

THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST-
AN UNSTATED SEARCH FOR PROOF

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There is a great deal of "journeying" in the poetry of Robert Frost. While most of the "journey" poems do not conform to the narrowest sense of that label, as for instance "Birches" does, they are still representative of a basic characteristic of much of Frost's work, the search for meaning. "When most confiding, he admitted that the primary goal of his experience-poetic and non-poetic- was the quest for psychological and spiritual salvation."¹ Given this general tendency, we first have to state that Frost does not openly admit to such a pursuit. But in spite of the "resolved" stance which he affects, the searching goes on. Again, such a journey or search would seem pointless, because as one of his first poems points out, nature is a "mask of gloom" which reveals no answer. Nature is only a physical fact, and not the manifestation or key to some higher spiritual reality. But the searching goes on. And even if he could penetrate the gloom, says Frost, it would only corroborate conclusions that he has already reached by instinct, "Only more sure of all I thought was true." While he never explicitly states these conclusions, the tone of most of his poetry would seem to indicate that they are positive rather than negative.

Yet despite this instinctive knowledge, Frost does, repeatedly, probe the mask. While he does not admit to this search, his actions demonstrate man's basic need to be assured of his suspicions, whatever the cost. Wouldn't it be logical to assume that a man who felt he knew the answer wouldn't press his luck? But such is not the case with Frost, nor with most men. From the very beginning he claims that penetration is impossible, and seems to be resolute in his decision to make his own way. But he is compelled to find truth

at its source. He flies into the blank face of nature when he knows it won't do any good because underneath there is an urge that will not let him rest, that hopes beyond hope to find an answer. "Revelation" demonstrates Frost's need for a response from the universe which mutely confronts him.

But with all, from babes that play
 At hide-and-seek to God afar,
 So all who hide too well away
 Must speak and tell us where they are.

But why "must" God speak?

So far I have assumed two things, first that the contradiction between Frost's instinctive knowledge (as a child he did know) and his searching is more of a truism than a contradiction, and second that it is a matter of course for man to probe physical nature for the answer to his philosophical and religious questions. The first assumption, I think, is true for most men, and the second one is especially pertinent to a discussion of Frost. It may be a contradiction for a man with instinctive faith to need proof, but men have to see things in person, even though they already know the truth. As a child Frost knew God, and didn't need proof then. But as a man, instinct no longer satisfies his psychological needs, and he must have evidence. This need to have evidence would be most crucial in religion. The contradiction, the need to support instinctive faith with proof, is probably true of most men.

The answers to Frost's personality and to his religious beliefs lie in the interaction of several factors in his early life. Early religious training, a basic insecurity, cowardice, self-deception, egotism, and a natural human need to be sure of God all contributed in the production of Frost's religious beliefs. This discussion will not attempt to present a chronolo-

gical record of his philosophic development because that development was finished when Frost was young. At different times various colors of the picture achieved ascendancy, but the picture itself does not change shape. Much of his poetry is a record of his attempts to prove what he knew instinctively as a child.

Frost's religious training, or better, his religious indoctrination came at the hands of his devoutly religious mother, a Scotch-Presbyterian-Unitarian-Swedenborgian. "As soon as Robbie and Jeanie were old enough to be interested, their mother combined storytelling with devout moralizing for the purpose of teaching them the fundamentals of religious and theological truth."² Much of his early education was received at home. From his mother he got a strong instinctive belief in God. It must be stressed; as a child he knew God. As a child he accepted his religion at face value, but with maturity and the full growth of his rational powers he needed demonstrable proof to support his faith. For the rest of his life he sought to prove what he already knew, what had been his by training and by human instinct- the knowledge that God exists.

The next question to be answered is why Frost did not admit that he was searching. To admit that you're searching is to admit that you've lost something. The number of rigidly assertive poems he wrote would indicate that he was not about to admit uncertainty, at least not about the most basic part of his belief. Poems like "In a Vale", "A Prayer in Spring", "The Vantage Point", "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight", "Our Hold on the Planet", "Skeptic", and "Birches" express satisfaction rather than philosophical uncertainty. "He clung to his religious beliefs, desperately, because he needed them as protection, particularly against his fear of death. At the same time, he was ashamed not only of his fears but also of his compensating religious beliefs, and

sometimes he tried to hide them both."³ Any slackening in his assertions might prove disastrous, and he sensed this. "Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke."⁴

If a poet were going to search for God the places where he might look would certainly be limited. He could seek to find God manifested in the actions of people; he could scan the institutions of society for a hint of divine providence, or he could look to nature for his answers. Nature is Frost's place to find God, particularly because of his upbringing and the powerful influence exerted by his mother. Mrs. Frost was converted to Swedenborgianism by one of Emerson's essays. "The world is a temple whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and capital commandments of the capital diety- in this that there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature."⁵ At an early age Frost was also exposed to Bryant's "To a Water Fowl", and he says that as a child he suddenly realized that he knew the poem by heart without ever having tried to memorize it. With this background, nature would be the most likely place for Frost to look for God, or to find a hint of God's presence in the world.

Most of Frost's poetry does not employ the first person device, but there is, I feel, a certain amount of correspondence between the searching and questioning in the poems, and Frost's own feelings. But the only thing more difficult to determine than the exact correspondence the poet has with the people and the situations in the poetry is the exact extent to which Frost himself is aware of this autobiographical element. Because of his early failures, and a lack of self-confidence, Frost had a tendency to overcompensate to insure success. He cultivated the public image of the wise old poet; he used scorn and

humor as a means to ignore things that troubled him, and also to destroy them, and he gradually eased himself into habits of self-deception. "Robert Frost was so fascinated by the story of his life that he never tired of retelling it. A good raconteur, he naturally varied his accounts, and whenever the bare facts troubled him, he discreetly clothed them with fictions. This imaginative process caused him to mingle self-deception with little falsehoods; it even caused him to gradually convince himself that some of these fictions were genuine truths."⁶ The need to be protected from his own problems and personal failings many times led him to fabricate excuses for himself, or to ignore the problems altogether. Some of his alterations approached outright lies as for example his tampering with the facts of his early acquaintance with Yeats. The thinly veiled digs at other poets and public figures in his letters to Untermeyer also show his need to be right, to be the best. A number of times he apologizes to Untermeyer for being so harsh to other people, and claims he will try to behave better next time, but this is only to soothe his conscience until his ego demands new sustenance, and then he attacks again, always claiming weakness as an excuse for his actions. His insecurity needed to be protected by a wall of scorn and aggressiveness.

The seeming contradiction between the public poet, the letter writer, and the writer of poems only underscores Frost's use of various personalities. At times the letter writer uncovers weaknesses and uncertainties. The public pose as the wise poet sometimes contradicts the occasionally adolescent letter writer. And the poet in print seems to be a man very much different from these others. The poetry reveals a private Frost, a man who was never revealed to even his closest friends, a man who was much smaller, closer to human size, a man who was at times afraid and uncertain. In the serious poems the large public figure fades into the background. Any reading of the letters will amply

demonstrate that the real Frost was certainly not to be found in the public figure so widely celebrated, and the poems uncover a man even more personal than the one who writes the letters. The public pose was used efficiently to dupe outsiders. "Frost is a delightful personality, frank, straightforward and honest. I have been charmed with his candor. He is without pretense of any kind... His personal view of everything is most pronounced. 'I am very personal,' he said to me once; and it is true. There is no restraint about him at all. He is rather like nature in his abundant outgiving, which is no effort to him, but obviously a joy."⁷ The combination of Frost's willingness and ability to be picturesque, and the desire on the part of outsiders to see him that way, resulted in his being cast as the wise and kindly poet. "In a word, even on such short acquaintance, I didn't have to wonder what kind of man he was. I already knew."⁸ A good number of his interviewers were taken in by his pose just this easily.

When we take into account Frost's defensive maneuverings, both conscious and unconscious, and add to that the ambiguity and elusiveness of the persona in his poetry, the problem of piecing together a coherent picture of Frost's philosophical attitudes becomes difficult, if not hazardous. In a good number of the poems the persona, who is Frost, at least to some extent in most of them, takes the pose of the self-sustaining onlooker who is not involved in the problems of the poems. But there are places where the mask slips a little, and a handful of places where it falls away altogether.

The over-all impression is that the poems reveal a number of clues to Frost's personality, many times without his realizing it. Frost is one of the people in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep", a poem which comments on the need to search. Just how much Frost is aware of this is impossible to determine.

But the almost pitying tone of the poem, and the concealed attempt of the speaker to raise himself above the scene viewed, would, in the light of Frost's needs as a personality, lead me to believe that his philosophical uncertainties required him to disassociate himself from the watchers, and probably made him unaware of his own resemblance to them. The insistence on "they", as I read the poem, is an attempt by the speaker to separate himself from these people, to say "not me."

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

Frost's elusiveness as a personality is due to his ability to make his persona so ambiguous. Any blanket declaration concerning the relation between Frost and his persona would be, I think, critically indefensible. Our clues are fleeting glimpses; we might have seen something just as the persona might have in "For Once, Then Something". After reading the body of his work we have the feeling that we know what he's like, but our reaction is subjective. My point is simply that in some way, indefinable as it is, the poetry of Robert Frost is autobiographical in its philosophical content. Granted this assumption, that the poetry is somehow autobiographical, I think the reader is provided with a tool that will enable him to resolve many of the seeming contradictions that exist in Frost's work. While the speaker of the poems dealing with this searching is unidentified, certain patterns do become visible. That the patterns are contradictory is something that can easily be explained. While all these patterns do vary to opposite extremes, they all represent Frost's subjective reactions to the results of his probing of the "mask of gloom". The "mask" can take the form of physical nature and/or the life

around him. And although Frost warns against ascribing personality, conscious intention, or responsiveness to nature in "The White-Tailed Hornet" and "The Most of It", he too, because he needs to find an answer and has no place else to look, endows nature with a vague spiritual or intellectual awareness. Trapped by the lack of alternatives, Frost almost necessarily has to "choose" to be guilty of this weakness he has warned us about. The view of nature presented is only determined by Frost's mood on the day he conceived or wrote a particular "journey" poem. If he's unhappy on a particular day, the cosmos may seem to him unkind. If he happens to write a poem on that day, chances are nature or the world will be shown as unfriendly to man. The poem "Stars" was written shortly after the death of his son Elliot. It is only natural for a man's moods to vary, and the poet is no exception. The view of nature as a source of answers is bound to vary in accordance. Let me emphasize that Frost does not probe by means of any scientific trial and error method or research technique, but that his reactions represent the emotional ups and downs that any man is subject to because of his unplanned and haphazard collisions with life.

Frost is not a nature poet in the traditional sense of the term. His relation to nature is poetic, but more than that it is philosophic. He does use nature for descriptive poetry, but his main concern with nature is the degree to which he can use it as evidence in his spiritual quest. While Frost never says that he's convinced that there is any reason for man's existence, or that there are any obligations incumbent upon men, he nevertheless, without being asked to, tries to chip away at nature for a clue. Nature probably won't answer, but what else does man have to work with? The physical world is evidence of some type of order, which Frost asserts many times, but he is looking to discover proof that he has any part in the scheme. Perhaps he's only a

bystander isolated because of his consciousness.

As the speaker implied in "Into My Own", nature is mute. It offers no encouragement; it's just there. For most people nature is merely a physical fact, and is not silent or indifferent because both terms assume a conscious ability to be otherwise which nature does not possess. Obviously, it presents the same aspect at all times, yet Frost, like all men, being subject to different moods endows and colors nature with moods and personality similar to his own. But even this act of coloring is not stated in the poetry, and here too, the reader has to decide subjectively how much self-awareness there is on Frost's part.

One of the moods of nature in the poetry of Robert Frost is silence or indifference. And Frost's reaction to this varies. Sometimes he merely notes the silence, and comments that man is still without an answer.

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever stood?

(The Star-Splitter)

Sometimes he accepts the mask of nature as a physical fact, but wishes it weren't so.

And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight.

(Stars)

After the death of his daughter Marge, Frost had a similar reaction to the lack of response from nature, "We thought to move heaven and earth-- heaven

with prayers and earth with money. We moved nothing."⁸ At times the silent mask makes us realize with a twinge the transiency of life.

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.

(On Going Unnoticed)

There are a few places where the waiting and searching without success make Frost impatient, and then it seems to him "as if" nature is deliberately refusing to help him find truth. A trace of sarcasm seems to creep into the persona's voice.

Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
On his particular time and personal sight.
That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.

(On Looking Up By Chance At Constellations)

Even when presented with the blank exterior of nature Frost continues to search for an answer, regardless of whether or not it exists in practice, or theory. Here, in spite of what he believes to be the fact, that even if a higher truth does exist he will not find it, his instinctive belief, or need to believe in a meaning, pushes him to, perhaps, make up the possibility of that meaning. In "Reluctance" he says:

When to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things.

He already has a good idea of where things are drifting to, but by nature he has to fight the current. What better way than to say it was "as if" nature was trying to communicate? There are times when the reader can accept the

idea that Frost does have a clue. But after a while it begins to seem that Frost is reenacting a pattern basic to the race, that has been repeated for as long as man has been worried about mortality. Even primitive man deified nature, or particular parts of it. "Desert Places" is probably the best example of Frost's realization that his attempts to endow nature with awareness are an exercise in self-delusion. And there are times when this realization makes him feel not only empty, but bitter as well. Nature mocks him. "In all of his re-thinking, his own attitude toward the findings of science (as opposed to the beliefs of religion) remained one of strong and stubborn hostility toward materialism."⁹ But by the very fact of engaging in a struggle with materialism he was admitting the need to defend his beliefs.

The sound was behind me instead of before,
A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As of one who utterly couldn't care.

(The Demiurge's Laugh)

(Frost identified the Demiurge as science)

In two places, to avoid being frustrated, and to avoid being mocked, Frost almost conquers this need for an answer. In "The Strong Are Saying Nothing" he not only refuses to speculate, but he refuses to speculate on his chances of speculating. In effect he's saying, "I'll wait and see". But only after he has already looked for a while. In "Pod of the Milkweed", from In The Clearing he makes a similar statement.

He seems to say the reason why so much
Should come to nothing must be fairly faced*

*And shall be in due course

Paradoxically, if we can ignore the fact that Frost believes there is no answer

for him, we can trace his search for it.

In most of Frost's poetry nature does not communicate in any direct way. But nature does act in generally fixed patterns which she expects man to follow. If he infringes on nature's jurisdiction nature has ways of demonstrating that she can frustrate man's attempts to ignore these norms. In "Mending Wall" and "There Are Roughly Zones" nature exhibits this corrective power. Somehow man is foiled. In the broadest sense this is a form of communication, but again, in his instinctive assertions Frost is not exactly sure how all this works. In one poem, "A Brook In The City", Frost is not at all sure of the consequences of ignoring nature's designs, but the feeling of foreboding is very much present. In "A Tree Fallen Across The Road" man, to hear him speak, can disregard nature. The subtitle of the poem in a curious way acts to deflate or to mitigate our boast. Frost can also move to the opposite side of the question. Instead of sensing the fundamental powers of nature, or her warning to man, he is attracted by the determination of man. The power of nature in "Willful Homing" is disregarded with impunity, and seemingly without prohibitive consequences. In "Our Hold On The Planet" Frost comes full circle from his feelings about nature's indifference. Again guided purely by instinct, and a subjective reaction to the world around him, he can't help feeling that since man has survived, nature must be at least one percent more in his favor than against him. This group of poems serves only to point out the absence of a systematic theory in Frost's mind. His opinions are generally a product of instinct and his own satisfaction with life, and these, with all their variations, are directly reflected in his poems. "Frost asserted his rightful will to believe in the utterances which had the greatest relevance to his immediate needs. Like James, Frost wanted to be 'pluralistic' in the same sense that he could combine naturalism and idealism, physics and metaphysics, scepticism and

mysticism. It was a feat which he managed to maintain throughout the rest of his life, although the consequent fluctuations between these extremes produced inconsistencies which puzzled him almost as much as they puzzled the intimate members of his family, and, eventually, some of his readers."¹⁰

Again, in his inconsistent and unsystematic way of reacting to things there are several poems in which nature almost yields answers to questions larger than matters of behavior. In "Two Look At Two", "For Once, Then, Something", and "A Passing Glimpse", nature does "seem" to be making an attempt to actually communicate with man, but Frost is always careful to say it was "as if" nature was trying to get through. But somehow the "mask of gloom" is never lowered enough to allow anything but an uncertain hint. At times Frost makes it sound as if he's being teased.

Was something brushed across my mind
That no one on earth will ever find?

Heaven gives the glimpses only to those
Not in position to look too close.

(A Passing Glimpse)

In the face of this frustration how can man make his life meaningful? He's forced to make his own choices because there is no prescription for behavior, and he's forced to create his own meanings because no other is apparent. Frost has no choice about this situation. Like any other man who can't get an answer he has to make his own. Frost, unsupported by anything but instinct, necessity and his own personality needs, believes that man is capable of making his life have meaning, at least on human terms. Man is heroic when he is able to make choices and live by them in the face of a very loud silence. Unable to penetrate nature for a higher truth, Frost has no proof that decision-making does any good either temporally or eternally, but because of his needs

to have a meaning (which we all have), he decides that at least on the temporal level heroism is possible and good.

Even the bravest that are slain
 Shall not dissemble their surprise
 On waking to find valor reign,
 Even as on earth, in paradise;
 And where they sought without the sword
 Wide fields of asphodel fore'er,
 To find that the utmost reward
 Of daring should be still to dare.

(The Trial By Existence)

Throughout most of his childhood Frost was afraid of many things, including being a coward. There was a great emphasis on hero stories in his early education. To overcome his fear, and his fear of fear, he did many things he was afraid to do in order to assert his courage, including getting into fights to demonstrate to himself that he wasn't a coward. He chose courage as the chief virtue, probably because it was what he wanted most. Simply to choose is an ennobling act. The decision, or the consequences of the decision, in "The Road Not Taken" are not specified, but the decision, as we are told, does indeed make a difference. The people in "The Investment" have enriched their lives just by bothering to struggle against the dreariness of their existence. And conversely, the essence of the tragic lies in the situation where the opportunity to choose never arises, as in "A Servant To Servants".

The poems toward the end of The Complete Poems still demonstrate the refusal or inability to form a system of philosophy, and they also show the same vacillation between a positive and negative attitude. While the poetry of Robert Frost always had a serious-mindedness to it, the later poems are particularly dominated by religious or spiritual concerns. Again I want to stress the fact that he is not consistently hopeful or pessimistic about the answers

to his questions. In three consecutive poems he can move from pessimism, to bitterness, to stubborn hopefulness. In "The Middleness Of The Road" he admits he doesn't know about higher truths, but he says he does know the physical nature of his "ton of car" has "almost nothing to do/ With the absolute flight and rest/ The universal blue/ And local green suggest." In "Astrometaphysical" he facetiously addresses God about his hopes of going up rather than down; but some concern about his final end is evident, and it renders the laughter hollow. In "Skeptic" his instinct causes him to reverse his feelings completely. He says that despite the doubts he sometimes has he refuses to believe the muteness of the stars will continue. He will get an answer, and maybe soon, too!

Far star that tickles for me my sensitive plate
And fries a couple of ebon atoms white,
I don't believe I believe a single thing you state.
I put no faith in the seeming facts of light.

I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,
I don't believe you're anywhere near the last,
I don't believe what makes you red in the face
Is after explosion going away so fast.

The universe may or may not be very immense.
As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt
To feel it close in tight against my sense
Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.

(Skeptic)

From the weariness of seeking in "Too Anxious For Rivers" he moves in the next poem, "An Unstamped Letter In Our Rural Letter Box" to where he finds another hint of meaning, "And for a moment all was plain/ That men have thought about in vain." Exactly what was plain is not explained. But the search for answers is still what motivates him.

But the searching has wearied him, and why not? He's been frustrated

right from the start, and things are exactly as they have always been. In all the poems which use the journey motif, Frost goes into nature for rest, solace, or reassurance, and then returns home. But in "Directive", a late poem, he chooses not to return. The narrator acts as a guide, and he has returned (otherwise there would be no one to speak the poem) but the idea of not returning is very significant, because this is the only place in Frost's poetry where the return from the journey is not considered the right choice. It represents Frost's desire to withdraw entirely, even though later poems go on to express hope and even optimism. In this poem he wants to get "out of all this now too much for us", to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." What he means by "whole" is not clear, but the weariness is quite apparent. All this only underscores the inconsistency in his point of view.

Something new appears in the later poems of The Complete Poems, something that may seem to be a definite strain of bitterness. Even his social commentary poems are filled with venom. In "A Considerable Speck" we can't help feeling an autobiographical note which probably explains how he feels in relation to the universe which surrounds him.

Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet it must have had a set of them complete
To express how much it didn't want to die.
It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
Then in the middle of the open sheet
Cower down in desperation to accept
Whatever I accorded it of fate.

In "To A Moth Seen In Winter" Frost pities the moth, who like himself, is driven relentlessly by its nature. The poem which probably best sums up Frost's attitude after all this frustration is "The Lesson For Today". He is aware of his

own search, and sadly aware of its fruitlessness, but he chooses to accept the fact, not cheerfully, of course, but resolvedly.

There is a limit to our time extension.
 We are all doomed to broken-off careers,
 And so's the nation, so's the total race.
 The earth itself is liable to the fate
 Of meaninglessly being broken off.
 (And hence so many literary tears
 At which my inclination is to scoff.)
 I may have wept that any should have died
 Or missed their chance, or not have done their best,
 Or seen their riches, fame, or love denied;
 On me as much as any is the jest.
 I take my incompleteness with the rest,
 God bless himself can no one else be blessed.

I hold your doctrine of Memento Mori.
 And were an epitaph to be my story
 I'd have a short one ready for my own.
 I would have written of me on my stone:
 I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

He's not happy about the fact that he hasn't gotten any answers, but he loves the world anyway.

At the end of his Complete Poems Frost is still involved in the same activities that occupied him in his early work. But unlike in the beginning when the search was motivated merely by a desire for proof, it is now more relevant to his actual situation. At this time, for all he knows, he is near the end of his life span. The time for searching no longer stretches far into the future as it once did, and he's understandably concerned and annoyed with the lack of results. The journey has been long, and he's not as young as he once was; but the end in sight is not of his own choosing. A well earned weariness is evident in the poems, and a creeping pessimism can be felt.

The philosophic content of Frost's last book, In The Clearing, seems strangely different from his previous work, but it is only the reflection of another part of his character that has now become dominant. The poems in

"Cluster Of Faith" are dogmatically assertive of a positive religious faith. True, he once said, "belief is best when rapt" but his poetry never approached the aggressiveness that it achieves in this book. He also said that humor was a form of cowardice. "I own any humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. So is a twinkle. It keeps the reader from criticism."¹¹ What, then, are we to think when the last volume is filled with a mocking and ironic Robert Frost? In "Away!" he practically tweaks death by the nose.

And I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

Frost was in the habit of using humor and scorn to protect himself, for by belittling the opposition he could remain secure to believe what suited him. The vein of satire that runs through In The Clearing, and the large number of seemingly whimsical poems show the energy which he was able to generate for self defense. A humorous, but evasive poem on evolution, "In A Glass Of Cider" is a good example of the subterfuge he found necessary to employ in order to disregard what stared him in the face- scientific fact. It seems that he's aware of science, and some particular theories and facts about how life began, but regards them as utter nonsense. Since science had to explain what it hadn't yet demonstrated in a laboratory, protein synthesis, or some idea about the beginning of life, Frost apparently regarded the theories as we would view the idea of a philosopher's stone. Instead of just arguing with science, this poem is more of a burlesque.

It seemed I was a mite of sediment
That waited for the bottom to ferment

So I could catch a bubble in ascent.
 I rode up on one till the bubble burst
 And when that left me to sink back reversed
 I was no worse off than I was at first.
 I'd catch another bubble if I waited.
 The thing was to get now and then elated.

"Accidentally On Purpose" is a blindly assertive poem that seeks to belittle science. Admitting he has no proof of any of his conjectures, he insists on saying that instinct is all we need, probably because that's all he has.

Whose purpose is it? His or Hers or Its?
 Let's leave that to the scientific wits.
 Grant me intention, purpose, and design-
 That's near enough for me to the Divine.

And yet for all this help of head and brain
 How happily instinctive we remain,
 Our best guide upward further to the light,
 Passionate preference such as love at sight.

It would seem from the general tone of the book that Frost has found God again, or convinced himself that he has. In 1921 he said, "I shouldn't wonder if my last end would be religious."¹² Maybe he has found God again, or maybe in 1921 he knew he would find God even if he had to talk himself into it. It would be easy to say that the dogmatism of In The Clearing proves that Frost has managed to reassure himself enough that matters were finally settled. But two short lines in this book leave the newly erected false front of optimism crazed.

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
 And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

In his most private moments Frost is aware that he's exactly where he started-intuitively convinced, but unable to formulate philosophic support.

Footnotes

1 Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost The Early Years (New York, 1966), pp. xxii-xxiii.

2 Ibid., p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 594.

4 Lawrance Thompson, ed., Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York, 1964), p. 300.

5 Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 70-71.

6 Ibid., p. xiii.

7 Edward Connery Lathem, ed., Interviews with Robert Frost (New York, 1966), p. 22.

8 Ibid., p. 32.

9 Thompson, The Early Years, p. 120.

10 Ibid., p. 246.

11 Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 299.

12 Ibid., p. 271.

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One of the basic characteristics of much of Frost's work is the search for meaning. "When most confiding, he admitted that the primary goal of his experience- poetic and non-poetic- was the quest for psychological and spiritual salvation." Given this general tendency, we first have to state that Frost does not openly admit to such a pursuit. But in spite of the "resolved" stance which he affects, the searching goes on.

Generally Frost decides things by instinct rather than by any rigid system of philosophy. Frost attempts to find the answers to his questions in nature, but strangely enough as one of his first poems points out, nature is a "mask of gloom" which reveals no answers. He says penetration of nature is impossible, but he keeps on trying. And even if he could penetrate the gloom, says Frost, it would only corroborate conclusions that he has already reached by instinct, "Only more sure of all I thought was true." While he never explicitly states these conclusions, the tone of most of his poetry would seem to indicate that they are positive rather than negative.

Frost's reactions to nature are subjective. If his life is happy on a particular day he writes a poem, chances are nature will seem friendly to man in that poem. Throughout his life Frost moved between opposite poles, from pessimism to optimism, but because of his needs as a personality he always moved back to his instinctive belief in God. Any slackening in his assertions might prove disastrous, and he sensed this. "Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever. At bottom the world isn't a joke." Frost once said he shouldn't doubt if his last end would be religious, and he was right. At the end he seemed to be firmly entrenched in his instinctive faith in God.