns to realign himself relative to God, to time, to nature and cosmos, and to life and death itself.

Such a discovery of this new plane, this new positioning of the self and of God, would not have been possible, nor would it have been necessary, without the initial plunge into darkness. Unlike the mountain quest, however, this remapping is galvanized neither by desire nor by obligation. It is borne of the inherently tragic nature of living, the reality that the human experience is encompassed by suffering, that the one universal constant to all mankind is the inevitability and the certainty of pain. Frost’s dark images and symbols concede to this reality and stand stalwart before it. Such, for Frost, is the inescapable work of the human, the undeniable responsibility of the poet.

If Frost’s poetics operated along traditional positivist polarities, subscribing to the binaries in which the meeting of opposites signifies the annihilation of both, then Gothic readings of Frost’s dark images as they are described in the previous paragraph would be justified. However, as has been shown, in the dualistic metaphysics of Frost’s corpus, the invocation of darkness not only implies but requires the existence of light. It is this coexistence of opposing forces which makes faith possible in Frost’s oeuvre. If faith is both an exercise and an outcome in Frost’s philosophical and aesthetic system, then the confrontation with the darkness which humbles, wounds, terrifies, and disorients the individual simultaneously activates the exercise of faith. This exercise of faith is, for Frost, the light coexisting with the darkness, the illumination linked to opacity, the coequal recognition of limits and the transcendence of limits.

As was explored at length in Chapter Two, an important component of this clash of light and dark in Frost’s aesthetic is the thematic of entelechy, the trope of an intrinsic state of potentiality which exists within all humans and toward which each individual is gradually evolving. All matter tends toward that state of being-ness, of becoming the best and highest form of the self, of manifesting that state of being for which the unique individual was created. The process begins *sui generis*, from the origins of the entity’s being, whether on earth or in the realm of spirit, and it continues self-directed and self-sustained through the buffetings of
life experience unless and until the individual takes control, actively cultivating that inner best and highest self. For no one is the process of entelechy more important and obligatory than for the poet, the one who trades in language. For Frost, the poet’s responsibility is to chart the trajectory of his own evolution, to articulate the progression toward which the individual is constantly moving, the successive manifestation of new and better selves. Such a process, Frost shows, is intrinsically searing, mandating the death and sloughing off of that which is past, the painful emergence into that which is new and unfamiliar.

Frost’s belief in entelechy, in the existence of a best and highest self in all individual creation, enables the philosophical disposition which helped him to process and contextualize, if never entirely mend from, his many life losses. For Frost, the man and the poet, life, loss, and existence are intrinsically meaningful, even if that meaning is merely in the search for meaning. In the poet’s symbolic economy, this is what connects the light to the darkness—that is the light coexisting with the darkness.

Significantly, the affirmation of faith in entelechy, in the existence of a higher self which it is the human’s responsibility to cultivate, aligns with the art of poetry in particular. As was shown in Chapter One, Frost’s conceptualization of entelechy signifies the emergence of a mystical consciousness which is itself inextricably but mysteriously linked to language. In this study’s explication in Chapter Three of Frost’s ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’, the speaker refers to an ‘essay of love’ which emerges in the face of the individual’s loss of primordial formlessness, of a wholeness and oneness with the cosmos. Individuation, the manifestation of singularity and particularity, is also the manifestation of lost origins in Frost’s poetics. It is the yearning for and love of that with which one once was conjoined, that with which one was once united, encompassing a sort of fall into language.

To speak of a thing is to be bereft of it. After all, there is no need to articulate immanence. Language for Frost is the coexistence of love and bereavement. Thus, in Frost’s dualistic metaphysics, where the clash of opposites sets the space for creative evolution, the locus of love and loss is also the site for the discovery of language, for a discursive renewal that is in itself an exemplar and an instrument of self-transformation.
Faith at the Junction of Opposites

Chapter Two of this study examined Frost’s woodland imagery, exploring his invocation of forests as hybrid spaces, those which are both primitive and utilitarian, separate from civilization and yet infiltrated by it. This is the materialization for Frost of the juxtaposition of opposites so essential to his dualism. This binaristic meeting point, the nexus where opposing forces touch, operates within Frost’s oeuvre not simply as the site of creative evolution but as the locus of faith.

Trees play a particularly important role in this working out of the individual’s spiritual faith, as this chapter demonstrates. By focusing in particular on the concept of aurality, Frost gives voice to the trees, presenting human subjects who are often humbled into silence in the presence of the whispering trees. In this way, Frost configures the forest space as the arena in which the human discovers a new language, the grammar of nature, which exists beyond human speech but which is the conduit for and essential element of the individual’s spiritual transformation.

The transformative encounter with the forest, particularly as it is precipitated and directed by the voice of the trees, is within the oeuvre a highly-advanced stage of human spiritual development, a stage which sloughs off established dogmas and repudiates organized religion. To be sure, Frost eschews regimented faith of every stripe and the prevailing critical readings of Frost’s ecclesiastical antipathy are not without merit. However, as was shown in Chapter Two, to read the anti-doctrinaire Frost as atheistic or agnostic is to misread him entirely. There is a God, an Absolute, at the core of Frost’s aesthetic. However, the manner in which He or It comes to be known is not liturgical. It is personal; it is idiosyncratic; it is at once experiential and contemplative.

In Frost’s corpus, there is no more apt symbol or conduit for this meeting with and transformation through the Divine than the forest itself. Further, as has been shown in this chapter, aurality is, for Frost, a prime catalyst for this encounter in that it taps into a primordial language, a language of origins, of the cosmos and of spirit. This is the language that the philosophical poet, according to Frost, must ever be seeking, the language which the poet is charged with finding because without it the new faith, private and complex, grave and gay, can never come into being. It is for this reason that the natural world in general and forests in
particular are time and again associated in Frost’s work with texts and grammars, the syllabary of the Divine Absolute.

Indeed, faith occupies a potent position within Frost’s corpus insofar as it manifests and exemplifies the complexity of his dualistic metaphysics and the aesthetics derived therein. Contrary to the ubiquitous readings of Frost’s poetics as inherently pessimistic, hopeless, and even nihilistic, the analyses presented in this study have shown that Frost’s dualism insists upon a vision of divine grace, spiritual and social progress, and the positionality of the self and the soul within a larger cosmology that is inherently hopeful—a mechanism and manifestation of faith. As has been shown throughout this study, in keeping with a core belief in the marriage of spirit and matter, Frost deploys his poetry as a metonymic representation of both: the articulation of the poetic spirit onto the material plane both of language and of text. Forests in Frost’s oeuvre signify a similar conjoining of spirit and matter, as illustrated in the immanent and immovable materiality of the trees conjoined with their ineffable voices carried on and through the wind.

**Faith on the Mountaintop**

The analyses presented in Chapter Three of the iconography of mountains in Frost’s oeuvre illustrate the strong affiliation between Frost’s mountain imagery and faith. Whereas critical readings have typically read Frost’s mountain imagery as the harbinger of limits, a lamentation for the inevitable checks on the power of the human, this study has shown the central transformative role that mountains play in Frost’s philosophical system. More specifically, this study has shown that mountainscapes perform an intricate process of repositioning that is in itself aligned both with revelation and with (re)vision. Mountains in Frost’s symbolic economy, signify, at base, the positioning—or repositioning—of the individual human self in relation to the sublime, to that which is at once eternal and immovable. As has been shown, mountainscapes in Frost’s corpus can be profoundly unforgiving, particularly for those foolhardy enough to approach them with undue care. This has given rise to the Gothic readings of mountain imagery that this study seeks to refute. Frost does not deploy mountain imagery as a mechanism to bemoan humanity’s shortcomings or to convey a stasis that borders on the hopeless. Rather, the repositioning of the human relative to the mountainscape (with its vast cosmological signification) is a facet of a larger project of self-and-other revelation which simultaneously speaks to the individual of his or her own
nature while also infusing the self with an awareness of the potential—and, indeed, the obligation—of transformation.

In Frost’s poetics, the quest narrative, as has been shown, figures powerfully in this process of self-revelation and the promise of future change. Frost’s texts feature not only quest narratives but, more important, narratives of *failed* quests. Mountainscapes are typically the locale in which these failed quests take place. Thus, mountains serve both a pedagogical and a disciplinary function within Frost’s oeuvre. The mountains simultaneously instruct the individual in his own nature even as they discipline him to submit to that nature, to be humble in the recognition and acceptance of those limits, those cosmological boundaries.

That this process would operate most frequently through the mechanism of the failed quest is vital, in that the nature of a quest speaks to the recognition of the existence of that which is highly desirable but profoundly out of reach. Frost’s extension of this important model into the arena of failure, of centring upon characters largely defined by denial and loss, situates the poetics within a thematics of the unrequited, of the yearning for that which will never be won, of the desire to achieve that which is unachievable. This complex symbolic system aligns, for Frost, with the quest for God—and, more specifically, with the yearning to understand *and* to speak of Him.

Like the stalwart and omnipresent mountains, this thirst to articulate God is a fierce and enduring facet of the human soul, as well as the *modus operandi* of the poet. And yet, like the mountain which cannot be comprehended or conquered in its totality, God, for Frost, is beyond comprehension—He literally exceeds any human capacity, intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic. God is, in essence, the supernumerary element - that which exists beyond human boundaries, that which exceeds the limitations of the human.

This superseding of the limits of the human manifest in the sublimity of the mountain does not, however, occasion a nihilistic hopelessness, the abandonment of effort. Such a reading would constitute an oversimplification of Frost’s aesthetic, aligning it with modern binaristic frameworks which inform contemporary culture but which are largely irrelevant to Frost’s poetics. For Frost, what matters is not the outcome of the quest. What matters is the process of questing itself. The act of seeking not only signifies the desire for that which is outside of one’s possession, but it also exemplifies the seeker’s belief that what is lost may be found.
In providing the locus for this quest, mountains, therefore, serve more than a pedagogical and disciplining function in Frost’s corpus. As the site of the quest—and, as the site of the failed quest in particular—mountains operate as the facilitator of the process of human spiritual evolution. This is an evolution, in Frost’s metaphysics, which can only be catalysed through the individual’s active confrontation of and engagement with the eternal divine (i.e. the mountainscape in Frost’s symbology). Faith, therefore, is at once an outcome and an exercise; more specifically, it galvanizes the action of the individual (the quest) through the yearning for that which is outside of one’s reach (symbolized in the formidable physicality of the mountain). Faith is also, in Frost, an inherently living thing, amorphous, shifting, evolutionary, and revolutionary, transforming with the exercise of it, deepening and enriching as it is practised.

As has been shown in this study, mountains enable Frost to problematize diverse ways of knowing, to dismantle modern epistemes and orthodoxies. This aligns with the complexity of faith as it manifests in Frost’s symbolic economy in that there is no easy alliance, in Frost’s poetics, between faith and established knowledge systems. This is not only a faith that exists outside of religious dogma, but one which also defies the presumptive truth values of modern positivist science.

As this study has shown, Frost’s frequent use of the failed quest narrative, particularly as it occurs on a mountainscape, is most often configured as a clash of local and received knowledge, the understanding of the native versus the understanding of the scholar. Thus, as in Frost’s iconic 1915 poem, ‘The Mountain’ the farmer’s intimate knowledge of the landscape is juxtaposed against that of the quester, a newcomer who seeks that which he has ostensibly learned about only from academic texts or in the dusty lecture halls of a distant university. This dynamic of the rustic sage educating, or at the very least, tolerating the foolish academic is a Romantic commonplace, a favourite trope since Wordsworth’s glorious example.

However, in keeping with Frost’s dualistic metaphysics, there is far more at play here than the simple collision of two epistemes, the confrontation of two opposing worldviews and life experiences. The newcomer’s request activates a quest in which the farmer is not only participant but an essential guide. In and of himself, the farmer is not driven by a cognizance of loss, of the need to attain that which is beyond reach, as the newcomer is. Rooted in his positionality in and intimacy with the mountainscape, the farmer does not sense an unmet need,
a void that must be filled. For him, the impetus to quest is the impetus of social responsibility, the onus to fulfil the humane obligations that one man owes to another.

Where the conflicting epistemes come into play, however, is in the context of each man’s expectations. The newcomer fully intends and anticipates the discovery of the fountain. This is his faith, a belief in an empirical episteme which seeks to quantify and characterize the mountain, a positivist hermeneutics which presumes unassailable knowledge of the geography of the mountain. This, though, is not the episteme of the farmer. He understands that there is no fountain to be found, certainly not in the place or manner in which the newcomer expects to find it. His journey is driven by a different form of faith, the commitment that the encounter with the mountain will, inevitably, have lessons to teach, that each man will make discoveries that defy prediction and will elude complete comprehension and accurate articulation. The farmer has been in contact with the mountain long enough to understand its pedagogical and disciplinary function, and he moves in the faith that there is always already more to learn, that his own long local knowledge of the body of the land he loves is infinitesimal in comparison to the scope of the secrets she maintains. The farmer emblematizes then the core of Frost’s ideological and aesthetic investments, his faith in the inevitability of human (and social) evolution at the nexus where understanding and discovery meet incomprehension and denial.

Another salient component of Frost’s invocation of mountain typology as a mechanism for explicating and analysing the nature of faith is the poet’s frequent religious allusions regarding mountains. Throughout the corpus, mountains are associated with Biblical references, including Mt. Hor, Ladd, and Jacob’s Ladder. This constellation of allusions is significant insofar as they defy clear connotation. There is nothing wholly positive nor wholly negative in this symbolic chain. Rather, and in keeping with Frost’s dualism, the symbolic economy developed through these religious allusions positions Frost’s mountains as a sort of sliding signifier, invoking ascension and declension, the denial of the Promised Land and its ultimate (if only partial) achievement.

In this way, Frost deconstructs and overturns orthodoxy, the codification of faith systems and their affiliation with power-knowledge structures. These Biblical allusions align mountains with a faith system the eludes taxonomy, that cannot be clearly defined, articulated, or contained because it possesses within itself all elements and most notably the coexistence of that which science and religion alike deem incompatible and mutually annihilating. Critics who characterize Frost’s aesthetic as Gothic fail to recognize the significance of this juxtaposition.
of elements in the symbol system as a whole and in his invocation of religion in particular. As has been shown throughout this study, Frost repudiates positivist epistemes and the hierarchical and hegemonic binaries on which these epistemes are typically based. In his dismantling of these knowledge systems, Frost opens up a space in which denial, signified for example by the allusion to Mt. Hor, where Moses lost divine favor to achieve the Promised Land, does not mean eternal loss. After all, the mountain is not only Mt. Hor, it is also Jacob’s Ladder, the staircase which the angels used both to ascend to heaven and to descend to earth.

The analyses of Frost’s nature imagery which have been presented in this thesis necessitate, however, a revised application of the thematics of faith as deployed in Frost’s corpus. Faith in Frost’s aesthetic signifies not an unproblematized assurance of future security, safety, or success. Rather, faith operates within the oeuvre as a nuanced nexus of recognition, representation, and (re)vision. It functions simultaneously on the planes of the real and the imagined; it is born, again, when opposing principles such as these meet in a state of tension, when they buffet and rub against one another to form the possibility of newness. Thus, this study suggests that Frost’s corpus exemplifies not the absence of faith, as required in contemporary ‘Gothic’ readings of Frost’s poetics. Instead, faith occupies a central position within the texts, product of the dualistic metaphysics which drives his beliefs and shapes his poetics. This is a faith that recognizes limits, a faith that does not blindly cling to dogma or rejoice in any certainty of success. It is a sufferer’s faith. It is a grown-up faith, a faith to endure, learn, and move on.
Bibliography


