

ROBERT FROST: A MOVEMENT TO FAITH

by *Jojo*

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B.S.L., Ozark Bible College, 1966

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

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Major Professor

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#### A MOVEMENT TO FAITH

The Bible was an integral part of Frost's life. He knew the Bible, read it "recklessly," as he said,<sup>1</sup> and used it frequently in letters and in conversations. His mother, having made her religious way from Scotch Presbyterian to Swedenborgian by way of Unitarianism, was very devout. As soon as Frost and his sister, Jeanie, were old enough, their mother combined storytelling with moralizing in order to teach them fundamental religious truths. Bible stories were the staple of this instruction, and Mrs. Frost particularly emphasized the Genesis stories--Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Noah and the ark. Because she was Swedenborgian, and saw life as a constant correspondence of opposites, she made stories illustrate moral truths which involved pairs of opposites. Lawrance Thompson speculates that this instruction in duality had its share in producing the polarities of Frost's poetic superstructure.<sup>2</sup> However, there were more immediately discernible results of the Bible teaching. As a child Frost was obsessed with the need to be perfect. He refused to stay at school in the first grade because he was unable to cope with making mistakes. When Frost was in the early phases of learning to write, he was given a new copybook. Making a mistake he flew into a rage, tore the page out, and insisted upon starting a new, clean one. Thompson says of this, "His mother's idealism, thus reflected, had already caused him to give sympathetic ear to those exacting Biblical words, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' The older he grew, the more he puzzled over that difficult exhortation."<sup>3</sup> Poetic perceptions and frustrations were not the only residue of Frost's early Biblical

indoctrination. His father's primary role in the family was correcting and punishing the children. To reinforce his authority, Belle Frost taught her children that earthly and heavenly obedience were inseparable, and that there would be a day of judgment when all would be brought to account for their earthly performance. The Frost children were taught the parable of the talents in many different versions, and were made to understand clearly that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom. Frost was also taught that the ways of God were mysterious and were not to be inquired into too closely. In his childhood, cumulative fear of a distant, mysterious, and punishing Heavenly Father was related to the inconsistent and severe punishments meted out by his father.<sup>4</sup> William Prescott Frost died in California, and the family returned to the East. Frost's acquaintance with the Bible deepened. Fear and frustration, however, had already taken root, and in the 1890's, while at Lawrence High School, Frost was troubled by a growing awareness that the serenity of his mother's religious beliefs was not his. This awareness drove him to examine himself, and he became what he called a "religious re-thinker."<sup>5</sup> His mother sought to comfort him with Biblical quotations, but it appears to have been the reading of Emerson and Thoreau while at Harvard that actually helped to reestablish his religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

From 1906 to 1911 Frost taught at Pinkerton Academy, a Congregational school, and his religious life took a new turn. The Congregational ministers there moved him to renew his acquaintance with the Bible, and he more and more openly expressed an orthodox Christian conviction. It was at this phase in his life that he wrote "The Trial By Existence," utilizing references from the Apocalypse for the setting of the poem. He also took on the religious training of his young

children, without the help of his wife, since she had flatly declared at the time of her first child's death in 1900 that there was no God. During their childhood, the Frost children were taught in the same manner as their father--by means of Bible stories.<sup>7</sup>

Frost continued to balance times of religious doubt with times of nearly fervent certainty. This is graphically illustrated in one letter written to Louis Untermeyer in October, 1917.<sup>8</sup> The letter also serves to illustrate Frost's aptness with Biblical allusions. In it, he first says: "...I discovered that do or say my damndest [sic] I can't be other than orthodox in politics love and religion: I can't escape salvation: I can't burn if I was born into this world to shine without heat." (an allusion to a Psalm). Only a few paragraphs further he complains, "The conviction closes in on me that I was cast for gloom as the sparks fly upward...." (a direct quote from Job). The weariness of inconsistency was aggravated by haunting guilt over his treatment of his wife and family. While in England, he kept a notebook of private observations. The entries mirror his search for righteousness and show him expressing spiritual questions in Biblical terms.

...Ever since man was man he has known the generous thrill of owning a better. There is better in me than I am. How does he bring himself to it. Christ is one he has taken to do it with.... Evil clings so in all our acts that even when we not only mean but achieve our prettiest, bravest, noblest, best, we are often a scourge even to those we do not hate. Our sincerest prayers are no more than groans that this should be so.<sup>9</sup>

In 1921, Frost again wrote to Untermeyer.

I shouldn't wonder if my last end would be religious; I weary so of cutting back the asparagus bed of my faults. I wonder what it is about prayer. I have half a mind to try it. I'm going to try to be good if it isn't too late. Let the columnists mock as they will.<sup>10</sup>

The preoccupation with guilt made a concurrent theory of salvation necessary. In 1935, Frost wrote to The Amherst Student, once more couching his spiritual observations in Biblical terms.

One can safely say that after six to 30,000 years of experience that the evident design is a situation here in which it will always be about equally hard to save your soul. Whatever progress can be taken to mean, it can't mean making the world any easier a place to save your soul--or if you dislike hearing your soul mentioned in open meeting, say your decency, you integrity....<sup>11</sup>

Examples of Frost's Biblical acuity pile up in letters and in records of conversations. In a letter to Sidney Cox, written in 1937, Frost compares his own "masking" in letters with God's confusion of the tongues at the Tower of Babel.<sup>12</sup> In the 40's Frost formed a close friendship with Rabbi Reichert of Cincinnati, and their favorite topic of discussion was the Bible, particularly the Book of Job. Invited to speak to Reichert's congregation in 1946, Frost framed his remarks around Psalm 19, verse 14. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." In 1947 this verse appeared as the center of A Mascue of Mercy. Later, in 1953, at the age of seventy-nine, Frost wrote to Reichert inquiring for the precise Biblical passage, questioning if he had made it up "out of nothing." As he said,

You know how I am about chapter and verse--somewhat irresponsible some would say. I went about wielding the phrase culpa felix to my own purpose for a long time before I pinned myself down to what it may originally have meant in church history.<sup>13</sup>

In later life, Frost began to hint quite broadly that he was no longer a doubter. In 1952, Frost referred to himself as "an Old Testament believer," allowing a lot of latitude.<sup>14</sup> This open stance reached culmination in the 60's. On a goodwill tour of Israel in 1961, Frost, calling himself "an Old Testament Christian," over and

over exhibited a working knowledge of the Bible. His allusions ranged from the disparaging remark likening Carl Sandburg to the Biblical creation ("...he's without form and void, with darkness reigning on the face of the deep.")<sup>15</sup> to quotations of the Psalms.<sup>16</sup>

In a life made turbulent by the conflict of ingrained faith and recurring doubts, Robert Frost's religious convictions found expression in his poetry. In both states, he used Biblical motifs and allusions. In the Collected Poems and in the last volume of poetry, In the Clearing, there are over one hundred direct Scriptural allusions. As was natural with his background, Biblical concepts and phrasing became his poetic vocabulary in framing metaphysical statements. The predominant Biblical motifs which Frost used--the Edenic motif of the fall and displacement of man, the Job motif involving the questioning of suffering and the attempt to find an answer in self-sufficiency, and the final movement to the New Testament motifs of salvation and the Incarnation, with their implications of mercy and surrender--seem to reveal a developing pattern of affirmation. Frost discusses the place of man in the cosmos in Biblical terms, and as he grows older, he expresses a resolution of the cosmic dilemma parallel to that of Scripture--the search of man for God is ended by the revelation of God in man, the Incarnation. It would be presumptuous, if not impossible, to attempt to evaluate the state of Frost's soul at any particular time or his relationship to God. But one can say, "This at least is how he meant to be read; this is his poetic statement." The poetic statement is dependent upon its frame. When Biblical constructs with implicit meanings are used, one can assume that this is a clear indication of meaning. The fact that Frost's constructs progress from description of man's plight to prescription for its amelioration is a valid indication of spiritual progression. When

we combine this with Frost's explicit assertions in conversations and letters, we can draw a rather certain conclusion.

Frost's last letter to his close friends, Roy and Alma Elliott, is a reflection of his final spiritual stance. Haunting guilt and depression of earlier years are resolved by the acceptance of an answer outside of himself, the atonement. The imperfection of man is faced bravely, without rationalization. The tendency toward doubt is dissipated by acceptance of the possibility that spiritual questions may be resolved without being answered. He says,

...Why will the quidnuncs always be hoping for a salvation man will never have from anyone but God? I was just saying today how Christ posed Himself the whole problem and died for it. How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice. We study and study the four biographies of Him and are left still somewhat puzzled in our daily lives....<sup>17</sup>

This spiritual stasis is one of surrender, not of self-sufficiency. The movement from questioning to acceptance of an imposed answer is observable in the poetry.

The Eden motif is present in quantity especially in the first thirty years of Frost's poetry. The several phases of the Genesis account are used; references run in no particular chronological pattern except that they are all contained in the first seven books. The earliest allusion to Eden occurs in "Love and a Stranger," found in A Boy's Will. It refers to a decision about admitting a "Stranger" into the idyllic world of two, a bride and a bridegroom. The parallel with Adam, Eve, and Satan immediately presents itself.

There are instances when Frost appears to view the results of Eden as fortunate, but the prevalent attitude is concern with present evil in the world. This is the spiritual burden man bears--knowledge of the lack of perfection in himself and in his world. This is the

impetus toward a search for spiritual resolution. Without committing himself to a statement of the origins of man's imperfection, Frost makes use of the Snake/Satan concept. In New Hampshire, we find "The Ax-Helve." In this poem, the ax-helve is used by Frost as a symbol of the individuality that makes for strength. The Frenchman, Baptiste, shows the persona of the poem "that the lines of a good helve/ Were native to the grain before the knife/ Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves/ Put on it from without...."<sup>18</sup> Then the finished helve is described as "Erect, but not without its waves, as when/ The snake stood up for evil in the Garden--". Frost seems indeed to view evil in man's nature as one of the unavoidable boundaries of man. The fact of bounds which humankind must not or cannot overstep is developed particularly in two poems found in A Further Range. In "There Are Roughly Zones" man is indicted for having a "limitless trait" in the heart. Here what happened in Eden is not viewed as a Fortunate Fall because man has still not learned to be confined--perhaps because the boundaries are not clear to him.

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--  
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?  
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach  
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.  
Why is his nature forever so hard to teach  
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right  
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.<sup>19</sup>

This same primal ambition is mentioned in the "political pastoral," "Build Soil." In a discussion of the definition of socialism, Meliboeus maintains that socialism isn't just spreading around the good of something to everyone. It can also be the spreading of bad. "We sometimes only get the bad of them./ In your sense of the word ambition has/ Been socialized--the first propensity/ To be attempted...."<sup>20</sup> It is the native grain of evil in his nature which makes man what he is,



which gives him a kind of strength, but it is this very inflexibility that frustrates him.

The results of evil are a dislocation in time and place, and a total misunderstanding of his present role which plagues man. The imagery of "Bereft" from West-Running Brook conveys the bleak mood of one living in a post-Edenic world. Nature itself assumes a satanic aspect.

Summer was past and day was past.  
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.  
 Out in 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.<sup>21</sup>

The displacement of man from a state of innocence and freedom is the concern of Frost when he uses the apple/Fall connection. Two good examples of this are again poems from A Further Range. In "Unharvested," the present is intruded upon by a remembrance of Eden's "apple fall." The present and the past combine their effect in the last quatrain as a prayer for the future emerges--a prayer for the freedom of man to "smell" without guilt the sweetness of an unstructured existence.

A scent of ripeness from over a wall.  
 And come to leave the routine road  
 And look for what had made me stall,  
 There sure enough was an apple tree  
 That had eased itself of its summer load,  
 And of all but its trivial foliage free,  
 Now breathed as light as a lady's fan.  
 For there there had been an apple fall  
 As complete as the apple had given man.  
 The ground was one circle of solid red.

May something go always unharvested!  
 May much stay out of our stated plan,

Apples or something forgotten and left,  
 So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.<sup>22</sup>

In "Provide, Provide," Frost points out that the Fall is not only a past event which intrudes itself upon our memories at times of longing for the impossible or forbidden. It is a state through which man is still passing. One can resign oneself to this state or one can make the effort to cope self-sufficiently with the results, but one cannot avoid it. The situation deals with the plight of Abishag, and innocent and therefore Eve-like figure from the Old Testament. The last concubine of the ancient King David, she performed only an ornamental function and after David's death was consigned to a perpetual sterile state. This sterility had implications for the present as Frost knits together the Fall, Abishag, and the forgotten sex symbol of the artificial world of Hollywood.

The witch that came (the withered hag)  
 To wash the steps with pail and rag,  
 Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.  
 Too many fall from great and good  
 For you to doubt the likelihood.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondence between the prelapsarian and post-Edenic worlds is the basis of one of Frost's most telling points. The tone of whimsical or poignant reminiscence is combined with the sinister element of satanic imagery in an overview both pathetic and wistful. In West-Running Brook and A Witness Tree we find poems that speak of the prelapsarian world. "A Winter Eden" sees this world in dormant nature. This world is Eden, but sterility is its main characteristic. Innocence is the product of winter and isolation and apathy.

A winter garden in an alder swamp,  
 Where conies now come out to sun and romp  
 As near a paradise as it can be  
 And not melt snow or start a dormant tree.

It lifts existence on a plane of snow  
 One level higher than the earth below,  
 One level nearer heaven overhead,  
 And last year's berries shining scarlet red.

.....  
 So near to paradise all pairing ends:  
 Here loveless birds now flock as winter friends,  
 Content with bud-inspecting. They presume  
 To say which buds are leaf and which are bloom.

A feather-hammer gives a double knock.  
 This Eden day is done at two o'clock.  
 An hour of winter day might seem too short  
 To make it worth life's while to wake and sport.<sup>24</sup>

It is a far from idyllic world, though it is peaceful where two times meet. In "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" there is more of the idyllic description of Eden, although the actual intent of the poem is to make an ironic declaration about the so-called Fortunate Fall. The "daylong voice of Eve" is given credit for the "oversound" in birds' songs, the tone "an eloquence so soft/ Could only have had an influence on birds/ When call or laughter carried it aloft."

This, however, is the only fortunate aspect of the Fall. As the poet says in the last lines, "Never again would birds' song be the same./ And to do that to birds was why she came."<sup>25</sup>

Part of the tragedy of the post-Edenic world is the misunderstanding of the Edenic world, and thus, a misunderstanding of man's role. The relationship of man and woman is marred by the misunderstanding of what innocence is and was, as in "The Subverted Flower." Leaning away from advances, a girl fears that the "brute" will hear "her mother's call/ From inside the garden wall" and "pounce to end it all" before her mother comes. This allusion to the mother and garden is developed further in the poem, as the girl herself becomes an Eve-figure, responsible for the man's shame.

A girl could only see  
 That a flower had marred a man,  
 But what she could not see  
 Was that the flower might be  
 Other than base and fetid:  
 That the flower had done but part,  
 And what the flower began  
 Her own too meager heart  
 Had terribly completed.<sup>26</sup>

The result of the Fall is not only displacement and shame, but fear.

After the Fall, the Genesis account says:

And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew  
 that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together,  
 And made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of  
 the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day:  
 And Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence  
 of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And  
 the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where  
 art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden,  
 and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.  
 And he said, Who told thee that thou was naked? Hast thou  
 eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou  
 shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou  
 gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did  
 eat.<sup>27</sup>

This is no Fortunate Fall, but is instead a loss of innocence. In an  
 earlier poem, "The Fear," there is a similar episode--a man and woman  
 drive into their farm yard after having glimpsed a face at the side of  
 the road. It is evening, and the following dialogue ensues.

'In the first place you can't make me believe it's--'

'It is--or someone else he's sent to watch  
 And now's the time to have it out with him  
 While we know definitely where he is.  
 Let him get off and he'll be everywhere  
 Around us, looking out of trees and bushes  
 Till I sha'n't dare to set a foot outdoors.  
 And I can't stand it. Joel, let me go!'

'But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough.'

'You mean you couldn't understand his caring.  
 Oh, but you see he hadn't had enough--  
 .....<sup>28</sup>

While there is no indication that Frost meant for there to be a

literal correspondence, this is a minimal pair, fearful of some unnamed outside force, thwarted in its attempt to maintain some kind of contact. The woman takes the leading role, seems to have the largest share of responsibility in the fear. It seems at least possible that Frost is creating a dramatic extension from a Biblical frame, as he was to do thirty years later in A Masque of Reason.

Contiguous with Frost's use of the Eden motif and the preoccupation with the displacement of man is Frost's use of the Job motif. In the Bible Job the sufferer is also Job the questioner of God. The main action of the book is centered around Job's demand that he be given a chance to confront God with the unreasonableness of the trial imposed upon him. Job voices the frustrations of suffering innocence several times.

For he (God) is not a man, as I am, that I should  
answer him, and we should come together in judgment.  
Neither is there any daysman between us, that might  
lay his hand upon us both. Let him take his rod away  
from me....Then would I speak, and not fear him....  
(Job 9:32-35)

Oh, that I knew where I might find him! that I  
might come even to his seat! I would order my cause  
before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I  
would know the words which he would answer me....  
There the Righteous might dispute with him; so should  
I be delivered for ever from my judge. (Job 23:3-5, 8)

It is this near defiance that moves Job to define the human condition in these terms: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not." (Job 14:1, 2) The outrage, the persistent questioning, the sense of man's transience, plus the framework of the Job story itself are all used by Frost. The resolution of the book of Job is one imposed by a deus ex machina who offers no explanations but only asserts His undeniable divinity. Job's

resolution prior to the interposition is his own self-sufficiency--the confidence he has in his own righteousness. "My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live," said Job (Job 27:6). It was not until the publication of A Masque of Reason in 1945 that Frost came close to hinting at any resolution approximating that of the Biblical God in the whirlwind. Before this, the answer Frost proposed to the problem of suffering was the defiant claim of self-sufficiency, making him more like "a modern Job" than even a friend seemed to realize.<sup>29</sup>

The outrage and questioning of Job is reflected in several poems, most of them found in the middle volumes, A Further Range and A Witness Tree. "A Question" could very well be Job speaking:

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.<sup>30</sup>

"Our Hold on the Planet" raises the question of the proportions on earth of good and evil. This same theme is dealt with in the last volume, in the poem "Quandary." In the affirmative mood common to the last part of Frost's poetry, there is a resolution of sorts.

Never have I been sad or glad  
That there was such a thing as bad.  
There had to be, I understood,  
For there to have been any good.  
It was by having been contrasted  
That good and bad so long had lasted.<sup>31</sup>

The Job-like perception of transience and unimportance is very much like the concept of the lost "royal role." In "The White-tailed Hornet" the disparity between the potential and the actual makes for the pathetic tone of the poem. Frost expresses regret over the reduced position of man who allows science to dictate downward comparisons.

To err is human, not to, animal.  
 Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,  
 Only too liberal of our compliment  
 That really takes away instead of gives.  
 Our worship, humor, conscientiousness  
 Went long since to the dogs under the table.  
 And served us right for having instituted  
 Downward comparisons. As long on earth  
 As our comparisons were stoutly upward  
 With gods and angels, we were men at least,  
 But once comparisons were yielded downward,  
 Once we began to see our images  
 Reflected in the mud and even dust,<sup>32</sup>  
 'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.

The position, Frost seems to be saying, is instead the Davidic comparison found in Psalm 8, "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens....What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the Son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor." Job said, "All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust." (Job 34:15) The fading flower image of Job is also used over and over by Frost. In the poem "On Going Unnoticed," found in West-Running Brook, the flower is a symbol of man's transience.

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

Less than the coral-root you know  
 That is content with the daylight low,  
 And has no leaves at all of its own;  
 Whose spotted flowers hang meanly down.

.....

You linger your little hour and are gone,  
 And still the woods sweep leafily on,  
 Not even missing the coral-root flower  
 You took as a trophy of the hour.<sup>33</sup>



The questions and the insignificance made clarification imperative. Clarification of life's ambiguities is sought through self-sufficiency. In "The Trial By Existence" Frost early approaches this resolution by making man the central reality, cut off from any divine reality beyond its own courage and intelligence. He keeps alive the possibility that some higher power orders the universe, but man suffers a spiritual amnesia of sorts that prevents him from sustaining a relationship with this power.<sup>34</sup> Man's bravery leads him to volunteer to leave Paradise for the hazardous duty of life.

But always God speaks at the end;  
 'One thought in agony of strife  
 The bravest would have by for friend,  
 The memory that he chose the life;  
 But the pure fate to which you go  
 Admits no memory of choice,  
 Or the woe were not earthly woe  
 To which you give the assenting voice.'

And so the choice must be again,  
 But the last choice is still the same;  
 And the awe passes wonder then,  
 And a hush falls for all acclaim.  
 .....

'Tis 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<sup>35</sup>  
 Bearing it crushed and mystified.

Not only may man find comfort and a certain amount of justification in the thought of choosing to live, but he can also permit himself a guarded optimism. Of "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," Squires says that Frost states his case "as though he had deliberately set about arguing his case with his contemporaries."<sup>36</sup> This is much the same as Job who answers his three reproving friends with nearly Stoic obser-



vations on the dubious comforts of the grave.

Courage is not the only self-sufficiency open to man. As in "Provide, Provide," man can turn to his own wisdom for a stay against confusion. Randall Jarell has observed that this poem is "a marvelous reductio ad absurdum of expediency."<sup>37</sup> "The Wisdom of the World and the wisdom that comes we know not whence exist together in the poem, not side by side but one inside the other; yet the whole poem exists for...the fifth stanza."<sup>38</sup> Frost is saying that there is only one wise way to meet life. "Some have relied on what they knew;/ Others on being simply true./ What worked for them might work for you." However, if you will rely on yourself, be really expedient.

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

.....  
Better to go down dignified  
With boughten friendship at your side  
Than none at all. Provide, provide!<sup>39</sup>

This poem in its ironic recommendation of earthly wisdom or self-sufficiency anticipates Frost's A Masque of Reason. Here self-sufficiency is given the final deflating jab.

Reginald Cook maintains that Frost's "pleasure of ulteriority"--saying one thing and meaning another--is immense and is the basic texture of the two "New England Biblicals," the masques.<sup>40</sup> Ruth Todasco points out that the criticism of A Masque of Reason as "theological horseplay" is derived "from a tendency to interpret the whimsical banter of the masque as a direct expression of Frost's point of view, as though each character functioned as a mouthpiece for the poet."<sup>41</sup> This ignores the "organic rapport between form and meaning."<sup>42</sup> The characters are characters in their own right. Job and his wife are

projections of modern attitudes of self-sufficiency that cheerfully and informally emasculate concepts such as God or Satan, the bases of a significant value system. As Todasco says, "Frost is clearly a critic of the attitudes he depicts."<sup>43</sup> This, then, is the midpoint in Frost's progression to a New Testament position on man and his worth. As he becomes a critic of some spiritual values, he implies his appreciation of their converse.

The masque opens in a desert setting, illuminated by a strange light. Job and his wife see God tangled in the branches of an illuminated and very eclectic tree. The Burning Bush/Christmas Tree/Crucifix is a creation of human worship which is a confusion of art and belief.<sup>44</sup>

Thytira, Job's wife, exclaims "It's God. I'd know him by Blake's picture anywhere." This is indicative of the fault in man that Frost is excoriating. Just as man errs in reading man into nature, he errs in reading man into God.<sup>45</sup> Thyatira, prototype Jewish Mother and sophisticate, knows God only as a manmade conceit. As charming and voluble as she is, she becomes Frost's point of departure as he lays low the segment of society that allows no penetration beneath a veneer of sophistication. A moment of self-revelation makes no difference to her, as when she herself says to Satan, "Satan, what ails you? Where is the famous tongue,/ Thou onetime Prince of Conversationists?, This is polite society you're in/ Where good and bad are mingled every-whichway,/ And ears are lent to any sophistry/ Just as if nothing mattered but our manners."<sup>46</sup> Thyatira, with her Kodak, attempts to resolve all the cosmic differences among the antagonists with a posed smile. It is Thyatira's unbearable adequacy that Frost condemns. When she offhandedly remarks that the Burning Bush and the "gold

enameled birds" won't show in the photograph, she reveals the shallowness of her adequacy.

Job is an extension of the most self-righteous traits of the Biblical Job. He also represents a type of human sufficiency. Like the Biblical Job, he is seeking an official verdict. Job is a devotee of freedom. His concern for freedom is predicated upon the belief that anything imposed upon man from outside the purview of his own reason is tyranny. Ironically enough, Job, for all his earnestness, emerges as a person capable of working out his own answers.<sup>46</sup> When he questions God, he seems to have already made his mind up. As Thyatira remarks, "Nothing has been brought out that for my part/ I'm not prepared for or that Job himself/ Won't find a formula for taking care of."<sup>48</sup> As with Thyatira, it is Job's blinding competency that is his greatest fault. A victim of his own intellect, he seeks "to find out God" for the titillation of his intellect. At the end of the play, he is left in "amicable bafflement,"<sup>49</sup> "dazed with new ideas." He and Thyatira reduce God and all things spiritual to an easy familiarity.<sup>50</sup>

The presentation of a cavalier God is a deliberate device which points up the theme of the masque. Marion Montgomery says, "In this picture of God given in A Masque of Reason, he (Frost) is showing us not lack of reason or justice in God, but rather man's stubbornness and lack of understanding."<sup>51</sup> This is a picture of God as man makes him visible. He is the anthropomorphic stereotype who is impossible to take seriously precisely because he is only the foil of two well-developed propensities in man.<sup>52</sup>

From 1945 on, the New Testament motifs grow more and more dominant in Frost's later poems. He begins to strike a prescriptive note as he recommends a certain mode of salvation to individual man.

The motif of salvation is a recurrent one in all of Frost's poetry. The means were explored gingerly in early poems dealing with rest, withdrawal or devotion. Important to any reading of his poetry and his concept of salvation is a consideration of "Directive," written when Frost was into his seventies and formulating an attitude with which he could face the end of life. Amid the distracting confusion of things--what stand to take, what point of perspective, Frost suggests we go to the brook where we can "drink and be whole again beyond confusion."<sup>53</sup>

Essentially this religious poem derives its basic abstractions from Biblical symbols and references. Its title, with its imperative force, is indicative of its didactic purpose. The theme--the lost and saved condition--pivots around the dictum found in Mark 16:16, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." and in Matthew 10:39, "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." It is not surprising that a poet who treasures ulteriority should choose to deal with one of the primary Biblical paradoxes. Expressed in Frost's own whimsical way, the saved are those willing to lose themselves in the poet's unsophisticated discoveries of the spirit.<sup>54</sup> More Biblical references accumulate with the reference to the cup of water--"For whoso shall give a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you he shall not lose his reward." (Mark 9:41); the forty days of temptation; and the ladder road, analogous to Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament which angels descended.

Individual man has been Frost's true concern. In this poem Frost places special emphasis on human experience to which he assimilated

the historical situation, the Grail materials and New Testament doctrine.<sup>55</sup>

The opening of the poem is simple and informal. Frost seems to assume the reader is lost enough to want to find himself. The elemental nature of the quest for self-discovery is shown by the inclusion of references to natural elements already arrayed on the side of simplicity.

The personal experience must occur in a removed and simple time. Set in a "time made simple by the loss of detail" the invitation is to rejoin a lost culture. The present, "all this now too much for us," with its structures, is rejected in favor of an Eliot-like point where past and present meet to renew the future. This time spiral with its loss and renewal is the only way to retrieve the lost freedom and innocence of Eden.

The impermanance of man is implied, but more meaningful is the commitment such awareness imposes. Cast in the form of the Grail quest, the poem is related to the isolation theme. It is usually alone that one seeks and finds the Grail. The Biblical redeeming relationship with Christ is a one to one situation. The communion/baptism symbolism of the Grail is effective only after the withdrawal and the willing assumption of isolation: "pull in your ladder road behind you/ And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me." It is a "hard saying" much like the Pauline injunction to "Come ye out from among them...." The goblet, secreted in a childlike gesture after being taken from the children's playhouse, is used to partake of the brook near to its source. As Doyle remarks, "The (final) allusion to Saint Mark and salvation makes clear the reason for Frost's introduction of the children, for Mark records that Christ said, 'Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall

not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein."<sup>56</sup> In contrast to its use in Frost's earlier work, such as "Devotion," the water of life can work only after the death by water--the withdrawal to the brook.

The confusion of Job is made whole only by water, the symbol of life, from a brook close to its source, in a time closer to the longed-for Eden. The spiritual significance is that Frost goes beyond the "momentary stay against confusion" of art to the state "beyond confusion" of belief. This recommendation is no delaying action against ever-encroaching chaos. It is an acceptance of a Biblical imperative, an outer-directed response. Doyle makes a point that must be considered. The Modern English word for "holy" is derived from the Old English word for "whole." Frost's studies at this time would have apprised him of the Old Testament foundation of Judaism, that man's true purpose on earth is to become holy. The "directive" is straight from God: "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy."<sup>57</sup>

A Masque of Mercy deals with many of the same motifs. In this masque, the central theme is the humility necessary on man's part for salvation and the mercy necessary on God's part. Jonah, like Job, is a character from the Old Testament who is developed to point out the fallacies of reason. It is unreasonable for Jonah to expect mercy from a God of justice. It is impossible to be acceptable without mercy. Jonah finds no haven in the bookstore, nor any escape back to the stormy world. His way to light lies through darkness--the way to life is through death. It is in the murky cellar where human reason and self sufficiency are obliterated that Jonah and Keeper can find salvation. Keeper is obdurate throughout the play, but before the end of the play, Keeper on his knees repudiates his obstinacy after

Paul says,

Yes, there you have it at the root of things.  
 We have to stay afraid deep in our souls  
 Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,  
 And not our worst nor second best, our best,  
 Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's,  
 Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not  
 Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.  
 And that they may be is the only prayer  
 Worth praying. May my sacrifice  
 Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.<sup>58</sup>

Keeper is brought to his new humility because of Jonah's death. This is in some ways a reflection of the effect of Christ's death: "For if, when we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." (Romans 5:10).

It is in the final volume that Frost's Incarnation motif is fully utilized. This volume includes one section of poems that is a telling departure from Frost's usual practice; a section called "Cluster of Faith" is contrasted with a section entitled "Quandary." At last Frost is explicit in his answer to doubt--faith. The Incarnation is the point at which man can apprehend the workings of the Divine, and the point at which man can find the only sure footing for his groping toward sufficiency. The Incarnation is the metaphor used to validate man's leaps in knowledge. The first venture of man into the material, the Fall, is ill-fated. In Frost's mind, man is restored to his kingly dominance over the universe only by the upward comparison with the Incarnation. The significance of man's selfprojection through science and technology is God's own incarnation in the flesh.<sup>59</sup>

But God's own descent  
 Into flesh was meant  
 As a demonstration  
 That the supreme merit  
 Lay in risking spirit  
 In substantiation.

Spirit enters flesh  
 And for all it's worth  
 Charges into earth  
 In birth after birth  
 Ever fresh and fresh.  
 We may take the view  
 That its derring-do  
 Thought of in the large  
 Is one mighty charge  
 On our human part  
 Of the soul's ethereal  
 Into the material.<sup>60</sup>

It is this answer from outside of self that finally satisfies Frost.  
 In a sense the answer is imposed, but it is this very Pauline  
 "mystery"<sup>61</sup> which provides an answer to Frost's spiritual dilemma.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Reginald Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York, 1958), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York, 1966), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>6</sup>Hyatt Howe Waggoner, "The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost," American Literature, XIII (November, 1941), 210-211.

<sup>7</sup>Thompson, op. cit., pp. 290-307.

<sup>8</sup>Lawrance Thompson, ed., Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York, 1964), p. 221.

<sup>9</sup>Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 427.

<sup>10</sup>Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>14</sup>Reginald Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost: Early and Late," English Journal, XLVIII, 231.

<sup>15</sup>Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks--Walking. (Norman, 1965), p. 407.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 407-415.

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 596.

<sup>18</sup>All poems will be taken from The Collected Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1967), unless otherwise indicated. "The Ax-Helve," p. 228

<sup>19</sup>"There Are Roughly Zones," p. 410.

<sup>20</sup>"Build Soil," p. 421.

<sup>21</sup>"Bereft," p. 317.

<sup>22</sup>"Unharvested," p. 400.

<sup>23</sup>"Provide, Provide," p. 404.

- 24 "A Winter's Eden," p. 322.
- 25 "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," p. 452.
- 26 "The Subverted Flower," p. 453.
- 27 Holy Bible, King James Version, Genesis 3:7-12.
- 28 "The Fear," p. 112.
- 29 Thompson, Selected Letters, p. xi.
- 30 "A Question," p. 493.
- 31 "Quandary," In The Clearing (New York, 1962), p. 192.
- 32 "The White-Tailed Hornet," p. 360.
- 33 "On Going Unnoticed," p. 309.
- 34 Anna K. Juhnke, "Religion in Robert Frost's Poetry: The Play For Self-Possession." American Literature, XXXVI, p. 155.
- 35 Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, 1963), p. 134.
- 36 "The Trial By Existence," p. 28.
- 37 Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York, 1953), p. 41.
- 38 Ibid., p. 45.
- 39 "Provide, Provide," p. 404.
- 40 Cook, "The Stand of Robert Frost: Early and Late," p. 33.
- 41 Ruth Todasco, "Dramatic Characterization in Frost: A Masque of Reason," University of Kansas City Review, XXIX (1963), p. 225.
- 42 Ibid., p. 225.
- 43 Ibid., p. 226.
- 44 W.R. Irvine, "The Unity of Frost's Masques," American Literature XXXII, p. 305.
- 45 Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost, His Use of Barriers: Man. versus Nature Toward God," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII, 344.
- 46 A Masque of Reason, p. 604.
- 47 Juhnke, p. 161.

- <sup>48</sup>A Masque of Reason, p. 604.
- <sup>49</sup>Irvine, p. 309.
- <sup>50</sup>Montgomery, p. 344.
- <sup>51</sup>Todasco, p. 587.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 230.
- <sup>53</sup>Cook. The Dimensions of Robert Frost. p. 87.
- <sup>54</sup>Robert Peters, "The Truth of Robert Frost's Directive," Modern Language Notes, LXXV (January, 1960), p. 30.
- <sup>55</sup>John Robert Doyle, "A Reading of Robert Frost's 'Directive,'" Georgia Review, XXII (Winter, 1968), p. 505.
- <sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 503.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 508.
- <sup>58</sup>A Masque of Mercy, pp. 641-42.
- <sup>59</sup>Juhnke, p. 159.
- <sup>60</sup>"Kitty Hawk," In the Clearing, p. 49.
- <sup>61</sup>The "mystery" of Paul, dealt with in I Timothy 3:16, is that of truth unknowable to man until revealed by God. "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness;  
     He who was manifested in the flesh,  
     Justified in the spirit,  
     Seen of angels,  
     Preached among the nations,  
     Believed on in the world,  
     Received up in glory."

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ROBERT FROST: A MOVEMENT TO FAITH

by

JANET KAREN COLAW

B.S.L., Ozark Bible College, 1966

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1969

The Bible was an integral part of Frost's life. His devout Swedenborgian mother taught her children Bible stories from the time they were able to understand them. Lawrance Thompson speculates that this early Biblical indoctrination was responsible for Frost's poetic perception of opposites, his frustration at imperfection, and his confusion about the nature of God. Frost began to "re-think" his faith in high school, but various experiences at Harvard and at Pinkerton Academy, where he taught, served to influence a return to faith. In the following years, Frost continued to balance times of doubt with times of faith. His tensions because of this wavering are expressed in Biblical allusions in letters to friends. In a life made turbulent by the conflict of ingrained faith and recurring doubts, Robert Frost's religious convictions found expression in his poetry.

In both states, he used Biblical motifs and allusions. The predominant Biblical motifs which Frost used--the Edenic, the Job and the Incarnation motifs--seem to reveal a developing pattern of affirmation. His spiritual stasis is one of surrender; the movement from questioning to acceptance is observable in the poetry.

The Edenic motif is present in quantity especially in the first thirty years of Frost's poetry. There are instances when Frost appears to view the results of Eden as fortunate, but the prevalent attitude is concern with present evil in the world. As Frost sees it, it is man's propensity toward evil which dislocates him in time and place, displacing him from a world of innocence.

Contiguous with Frost's use of the Eden motif is his use of the Job motif. Job, the questioner of God, becomes a symbol of man who sees his own insignificance and life's ambiguities, and seeks

clarification through self-sufficiency. A Masque of Reason is the culmination of this usage. Frost criticizes and satirizes such attempts by showing the spiritual blindness attendant upon the self-sufficient Job.

The motif of salvation through the Incarnation is recurrent in all of Frost's poetry. New Testament allusions are especially employed in the poem, "Directive," which calls for a withdrawal to a state "beyond confusion," to belief. A Masque of Mercy points out the humility necessary to man if he is to be acceptable to God. It is the last volume of poetry which fully utilizes the Incarnation motif, as Frost validates man's leaping toward knowledge by an upward comparison to the Incarnation and accepts this "mystery" as the resolution to his own spiritual dilemma.