

THE QUEST:  
WATER IMAGERY IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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An abiding fearful question runs through the poetry of Robert Frost.

Although the poet did not set out to make a system of his work,<sup>1</sup> a unifying theme can be seen in his question of the relationship of human identity to the identity of a transcendent Source. The question struggles from a poet who desires to know the Source but who feels limited by his humanity, the obsessive fear of his own death, the ambiguity of the forces of nature, and the misdirection of a devitalized civilization. Because Frost knows and fears, yet dares to ask, the question itself becomes a religious experience, an Act of Becoming, a Quest.

It is Becoming in the sense given in Mircea Eliade's statement that "man's becoming aware of his own mode of being and assuming his presence in the world together constitute a 'religious experience.'"<sup>2</sup> It is Becoming in the sense of the poet's becoming aware of his power of creating form to balance his fear of death and nothingness. It is Becoming in the sense that the art form--the images, sounds, poses--reveals but does not state the fearful question, the visible quest.

In his best work, Frost's power of creating images and poses makes the form and the question merge. The poses of humor and skepticism which he uses to conceal the intensity of his fearful quest sometimes come close to hiding his meaning "too well away" as he phrases it in "Revelation." The poet does not wish to "oversay his position," however, and in the same poem gives the twentieth-century explanation:

We make ourselves a place apart

Behind light words that tease and flout,

But oh, the agitated heart

Till someone really find us out.<sup>3</sup>

Another New England poet, Emily Dickinson, explained the protective pose in her lines, "Mirth is the Mail of Anguish--" worn lest someone cry, "You're Hurt." Frost spoke of the relationship of fear and humor in a 1924 letter to Louis Untermeyer. "I own any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. . . ."4

Besides irony, skepticism, another kind of guardedness, is often used by Frost. Lawrance Thompson, Frost's official biographer, holds that the poet's skepticism is genuine, yet "It is often invoked as another means of protecting his religious belief from the criticism of others. . . ." Thompson continues, "His faith never had much difficulty in overcoming the temporary quandaries caused by his skepticism."5 This pose is often used as a device to argue the contraries of a situation. It is sometimes directed toward those people who seem to be the confidant of their god, who know his moves, and who have no dark questions. For Frost, absolute certainty is not possible; the question persists. "Narcotics cannot still the pain."6

Frost Yankee-philosophizes:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

One aid in interpreting the quest poems is Henri Bergson's Creative Evolution, a book which Frost read shortly after its 1911 publication in English and which he admired. Bergson believes that the universe is continually being made by one who is unceasing life, action and freedom. Every human act of invention, spontaneity, and freedom is a participation and a struggle back toward the continuity of original creativity, although the human act is "not the vital current . . . but a current already loaded

with matter. . . ."7

Bergson also believes that the current is continuous creativity uniting man with "the first origins of life" and with all organized beings in a "single impulsion, the inverse of the movement of matter . . . in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, perhaps even death."<sup>8</sup>

Frost uses Bergsonian water metaphors in his creation of a stay against the flow to death and nothingness. "West-running Brook" is the poem commonly given as an example of this use. However, traces of the water images can be found in Frost's other brooks, springs, and wells. They are now New England waters and they imply the elements of failure and risk in their return to the source.<sup>9</sup>

Besides water images Frost uses other common New England images to show his quest for the source. There are ladders to climb toward heaven, there are dark trees and mountains to ascend almost to the top, stars to study, and cellars to almost enter. Most often, however, the destination of the quest is expressed in poetic terms as a search for the waters of human imagination or for the undefiled spring, the Pure Source of original creativity.

Because Frost suggests that he knows what the destination of his quest is, even though he is held back from reaching it by his reservations and fears, his poetry has a feeling of hope. Death and disorder are present in Frost's work. However, brooks still run, springs still exist, and the poet still searches.

Once or twice through his water imagery, Frost gives evidence that it is possible to experience oneness with the source. (For example in "The



Pasture," "For Once, Then, Something," "Directive," and perhaps "The Most of It.") Most often he retreats behind his protective pose of "as if" or "something." He goes "toward" the pristine spring. Faith and skepticism are balanced as he views the reality of the contraries of his century.

Frost sometimes invites the reader to come and to drink of the waters of creativity and of the source. When, he reaches the waters, however, he fears to stay to watch them clear or to drink of them. Despite this fear, Frost continues to create his poetic quest. In this creation lies his salvation. Complete Poems ends with fear and hope balanced, as the poet, who has feared to leave the small fresh water spring of his own creativity, moves in A Masque of Mercy to Jonah's feet. With the dead prophet who thought that perhaps he saw a light of truth, the poet asks for one more chance to begin again the quest.

Because of its content and its position as a preface to Complete Poems and to earlier collections, "The Pasture" (CP, p. 1) can be accepted as an introduction to the quest. Lawrance Thompson says that the poem is one of love and of reconciliation with Elinor Frost. He also acknowledges the fact that it can have a valid symbolic extension. In this little poem the form and the content are artistically merged. Frost's creative act of spontaneity speaks of a movement back to original creativity. The quest for innocence and truth is formed in simple lines and speaks of simple actions. An aura of shy Edenic innocence is balanced by the tone of authority in the repetition of "'I'm going out'" and "'You come too.'" Frost also repeats "'I sha'n't be gone long'" which suggests that though the guide goes out to the source, he will return. The reader is consoled by the fact that even if he does not

accept the invitation, the poet-quester will return from the spring bringing new life. Frost selects his words carefully. He does not reveal if the quester will be completely receptive to the pristine waters of the spring. Clarity is the clue in this poem as it is in "For Once, Then, Something." Frost writes, "(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)." The parenthesis and the "I may" suggest a hesitant fear of staying until the waters are clear enough to discern the bottom of the spring.

In the liturgy of the Easter Vigil of the Catholic Church there is a blessing of baptismal waters. The priest prays over the waters so that all who wash there will "be cleansed from all filth of the old man" and "be born again new children of true innocence. . . ." <sup>10</sup> He then invites those who would be baptized to step forward. Although there is no such rite of blessing water in the Calvinist or Presbyterian religions, which are part of the religious background given to Frost by his mother, such rites can be suggested by the poem because they are not in contradiction to archetypal rituals associated with a renewal of innocence and a reception of creative power. <sup>11</sup> In "The Pasture" Frost suggests that he may be going out to the living waters and he commands those who wish union with the creative spring, "'You come too.'"

Such an interpretation over-simplifies Frost, however. As a poet he allows no absolute answers to his quest for meaning. He writes contradictions and his poems hide and reveal contrary layers of meaning. The phrase "'You come too'" can also be the command of the poet to the reader telling him to participate in imaginative creativity on a humanistic level. If the phrase is read, not as a command, but as an entreaty it can suggest the plea of a fearful quester for a companion or of a lover who desires his beloved to share his love. Perhaps (one of Frost's words) all of these meanings are in

the phrase. What is clear is that the poet-quester is "going out" to the spring, that he "sha'n't be gone long" and that he desires that "'You come, too.'"

"Going for Water" (CP, p. 26) is another early quest poem. There is no command or entreaty in it; the two characters run together to see the brook. Several critics, Nitchie and Lentricchia among them, feel that "Going for Water" celebrates the idyllic love relationship. The words Frost has selected, however, suggest otherwise. There is an Edenic tone to the poem but it is a fallen Eden in which man is separated from the original waters.

A surface picture of an idyllic Eden is created by the short lines, regular stanzas, simple meter and regular alternate rhymes. There is a tone of child-like simplicity suggested by the moonlight, the hint of hide and seek, and the mention of gnomes and treasure. However, there are many other words and phrases which suggest that the pair's quest is a fearful one undertaken with a knowledge of the ambiguous forces of nature, the dryness of civilization, and the limits of humanity.

The opening line of this poem, "The well was dry beside the door," suggests a thought that will be found in several later poems among them, "A Brook in the City," "The Birthplace," and "Directive." The well by the house of civilization is dry and the two lovers (or the quester and follower or the poet and reader) need to seek the brook. They do not go forward but backward toward the original waters: "Across the fields behind the house/  
To see the brook if still it ran."

There are irony and hope in the fact that the brook does exist and run; it is only the questers who are unsure and yet who seek. Like the

farmer in "The Pasture" they go out but they will return to their house and to their world bearing the water if they find the brook. There is fear in the Edenic pair's quest. It is not spring but autumn. Life is flowing into nothingness. It is not morning but night. Frost is selective of those words which express the contraries of reality. "The eve is fair/ Though chill." The moon "dawns" but slowly and "behind" the dark trees which are symbolic in many of Frost's poems. If this is Eden, it is stark. The boughs are barren; there are no birds, no breeze.

The middle stanza can be read in different ways.

But once within the wood, we paused  
     Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,  
 Ready to run to hiding new  
     With laughter when she found us soon.

Lentricchi interprets the stanza as meaning the pair are

Adults who are loosed from the grimmer realities of the adult world. Having dared to imagine, they now roam, playing hide and seek with the moon, in the land of the child . . . a land populated by elves, where the adult self is sloughed off, and where lovely mystery is common occurrence.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps. There are no mischievous sprite-like elves in the poem though. Rather the pair are like gnomes, those dwarfs who hide their treasure in the earth. Maybe these questers within the wood have hidden their human creativity away from the light of truth. Or perhaps "gnomes" should be interpreted as the Greek word which means a moral aphorism or

proverb. Taken in this sense, the line could mean that the handed-down moral aphorisms "hid us" from the light of truth. And like Adam and Eve the pair must run to hiding when the truth finds them.

Frost's poem ends with the two beside the brook but not taking water from it. First they must listen to the water and try to hear what it means before they look at the brook. The Edenic two have come to their destination and together they join to make a spiritual hush. Again, there is no final answer to the quest. The pair does not hear the complete song of the brook but a "note as from a single place." Doubt is expressed in the childlike affirmation, "We heard, we knew we heard the brook." The blend of sight and sound is beautiful. The note makes "Now" drops like pearls and "now" a silver blade. What they hear will not last; they must listen again. The choice of the phrase "slender tinkling fall" gives a tone of fragile breakable union. But though these now notes may evaporate, the seeking pair have found the treasure and the ambivalent blade. They are left with the contraries of life. The brook knows the Secret and the two who sought it must guess what it is.

There is little light or clear water in "After Apple-Picking" (CP, pp. 88-8 "Essence of winter sleep is on the night." The grass is "hoary." There is a blend of time and tenses. The events of the morning are recalled in a dream. The Calvinistic view is suggested in the fallen apples which whether bruised or sound are sent to the cider heap "As of no worth."

The water imagery in the poem is contained in lines suggestive of St. Paul,<sup>13</sup> whom Frost enjoyed reading:

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
 I got from looking through a pane of glass  
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
 And held against the world of hoary grass.  
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
 But I was well  
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell. . . .

There is no brook or spring in this poem. There is only the ice skimmed from the standing water in the man-made trough. The glass from the trough soon melts. The limitations of the farmer-poet's view are intensified by the repetition of I, I, I which emphasizes the feeling of man's turning in on self. The poet lets the dark glass fall and break but he has already begun to dream his winter sleep.

Frost is pessimistic here. The strangeness of the view of reality taken from non-flowing waters cannot easily be rubbed away. In the final lines the "see" emphasizes that the question remains. Is this a long sleep of Nature, a sleep in life, or will the poet-quester wake to see St. Paul's Truth face to face?

There is hope in the major spacial image of the poem, the two pointed ladder. The quester has climbed toward heaven and as in "The Pasture" and "Going for Water" he has come back to earth. He is done for now but the ladder points "Toward heaven still."

In "The Mountain" (CP, pp. 56-60), as in "After Apple-Picking," the limitations of humanity and of death and of dark nature are present. The substance of the poem, however, is Bergson's spontaneous human creativity

in the light mode. The poem becomes in fun.

The delight of creating the protective pose is a balance for the fear of the question it masks, as Frost explains in his often-quoted passage from the introduction to King Jasper. Frost wrote that this poem, "Generations of Men," "The Code," and "A Hundred Collars" are almost jokes.<sup>14</sup> There is much in the style of "The Mountain" that suggests native American humor: the frame setting, the meeting of the outsider and the seemingly-slow farmer who bests him in imagination, the speech jokes, and the tacked-on comment. As Frost has the poet-farmer say, "'All the fun's in how you say a thing.'"

The only waters the farmer "who moved so slow/ With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart" has seen are a "widespread brawl," once a river of destruction and a "dry ravine" which emerges from the wall of trees. (They are similar to the brooks in "Directive" which have flowed too far from the source.) The outsider wishes to use the dry ravine as his path to the top of the black mountain which blocks out the stars. The farmer-poet tells him that "'There is no proper path, but those that have/ Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's. That's five miles back.'" Again the quest poem suggests that back is the place to begin.

The poet-farmer wonders about the brook which he knows exists "Somewhere" above, but he has never climbed toward it. He has heard that it is "'warm/ Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm'" (perhaps like some poems and some sects). He thinks that there "ought" to be a view from the mountain and has heard that there is a spring, right on the summit that "ought" to be worth seeing. The mortal quester says, "'I guess there's no doubt about its being there. I never saw it.'" The same witty passage continues that

the spring "may not" be located at the very top but even "a good distance down might not be noticed/ By anyone who'd come a long way up." Perhaps the poet-quester is making fun of those who are certain that their spring is on the top.

Once the man, who "always meant to go and look myself," sent someone to look for him. The messenger did not go high enough to find the pure source but returned to proclaim a far off lake in Ireland. The longing for the clear waters remains but Frost must not take off his mail of mirth. As poet-quester he stays behind his artistic form. He draws his heavy oxen to him "with light touches" and goes "marching on."

In "For Once, Then, Something" (CP, p. 276), the quester does look into the waters himself and seemingly goes beyond man-made creativity to a fleeting view of the source of the living waters of the well. The quester has never seen into the water clearly for he has always "knelt wrong" to the light of truth. He has seen only "a shining surface picture/ Me myself in the summer heaven godlike." He has been both the man who has not dared to look beyond himself and the artistic Job of A Masque of Reason who designed God in his own image.

In "For Once, Then, Something" there is fun in Frost's image of the quester, godlike, in a wreath of fern and cloud puffs. The poet's wit is seen in the use of the almost Biblical "lo" to introduce the understated phrase, "a ripple/ Shook whatever it was." Even the line "For once, then, something" can be taken in contrary ways.

Frost maintains a subtle balance of faith and skepticism in the lines where the quester discerns beyond his own image. Though the poet has "always knelt" at the well in a continuing quest, only once has he discerned beyond



himself. The passage reads:

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.

The discernment line is the center one of the poem's fifteen lines. It balances the tension of the taunts and "never seeing" at the beginning of the poem with the questions and blurred waters at the ending of the poem. Within the line itself are counter-balanced the contraries of the powerful word "discerned" and the qualifying phrase "as I thought."

(The discernment passage is similar to one in "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box" [CP, p. 523]. In that poem the lines read: "for a moment all was plain," and "Each knows his own discernment best.")

As in most of Frost's quest poems, it is only for a moment that the quester in "For Once, Then, Something" discerns the "too clear water." His view is more fleeting than E. A. Robinson's "flash of blue that might have been a bird."<sup>15</sup> Soon, other waters rebuke the "too clear water." A single drop falls from a fern to shake and blur and blot. There is subtle impact in the recognition that the single drop may have fallen from the fern which forms the quester's godlike wreath. Suddenly there is a return to the image of "a shining surface picture/ Me myself" in the shining pebble of quartz of the final line.

Before the rebuke of water by water there was something. Frost's legacy is not the terrible nothingness of Wallace Steven's "Snowman." Once there was something; there is hope. However, the poet never overstates;

contraries are balanced. "Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something."

There is similar ambiguousness expressed in "The Most of It" (CP, p. 451). Frost feels that man cannot ask nature for more than it can give. But how much can it give? In his seeming isolation, man, who thinks he keeps the universe alone, cries out to nature that life wants "counter-love, original response." He cries from a "boulder-broken beach" and in reply to his plea hears only a mocking echo from a "tree-hidden cliff."

The most he gets from nature is a non-human, ambiguous answer as a powerful buck pushes crumpled waters ahead of him and with water streaming from his side like a waterfall stumbles over the broken boulders surrounding man and forces the underbrush. Has the man seen truth or a pebble of quartz?

The water which best shows the relationship of human identity to the identity of a transcendent source is that of the often discussed poem "West-running Brook." Critics agree that this poem is one that is most-Frost; they do not agree on its transcendent implications.

Because of Lawrance Thompson's position as official biographer, there is credibility in his assertion that "West-running Brook" is based on Frost's fear of death and hope for salvation in a life to come. Thompson also writes of the poem in Years of Triumph:

To Frost, one of the most important elements in Bergson's highly poetic philosophy was the denial of essentially deterministic elements in the Darwinian theories. In his gently contrary manner, Bergson insisted that the human spirit has the freely willed power to resist materialism through creative acts which

pay tribute to God. Frost, in bringing his poem to completion, made it a study in Bergsonian contraries.<sup>16</sup>

In this act of completion, Frost makes the form of the poem move with the meaning. (The movement metaphor within the famous "The Figure A Poem Makes" comes to mind.) As the poem moves forward toward its end, it moves backward toward its beginning. The poem is built around the contraries of the question of who is man and what is his relationship to the source. Images are introduced to reveal the question and then returned to as the form imitates the wave motion which it is creating. In the opening lines the wife says:

" . . . It must be the brook  
Can trust itself to go by contraries  
The way I can with you--and you with me--  
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.  
What are we?"

"Young or new?"

"We must be something."

(All italics in the quotations taken from this poem are mine.)

Midway in the poem, the wife sees that her husband's contrary reality must be expressed. Returning to her question she says: "'Go on. You thought of something.'" Almost in the closing lines of the poem the husband throws back the same word in his answer to the opening question: "'And there is something sending up the sun.'"

"Something" is the question and the answer. It is also the qualifier, the protective pose used to balance skepticism and belief. The husband

continues to expand his answer:

"It is this backward motion toward the source,  
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
The tribute of the current to the source.  
It is from this in nature we are from.  
It is most us."

At the end of the poem, the contraries of the two, the "us," are united. The wife who questioned says, "'Today will be the day of what we both said.'" Today. For now. Today offers an answer to the question; it also suggests that the question will come again. There must be a continuous white wave of resistance. The image of the white wave being thrown back is the most vital one in the poem. The contraries thrown against each other create a fall which sends up a little. (In the form of the poem, skepticism and belief, imagination and fact, are thrown against each other to send up a little.) The black stream is "Flung backward on itself in one white wave."

This is no romantic return to the source, no going back in time to a cheerful Eden, but a struggle where the dark unclear water itself creates the hopeful whiteness. Like blood the whiteness "flecks" the "dark stream" and "dark pool" from which it came. Finally it is "driven" against the symbolic far trees.

The wave image appears again after another dark passage describing the flow of "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--/ And even substance . . ." into nothingness. It is "unresisted,/ Save by some strange resistance in itself. . . ." The use of the wave image here suggests Bergson's passage:

To the idea of inevitable death she [Nature] opposes the image of a continuation of life after death; this image, flung by her into the field of intelligence, where the idea of death has just become installed straightens everything out again.<sup>17</sup>

The point of interest is that, like the wave, the dark "universal cataract of death" is flung backward on itself to create the contrary resistance of hope. The fear of death creates the hope of salvation. The resistance of man to the flow to nothingness must never be "Just a swerving, but a throwing back," a deliberate vigorous act. Man's resistance is freely willed and is a creative act. The wife has asked, "'What are we?'" The husband answers, "'The tribute of the current to the source . . . Is most us.'"

Mircea Eliade says that religious man's "terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness. The unknown space that extends beyond his world . . . represents absolute nonbeing." Since he thirsts for being, religious man seeks the space where he will be closest to the gods. He assumes responsibility for creating for himself "a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands."<sup>18</sup> The ancient symbol of this holy place is the cave and the spring. In Frost's "The Generations of Men," "The Birthplace," "A Brook in the City," "Directive," and A Masque of Mercy this ancient symbol becomes a New England cellar by a brook. Sometimes the cellar's stage of decay suggests man's present distance from the holy cosmos.

In "The Generations of Men" (CP, pp. 94-102), two members of the family of man seek out the holy cosmos. Their quest, like the one in "The Mountain," is expressed through a protective pose of humor. Frost called the poem an

"almost joke." It begins with a humorous Biblical-like proclamation by the governor that all those "sprung, so numerous a tribe," might seek "Ancestral memories" in New Hampshire. The Starks (perhaps their name suggests their condition) have "run to earth" their origins and have planned:

To stand together on the crater's verge  
That turned them on the world, and try to fathom  
The past and get some strangeness out of it.

It rains and only two questers arrive: a farm boy "strolls" there and a girl from the city comes, halting and reconnoitering. Their backward motion toward the source is through generations of generations (suggesting Bergson's statement that there is a "unity of impulse which, passing through generations, links individuals with individuals, species with species, and makes of the whole series of the living one single immense wave flowing over matter. . . "19). When the pair arrive they find that their holy cosmos is a Frostian one of contraries and questions. They are not at a transcendent mountaintop but halfway up, dangling their feet in an old cellar hole. The road disappears not far off and they know "No one went home that way." The brook they hear is symbolically "hidden in trees."

The boy and girl wish to see visions and hear voices, but when they ask, "'What do we see in such a hole, I wonder,'" there are so many contrary replies that the only true answer remains, "'Yes, what do I see?'" The girl sees the ancient Aztec caves of creation which become a cellar where a small boy searches, as he believes, in darkness although it is really light. The boy sees old Granny Stark searching for cider. He hopes that "she gets her drink and gets out safely."

Just as the answer to the pair's quest for a vision was the repetition of the question, there is ambiguity in the answer to their quest for the voice of truth:

"The voices give you what you wish to hear."

"Strangely, it's anything they wish to give."

What the voices of the brook say is that the two must take the charred door-sill from the crumbling cellar and make a new dwelling "on the ancient spot. The life is not yet all gone out of it." Perhaps the girl will come and sit there unafraid though she will "'not come in across the sacred sill--.'" With their contrary visions and voices, the two questers have made their own sacred "now" experience. They agree to meet again tomorrow at the cellar and the brook before they meet anyplace else.

The symbol of cave and spring is also used in "To An Ancient" (CP, p. 525). Scientists may date the ancient's "depth in silt and dust" but the poet, in words that tease and flout, suggests a deeper depth. The bones of man, the maker and grower, are discovered in "the delta of a brook" and in "a cavern where you used to cook." Bergson wrote that acts of human creativity are a participation in the continuity of original creativity. Frost says (in a guarded way since "immortality" may mean only fame):

Your claims to immortality were two.

The one you made, the other one you grew.

Another variation of the theme of man's original union with the sacred spring is found in "The Birthplace" (CP, p. 339). In it the outer picture of a father building a home for his dozen children is countered with the

inner tension of the idea that man must struggle to attain a sacred space. The fall from Eden is apparent in the thought that man by his very act of civilizing destroys the sacred. The father has "enclosed" the spring, simultaneously keeping out evil and preventing expansion; he has put up "chains of wall" and "subdued" the free life and growth of the earth into civilized grass. The most serious consequence of his struggle is seen in the satiric idea that the father has "brought our various lives to pass."

In the beginning God called man and woman by their names. Today the holy mountain "wouldn't know our name." The reason that man is unknown is ambiguous: perhaps it is because the father built higher "Than there was ever any hope"; perhaps it is because the generations have departed so far from the spring. No matter what the reason is, mankind is separated from the nurturing source:

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

These are the trees which must be climbed and entered and searched in order to find once again the path to the spring and the original house of man.

The relationship of man to the nurturing source is also questioned in "A Brook in the City" (CP, p. 285). The one who questions does so with seeming authority:

I ask as one who knew the brook, its strength  
And impulse, having dipped a finger length  
And made it leap my knuckle, having tossed  
A flower to try its currents where they crossed.



He has only "dipped a finger length" and only "tossed a flower," but he has known the brook. (Perhaps the words Frost selects refer to Bergson's single strong impulse and his vital and human currents of creativity.) Having known the brook, the man cannot forget it. His disturbing questions keep rising within the poem as the structure and meaning merge and build to the final "If."

The description of the farmhouse as one which "lingers" (past its welcome or soon to die?) is suddenly interrupted by the questioner:

But what about the brook

That held the house as in an elbow-crook?

Each time civilization wanders from the idea of a sacred time by cementing down the meadow grass or by throwing the brook "deep in a sewer dungeon," the man interjects another question:

Is water wood to serve a brook the same?

How else dispose of an immortal force

No longer needed? Staunch it at its source

With cinder loads dumped down?

The questioner knows the source cannot be staunched; he knows the brook still lives and runs although only ancient maps show it. The questioner ceases with the contrary thought that perhaps the act of keeping the brook under has caused the questions to rise which may perhaps make the city answer his first question--"But what about the brook?" He says:

But I wonder  
 If from its being kept forever under  
 The thoughts may not have risen that so keep  
 The new-built city from both work and sleep.

Perhaps similar disturbing thoughts are part of the "all this now too much for us" of "Directive" (CP, pp. 520-21).<sup>20</sup> In this probing poem the poet-quester seems to have been to "the waters and the watering place" and to have returned to guide the reader-follower out from the "too much for us." (The use of "for us" establishes an immediate bond between poet and reader.) His imperative "Back . . . Back" and the use of explicit Grail references imply that this journey cannot be just an escape, "a swerving," but must be a deliberate quest. However, the phrases "may seem" and "as if" caution against a too literal approach; it is only through a poetic approach that man goes beyond confusion. The guide warns that it is only in being lost that you will be found. (Perhaps this is also a reference to those who are certain that they know the only way to the source and who are thus truly "lost.")

According to Hyde Cox, Frost once said:

" [The guide is] not offering any general salvation--nor Christian salvation in particular. . . . He tells everyone to go back . . . to whatever source they have. The source might even be a conventional religion . . . but religion is most of all valuable when something original has been contributed to it. . . ."21

(The tribute of the current to the source comes to mind.) Cox also recollected that Frost said:

"People miss the key to the poem: the key lines, if you want to know, are 'Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,/ Too lofty and original to rage'. . . . But the key word in the whole poem is source--Whatever source it is."<sup>22</sup>

To find the source, the poet-guide directs, Go beyond man-made divisions and man-made religions. Dig deep into meaning: "the road there . . . May seem as if it should have been a quarry--." Go beyond ancient religious emblems, those "great monolithic knees"; go beyond the mythical foundations of the world. Do not mind the "ordeal" of passing through the rustling leaves--perhaps bickering, speculative religious dominations, or perhaps visible nature which must not stop man. Do not mind even the old trees. The source is what you seek.

As he guides, the poet blurs his tenses: "once was," "may be," and "is" are used together to create a state outside of time. He says, "And if you're lost enough" we can approach the sacred place. "Pull in your ladder road." (The one left "sticking through a tree/ Toward heaven still" or the one Jacob dreamed?) The guide continues, "Then make yourself at home," before the final trip across the last "harness gall." You must, like the Grail knight, meditate among the ruins.

More is needed to find the source. You must go beyond the playhouse of imagination and ritual. Weep as you go (like Christ over Jerusalem?) for the "little things," the play beliefs and creations, that can make men

"glad." (Contrarily the guide implies that unless you become as innocent children, you cannot leave these play things and find the true source.) Weep, too, he says, by the cellar hole that once was a "house in earnest." (Perhaps this can also be interpreted as "earnest" payment on salvation or creativity.) Go beyond man:

Your destination and your destiny's  
 A brook that was the water of the house,  
 Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,  
 Too lofty and original to rage.

In an aside the poet quips, beware of brooks developed into valley streams, too far from the source for comfort. They "leave their tatters" when aroused.

The guide suggests that only the reader who has the poetic heart of a child and St. Mark's mature understanding by which it is "given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God" will ever find the broken earthly goblet<sup>23</sup> and drink of the source. To such a man, the poet-guide says:

Here are your waters and your watering place.  
 Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

The poet-guide does not drink himself but perhaps he has drunk before-- it was he who hid the goblet--and so gained the right and power to guide others.

Confusion still remains for Frost, however. "Directive" is followed immediately by "Too Anxious for Rivers" and "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Mailbox." In "Too Anxious," the quester realizes that although he

"never saw so much swift water run cloudless. . . . We have to cease somewhere,/ No place to get lost like too far in the distance." In "An Unstamped Letter," he says that only "for a moment all was plain."

Frost's deepest fears and confusions concerning the relationship of human identity with the identity of a transcendent source are revealed in the two masques which close Complete Poems. There are no waters in them from which one may drink and be made whole again beyond confusion. Rather a dry sandy "tendency" flows through A Masque of Reason (CP, pp. 587-606) and in A Masque of Mercy (CP, pp. 609-642) a "small fresh water spring" of human creativity drowns and is renewed by its source. In A Masque of Mercy, man does not achieve the "holy cosmos" but stands in fear before the "wet flags" of an ambiguous cellar.

The masques are necessary in a discussion of Frost's quest because in them the poet questions the meaning of suffering, the extent to which man should bow his human reason to what seems a Divine unreason, and the possibilities of God's accepting or rejecting man's best white wave of creativity.

Frost sometimes overuses his protective pose to mask these questions. There are literary one-liners and Mother Goose allusions sprinkled throughout the works. Perhaps they are to underline God's "great big" joke on man, but they do not always work.<sup>24</sup> Frost defends his fun in his introduction to the British publication of A Masque of Reason. He writes:

There is risk in the play. But if some of the company get lost in the excitement, charge it up to proving the truth of chapter and verse in the Gospel according to

Saint Mark, although the oracle speaking is Delphic.<sup>25</sup>

Job is the quester in A Masque of Reason. One of his speeches echoes the questions of the wife in "West-running Brook": "'I don't know what we are. What are we?' . . . 'We must be something.'" Job says:

We don't know where we are, or who we are.

We don't know one another; don't know You;

Don't know what time it is. We don't know,

don't we?

Who says we don't? Who got up these misgivings?

Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with.

I mean we seem to know enough to act on.

Job must search by today's "strangest light." His modern light comes not from the tree of life but from a confusion of symbolic poetic and religious trees. God has been trapped in their troubled branches. When He finally frees Himself and comes before Job and his wife, God is recognized only through Blake's picture. (As in "For Once, Then, Something" the image of man clouds his perception.) At the end of the masque, Job's wife must still use her human light to take the snapshot<sup>26</sup> of God, Devil and Job about the thrones.

Although Job searches in "an oasis in the purest desert," there is more sand than water in evidence. (This is earth as a place of trial.) The devil is "precipitated from the desert air." God explains that the devil's appearance is "More to give his reality its due than anything." (And perhaps because he is "God's best inspiration"?). Later when a

modern tendency seems to be carrying the Devil out of the picture,<sup>27</sup>

Job says:

He's on that tendency that like the Gulf Stream,  
Only of sand not water, runs through here.  
It has a rate distinctly different  
From the surrounding desert; just today  
I stumbled over it and got tripped up.

This is no spontaneous Bergsonian current which "brings something new into the world" but dry modern sand which flows through surrounding sand. Its sterility is underlined by its ironic description in the stage directions as "a long, long narrow strip/ of middle-aisle church carpet."

Job's wife helps the Devil off the tendency. She and Job know that there is nothing--not even evil--that God does not stand behind. The Devil is necessary for her picture of the participants in creation. The three must stand together: God, Devil, and Job the suffering questioner, the artist who "cries out for design."

When Job cries out, "Why did you hurt me so?" he receives only a suggestion that he trust in God's Reason. "It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning" God tells His emancipator and adds:

There's no connection man can reason out  
Between his just deserts and what he gets.  
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.

The idea of success and failure being of equal value is echoed in A Masque of Mercy. (The masque deals with the contraries of justice and

mercy which Frost had touched on in "The Death of the Hired Man.") One of its characters, Keeper, says that he is "not governed by the fear of Hell" nor "of punishment for sin." His fear is "of the soul." He fears that his offering will not be acceptable in the sight of God.

Although all the characters in the masque have problems understanding God's mercy-justice contradiction, A Masque of Mercy centers on Jonah, whose Old Testament book "Is the first place in literature . . . Where Mercy is explicitly the subject." When Jonah first enters he exclaims, "God's after Me!" Paul gives the fearful would-be prophet recognition:

You are the universal fugitive,  
Escapist as we say, though you are not  
Running away from Him you think you are  
But from His mercy-justice contradiction.

Jonah cannot "trust God to be unmerciful" and he asks for justice. In response he receives the contraries of the human view from Paul and Keeper. They speak of social justice and of war. Paul says that if a man practices the justice preached in the Sermon of the Mount, he will fail and have to be "Thrown prostrate at the Mercy Seat for Mercy." Faced with these human contraries, Jonah says:

I think my trouble's with the crisis  
Where mercy-crossed to me seemed evil-crossed.

Paul responds:



Mercy is only to the undeserving.

But such we all are made in the sight of God.

. . . . .

Failure is failure, but success is failure.

. . . . .

That is the mystery you must accept.

Do you accept it, Master Jonas Dove?

Then through all the contradictions of the human view, Jonah perhaps  
glimpses truth:

You ask if I see yonder shining gate,

And I reply I almost think I do,

Beyond this great door you have locked  
against me.

Beyond the storm, beyond the universe.

The modern Pilgrim has recognized (or thinks he does) that what he is  
seeking is beyond man. It is "back out of all this." His "almost" glimpse  
causes Paul to give him new recognition:

Yes, Pilgrim now instead of runaway

Your fugitive escape become a quest.

Keeper cautions that this "too bright" light may soon fade just as "too  
clear" water soon clouded. He may also be cautioning Jonah to beware of  
following only Paul's light, for the one who thinks he knows the only light  
soon "comes to with a foolish feeling." Keeper also offers the consolation

that even though human light fades and human creative waters turn to brine,  
the source will make them new again. The passage is:

Don't let him [Paul] make you see too bright a gate  
Or you will come to with a foolish feeling.  
When a great tide of argument sweeps in  
My small fresh water spring gets drowned of  
course.

But when the brine goes back as go it must  
I can count on my source to spring again  
Not even brackish from its salt experience.  
No true source can be poisoned.

Although Jonah is "all turned round," he cries, "I want to run/  
Toward what you make me see beyond the world." Frost is careful to  
leave skeptical room. Jonah runs toward "what you make me see." His  
destination, his holy cosmos, is but a cellar. He asks, "Whose cellar is  
it . . . ?" He fears for he has no light by which to enter.

Keeper offers light. There is, he says, plenty of original light  
"reflected" from the human creativity of the printed page and from man's  
face. Lesser gods and saints all refract "God's white light." Perhaps  
Keeper is cautioning Jonah that he should seek the true light as he seeks  
the true source.

Although Jonah longs to seek, he hesitates from entering the cellar  
where he "must lie in self-forgetfulness" before a crucifix painted by an  
Aztec Indian. (The Indian cave of "The Generations of Men" is suggested.)  
He says:

If what you say is true, if winning ranks  
 The same with God as losing, how explain  
 Our making all this effort mortals make?

Then, although he fears, Jonah steps on the threshold. The cellar door  
 slams and he dies saying, "Mercy on me for having thought I knew." The  
 "lingering objection" remains: was he, as Jesse Bel puts it, "rejected  
 for his reservations" or was his sacrifice found acceptable in God's sight?

Paul and Keeper have the final word. Paul says:

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.

Frost quoted the last thought often. When he wrote to Rabbi Richert to  
 ascertain its Biblical reference, he said, "It is kindred in spirit to  
 'Nevertheless not my will but Thy will.'"<sup>28</sup> Once he called it "the greatest  
 prayer" and added "that's your life, your poem, your everything."<sup>29</sup>

Finally Keeper moves "as if" to ask for one more chance to begin  
 again the quest for truth:

Let the lost millions pray it in the dark!  
 My failure is no different from Jonah's.  
 We both have lacked the courage in the heart  
 To overcome the fear within the soul  
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.  
 Courage is what it takes and takes the more of  
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal.  
 And if I say we lift him from the floor  
 And lay him where you ordered him to lie  
 Before the cross, it is from fellow feeling,  
 As if I asked for one more chance myself  
 To learn to say (He moves to Jonah's feet)  
 Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.

Man's relationship to the source is also the subject of the 1962  
In The Clearing.<sup>30</sup> The title has a typical Frostian ambiguity: perhaps it  
 suggests Frost is finally out of the dark woods and into the clearing where  
 life is clarified; perhaps it is derived from the thought in "A Cabin in the  
 Clearing," "Than smoke and mist who better could appraise/ The kindred  
 spirit of an inner haze"; or, perhaps it is taken from the introductory,  
 "'And wait to watch the water clear I may.'" Most likely, all the meanings  
 are inherent in the title.

The Bergsonian idea of human creativity being a participation in the  
 on-going Divine creativity is strong in this final work. The frontispiece  
 "But God's own descent"<sup>31</sup> suggests that the Divine Incarnation was "a  
 demonstration" which man must imitate "In birth after birth/ Ever fresh  
 and fresh." (Job, too, must be in the picture.) "Our human part" must be  
 the freely willed risk of making "the soul's ethereal into the material."

To Frost this freely willed risk is the greatest thing about both God's descent and man's acts of creativity. He says:

That the supreme merit  
Lay in risking spirit  
In substantiation.

Frost himself risks. He is not Yvor Winters's or George W. Nitchie's "spiritual drifter." His poetry proves otherwise. The source exists and he seeks it. The quest appears in every book he wrote. Bergsonian brook and spring images and cave images are used to express the quest's destination in all but Mountain Interval, A Masque of Reason (though it hints at them), and In The Clearing. There is always a movement toward the source in these works, however, expressed through ladder, mountain, and star images or, in such modern poems as "Kitty Hawk" through space images.

Frost's lifelong concern with the relationship of man's identity with the identity of a transcendent source does not include the right to pronounce absolutes or to play "god." He believes that truth embraces contraries. Those who avoid life's contradictions can never become lost enough to be found. Yet he felt, as Keeper expresses it, "'I'd rather be lost in the woods than found in church.'" To be lost means to go beyond man to the source. In a deathbed letter to George Elliott, Frost wrote, "Why will the quidnuchs always be hoping for a salvation man will never have from anyone but God."<sup>32</sup>

For Frost, to seek does not mean to dismiss fear. It is to come with fear and step upon the threshold as Jonah did with all his "lingering doubts." It is to risk failure. "In Winter in the Woods Alone" (IC, p. 101)

ends with the thought that the poet-quester will "retreat/ for yet another blow." The blow may "overthrow" one of the dark trees or it may strike the quester. Failure is not "defeat." The movement back to the source is, as Bergson writes, "a struggle." Rabbi Riechert writes of a conversation he and Frost had when the poet was in his eighties:

Frost said to me, 'Victor, what do you think are the chances of life after death?' . . . So I said to Robert, 'What do you think?' Frost became deeply silent and then he said to me, 'With so many ladders going up everywhere, there must be something for them to lean against.'<sup>33</sup>

The fear and the hope and the search are the subjects of "Escapist--Never" (IC, p. 27):

His fear is not behind him but beside him  
On either hand to make his course perhaps  
A crooked straightness yet no less a straightness.  
He runs face forward. He is a pursuer.  
.  
.  
.  
His life is a pursuit of a pursuit forever.

Frost expressed the desire that even after death he would pursue truth, wherever it is. In "Away" (IC, p. 15) he says:

I'm--bound--away!  
  
And I may return  
If dissatisfied

With what I learn  
From having died.

Here as in "The Pasture," "Directive" and other poems, Frost suggests that he will be the guide who goes out and comes back, if necessary, to bring truth to his reader-follower. But, as his daughter, Leslie, wrote, "since he hasn't returned, nor has anyone, we may assume . . . that he approved of what he found."<sup>34</sup>

Frost's continuous creative backward struggle toward the waters beyond confusion perhaps gives more hope than any final answer could. In a century in which absolutes and a sense of order do not seem to exist, it is, as Mircea Eliade writes, more important that man ask how to grasp the truth of the religious experience than that he come to any single answer.<sup>35</sup> Robert Frost's contradictory and fearful questions give vitality to man's religious experience that pronouncements could not produce.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lawrance Thompson, ed., Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York, 1964), p. 343. In a 1927 letter to Mary E. Cooley, a former student, Frost wrote, "I'm less and less for systems and system-building in my old age. I'm afraid of too much structure. Some violence is always done to the wisdom you build a philosophy out of . . . ."

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion (Chicago, 1969), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, "Revelation" in Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 27. Hereafter all references to poems from this work will be documented by using the abbreviation CP followed by the page number.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Untermeyer, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1963), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938 (New York, 1970), p. 562.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Dickinson, "This World is not Conclusion."

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, trans. from the French by Arthur Mitchell. (New York, 1911), p. 239.

<sup>8</sup> Bergson, p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> Water is sometimes a limiting force expressed as large bodies of water, flooding rivers, or man-manipulated water. The wells are sometimes dry with civilization. Frost uses water in this manner in "A Servant to Servant," "Neither Out Far, Nor In Deep," "The Mountain" and other poems.

<sup>10</sup> Rt. Rev. Joseph F. Stedman, ed. My Lenten Missal (Brooklyn, 1941), p. 432.

<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion (New York, 1961), pp. 134-136.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and The Landscape of Self (Durham, North Carolina, 1975), p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 534.

<sup>15</sup> E. A. Robinson, "As It Looked Then."

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 301.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Bergson, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, trans. from the French by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (New York, 1935) p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 65.



- 19 Bergson, Creative Evolution, p. 250.
- 20 My reading of this poem is based on class notes from the class 20th Century American Poetry, Kansas State University, fall 1978.
- 21 Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Winnick, Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1939-1963 (New York, 1976), p. 136.
- 22 Thompson, The Later Years, p. 406.
- 23 Frost uses a similar phrase in "The Times Table" (CP, p. 336):  
"More than halfway up the pass/ Was a spring with a broken drinking glass."
- 24 This overuse caused some early critics to center on it rather than on the questions it masked. Randall Jarrell said, A Masque of Reason "is a frivolous, trivial, and bewilderingly corny affair." However, Louis Untermeyer (perhaps influenced by his friendship with Frost) said, "Most paradoxical of all, it is a young man's poem: a half questing, half querulous search for ultimates. The years have sharpened the wit of Frost." Linda Wagner, ed. Robert Frost: The Critical Reception (New York, 1977), p. 203.
- 25 Hyde Cox and Edward Lathem, Selected Prose of Robert Frost (New York, 1956), p. 26.
- 26 Perhaps the snapshot image is derived from Bergson's thought that "What is real is the continual change of form: form is only a snapshot view of a transition." Creative Evolution, p. 302.
- 27 As the devil leaves, Job's wife says, "He isn't really going, yet he's leaving." "The Black Cottage" (CP, p. 77) has lines which, although they have other interpretations, can also be used to reinforce her statement. They read: "Most of the change we think we see in life/ Is due to truths being in and out of favor."
- 28 Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 407.
- 29 Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 444.
- 30 As early as 1954 Frost decided to call this collection The Great Misgiving. (See Thompson, The Later Years, p. 294).
- 31 Robert Frost, "By God's Own Descent" in In the Clearing (New York, 1962), frontispiece. Hereafter, all references to poems from this work will be documented by using the abbreviation IC followed by the page number.
- 32 Thompson, Selected Letters, (Jan. 1963), p. 596.
- 33 Victor E. Reichert. "The Faith of Robert Frost," in Centennial Essays, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, Miss., 1973), p. 418.
- 34 Lesley Frost, "In Aladdin's Lamp Light," in Centennial Essays III, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, Miss., 1978), p. 315.
- 35 Eliade, The Quest, p. 9.

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THE QUEST,  
WATER IMAGERY IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

by

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Although Robert Frost did not set out to make a system of his work, a unifying theme is seen in his fearful quest for an understanding of the relationship of human identity to the identity of a transcendent source. This quest is often expressed through Bergsonian water metaphors as the poet-guide and the reader-follower search for the waters of human imagination and for the undefiled spring or the pure source. Frost also uses the archetypal image of the spring and cave to show the original union of mankind with the pure waters. Sometimes the clarity of the water or the degree of light in the poem is a clue to the quester's receptivity to the pure source.

Frost's creative act of verbally shaping the search is his resistance to nothingness. It is also, as Henri Bergson writes in Creative Evolution, a book which Frost admired, a participation in the on-going current of divine creativity. It is Frost's lifelong struggle backwards to the source of truth. The intensity and fear of that struggle are often hidden by the poses of humor and skepticism. To Frost, truth embraces life's contraries and fears; there is no absolute answer to his quest. He believes that man must be lost to be found and to him being lost means going beyond man's understanding to the source. The risk, the freely willed act of searching in spite of reservations and fears, is the supreme merit.