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ROBERT FROST: POPULAR IMAGE OF A POET.

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ROBERT FROST: POPULAR IMAGE OF A POET

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Lloyd Nash Dendinger
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ABSTRACT

The two primary intentions of this study are to call attention to the cultural significance of the persistent concern over Robert Frost's popularity and to point to a factor in the poetry itself central to the poet's wide appeal.

There are two fundamental attitudes taken toward Frost's popularity in the critical appraisals from 1913 to the present. There are those, on the one hand, who hold that the poet is popular because he is largely misunderstood, that most of his readers are charmed but misled by the deceptively simple and straightforward appearances of his poetry. And there are those, on the other hand, who believe that his wide appeal results from the manifestations in his poetry of fundamental cultural values which his readers do "understand," although not necessarily on the rational level. This second attitude places great emphasis upon Frost's distinctly American traits, upon his relationship, for example, to the New England tradition in general and to Emerson and Thoreau in particular.

Implicit in the attitude that Frost's popularity results from a widespread misunderstanding of his poetry is the assumption that mass appeal and significant artistic achievement are incompatible. The implicit pervasiveness
of this assumption throughout the criticism makes Frost's
career a significant chapter in the continuing efforts to
redefine "culture" in terms meaningful to modern democracy
and, more specifically, to understand the role of the
artist in modern America. The critical record indicates
how widespread is the attitude that an artist's "popularity"
must be explained away or used against him.

The second attitude, that Frost's appeal results from
the distinctive American characteristics in the poetry,
turns the attention of the criticism more directly on the
poetry itself in an attempt to find a positive rather than
a negative explanation of the popularity. Much of the
attention of this attempt is focused upon Frost's relation
to Emerson for which the Lionel Trilling--J. Donald Adams
controversy of 1959 provides a focal point. For Adams,
Frost is an affirmative, optimistic, "Emersonian" poet;
for Trilling, he is, most significantly, a poet of terror,
a Sophoclean poet. For Adams, Frost is a modern American
poet; for Trilling, he is a Modern American poet.

The polar extremes of the views of Trilling and Adams
bring to a focus the second intention of this study which
is to identify that characteristic of Frost's poetry which
can be most meaningfully related to both the mainstream of
American literature and to his popularity. At the center
of Frost's poetic vision is the mask or persona of the
traveler through the natural world who comes most sharply into focus in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." At this point the traveler is fully mature, a figure who has grown out of the lyric posture of A Boy's Will and been most significantly influenced by the realistic posture of North of Boston. If Frost's popularity is to be explained in terms of his poetry and not as a result of the cultural poverty of his audience, it is in terms of this mask, this realist in confrontation with the dark trees and deep woods of the natural world, that such explanation must be made. For Frost's traveler is a very American character for the same reasons that Leatherstocking, Hester Prynne, Thoreau as he appears in Walden, Ishmael, Huck Finn, Isaac McCaslin and Nick Adams are. All are quasi-mythical characters who embody in their confrontation with the wilderness the central moral aspiration of the American experience which has been to wrest from the great wilderness a new meaning, to make possible a genuinely new human condition.
INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement about the fact of Robert Frost's popularity. A persuasive case can be made for calling him America's most popular twentieth century poet, a case which would rest primarily upon the substantial evidence of the sale of his books;¹ upon the frequency with which he is anthologized; upon the extent of his public exposure in professional journals and the popular press; and upon his appearance on the occasion of the inaugural ceremonies of John F. Kennedy before perhaps the largest audience ever afforded a poet. His reputation as a popular American poet is secure as a matter of history; the question of the relationship between this popularity and his stature as a significant poet is not nearly so settled a matter.

The question of the relationship between artistic integrity and popular acclaim is of particular pertinence in modern America, raising as it does the even more fundamental question about whether or not the democratic process is indeed synonymous with a cultural leveling.

¹Time magazine reported in 1950 that Frost's books had sold in the United States "about 375,000 copies in all editions." "Pawky Poet," LVI (October 9, 1950), 76. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., has informed me by letter that In The Clearing, a 1962 Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, had sold 85,550 copies through December, 1965 and that Complete Poems, a 1965 selection, had sold 18,500 copies through the same date.
Alexis de Tocqueville formulated one of the central concerns of the nineteenth century when he wondered what the ultimate price of the democratic state would be as a result of "the irresistible leveling and lowering tendencies of modern peoples." Emerson and Whitman, the champions of nationalism, of the common man, of the "word En-masse," were not without misgivings about the direction in which the great experiment was going. Emerson objected to the climate which would lead one to "think from the talk of men that riches and poverty were a great matter" and caught the theme epigrammatically with his observation that "Things are in the saddle/And ride mankind." Whitman's doubts are most in evidence in Democratic Vistas, the tone of which sometimes almost matches the darkness of Thomas Carlyle's Shooting Niagara. By the end of the century the misgivings of the champions of democracy had been replaced by the darker acceptance of the satirist's view, embodied in, among other things, Mark Twain's The Gilded Age and in the "muck-raking" literature of social reform. And by the turn of the century Henry James had set an important precedent for American writers by taking up residence abroad.

Frost's popularity is troublesome because it goes against the cherished concept that the American society is

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extremely hostile to the artist who insists upon questioning the practical, material values and aspirations of that society. This concept was given dramatic expression by Ezra Pound and his generation; Pound was to emphasize, with glee one suspects, that Frost had to leave America to get recognition. Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt and H.L. Mencken's "boobocracy" are even less subtle reflections of the attitude of that period. But the roots of the concept go much deeper, finding overt expression at least as early as Hawthorne's self-conscious reflections in "The Custom House" about his ancestors' attitude toward his "idle" profession. From Emerson's 1837 American Scholar Address to the end of the century, American literature is characterized by a defensive self-consciousness never far beneath the surface but most obvious in Whitman's "barbaric yawp," Mark Twain's burlesques of European traditions, and Henry James' admission that he was "that strange monster, an artist."

James' expatriation set the pattern for Pound's generation in which the self-consciousness became defiance, and the solution was sought in flight to less hostile environments. Frost in this respect as in most others did not conform to the pattern of his contemporaries. He spent two years in England, writing about New England;

he was never one of the expatriates. His rebellion, his "lover's quarrel" was "with the world" in general and never exclusively with his native land. Nevertheless, the persistent attention paid Frost's popularity and the accompanying determination to explain it away (i.e., Frost is popular because he is not a first-rate poet, or he is popular because his readers don't understand him) arise naturally out of the old concern about the "irresistible leveling tendencies of modern peoples," out of a fundamental lack of faith in the culture of a democracy. Frost's career is, therefore, among other things, a valuable chapter in our continuing efforts to define the artist's role in the democratic society of modern America.

A consistent pattern in the critical responses to Frost's poetry from 1913 to the present has developed out of the regularity with which the various commentators have distinguished between the Frost they are praising as a significant modern poet and the "popular" Frost. Time after time the point is made that the poet's popularity rests upon a general misunderstanding of his poetry and that the poet's true merits arise from subtleties too fine and profundities too deep for all but a highly favored few. One basis of this attitude is implicit in an early evaluation by Ezra Pound, who although he found Frost "vurry Amur'kn" believed nevertheless that he had at least "the
seeds of grace."⁴ A more recent and a more explicit expression of this consistent duality occurred in 1959, and since the episode resulting from that expression is of central importance as a focal point of this dissertation, a detailed summary is called for.

In the summer of 1959 Lionel Trilling published an essay in the Partisan Review entitled "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode."⁵ As the title indicates, the body of the piece is a speech Trilling gave at a birthday dinner honoring Frost on his eighty-fifth birthday which he felt should be published because, as he puts it, the speech was the "occasion for a disturbance of some magnitude."⁶ Various and forceful exceptions were taken to some of the observations on Frost and his career, the focus of which was on the distinction between the Frost Trilling admired and the Frost he perceived "existing in the minds of some of his admirers."⁷ The theme of the speech and the focal point of the attacks upon it is that there are "two" Robert Frosts, the widely and traditionally admired rural American poet who "reassures us by his affirmations of old virtues, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling"

⁵XXVI (Summer 1959), 445-452.
⁶Ibid., p. 445.
⁷Ibid., p. 450.
and Trilling's "terrifying poet" who, like Sophocles, made plain to his people "the terrible things of human life."

The principal attack upon this point of view which was to begin the "disturbance of some magnitude" was that made by J. Donald Adams in the April 12 New York Times Book Review. After classifying Frost as "pre-eminently" of that company of "writers who are indubitably American," Adams identifies what he considers the basic cause of Trilling's diffidence on the occasion of the birthday speech:

His difficulty was that although—or perhaps I should say because—he is a native New Yorker, he showed little understanding of the United States. That circumstance has not, however, prevented other sons of this city from grasping more fully the meaning of the American experience. Professor Trilling's failure to do so is, indeed, one widely shared by other American intellectuals.

This difficulty, according to Adams, led Trilling to find the "key to the understanding of his Frost in D. H. Lawrence's criticism of American literature," whereas if he had read Emerson instead, "he might have lost his Frost and discovered the one he turns his back on, for a goodly part of Frost the man and Frost the poet is rooted . . . in Emerson, who was his intellectual and spiritual godfather." Adams feels that Trilling, like Lawrence before him, has become "lost in the Freudian wood," and he takes

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strong exception to calling Frost a terrifying poet, claiming for Frost a poise which precludes terror, a "private air-conditioning system [which] he got ... from Emerson." He concludes his remarks with the following observation:

All this country needs is to recapture its earlier vision. One of the silliest remarks ever made about the American experience came from one of the editors of your favorite magazine, the Partisan Review. Mr. William Phillips solemnly observed that American literature has played hide-and-seek with American experience for lack of 'an image, or cluster of images, of the national experience available to literature.' No such lack exists, and both of you should re-read one of the great American poems. It is by Robert Frost, and it is called "The Gift Outright."

The third phase of this cultural tempest, this "disturbance of some magnitude," came in the form of letters published in the May 3rd issue of the Book Review applauding Adams for his attack upon the birthday speech.9 There were nine of these letters, the writers of which included the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, the publisher of the Saturday Review, two poets and a literary scholar. Trilling says that he was "surprised by the low personal and intellectual tone of these letters," all of which "sounded a note of bitterness, or of personal grievance, or of triumph over my having been so thoroughly taken down by

Mr. Adams."10 The following excerpts from the letters used by Trilling to illustrate his point fairly represent the prevailing tone:

"Frost might have had the Nobel Prize if so many New York critics hadn't gone whoring after European gods. 'This Trilling fella had it coming to him for some time.' 'I hope Robert Frost was having a nice plate of buckwheat cakes and Vermont maple syrup as he read Mr. Adams's remarks. He couldn't have done better unless he had taken the so-called professor out to the woodshed.' 'I am a Freudian psychoanalyst, but I couldn't agree with Mr. Adams more. Imagine calling Frost a terrifying poet.'11

Trilling feels that his speech, Adams' attack upon it, and the letters applauding the attack, all constitute an "episode" which "will yield cultural conclusions to whoever wants to draw them."12

Among those who have been interested in drawing conclusions from the episode has been Alvan S. Ryan, who sees the validity of both Trilling's and Adams' views but who himself feels that most of Frost's poetry falls somewhere between the extremes postulated by them. Ryan feels that comparison of Frost with Sophocles is high but just praise and that the exceptions taken to that praise by Frost's admirers is ironical, resulting from what they "incomprehensibly took as Trilling's attempt to minimize Frost's

10Trilling, p. 446.  
11Ibid.  
12Ibid., p. 447.
significance.\textsuperscript{13} At the same time he recognizes the basis for the "widely-held view that both Emerson and Frost are amiable, inspiriting, optimistic writers." But these two positions represent, for Ryan, opposite ends of Frost's "wide spectrum." At one end of the spectrum are those poems celebrating "form, radiance and design in the natural order, and the lyric or dramatic evocation of those moments when man discovers joy and reward in his work"; at the other end are those terrifying poems which represent, for Trilling, Frost's most significant work. For Ryan, the large body of Frost's poetry represents a vision different from "either of these extremes":

The interplay and the tension between the human and the non-human, the sense of a goodness in the natural order which evokes and challenges human response without fulfilling the need for a properly human self-definition--this is the vision . . . that subsumes, or perhaps connects, both extremes.\textsuperscript{14}

The Trilling-Adams episode and Alvan S. Ryan's response to it serve as the central focal point of this dissertation, one primary concern of which will be to examine Frost's poetry in terms of the three points of the "wide spectrum" defined by these three critics. My view is that Ryan's position is valid and valuable, offering,

\textsuperscript{13}"Frost and Emerson: Voice and Vision," Massachusetts Review, I (Fall 1959), 15.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 23.
as it does, an explanation of how both of the diametrically opposed views of Trilling and Adams can also be valid. My third chapter is an examination of selected poems designed to illustrate the extent to which Frost can indeed be considered both a Sophoclean poet and a poet of Emersonian affirmation. Chapter Four is a study of selected poems designed to illustrate Ryan's view that the large body of the poetry lies between these extremes. Before turning to the poetry itself, however, we must consider the relationship of these views of Frost to the larger question of his critical and popular reputation. And so I begin my study with a survey of the criticism of Frost's poetry from 1913 to the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959. My second chapter is a study of the traditions shaping Frost's poetry as these traditions are defined both in the body of the criticism and in the poetry itself as I see it. Before we turn to the critical record, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the two most meaningful definitions of

15 My study of the poetry is selective. I concentrate primarily on those poems concerned with realistic character study of the kinds one finds in greatest concentration in *North of Boston* and on those poems which deal with the relationship between man and the natural world. This does not account, of course, for all of Frost's poetry, but it does account for most of his most important poetry, both in terms of his popularity and of his most successful achievement. I will not attempt to deal with, except indirectly, his political and scientific satires, nor with his specifically religious poems such as the relatively late masques.
the term "popularity."

In the early stages of this study, my intentions were to attempt some kind of definition of Frost's popularity in the broadest sense, in the sense so often used against him in the light of the distrust of popular tastes. But it became evident quite early that while there is ample evidence to establish the case for his widespread popularity (to reiterate, for example, his books sell extremely well), there is at the same time a frustrating vagueness about precisely what is meant by "popularity." The evidence is almost exclusively quantitative: one can tabulate figures about the sale of books, about literary prizes won, about magazine cover stories in the popular press, but without getting to the popular audience itself, defining it first, then sampling somehow the views held by its members, the statistics have very little value except as statistics. And so I would distinguish here between the general popularity with its connotations of mass culture so often made use of in the cases for and against Frost and another kind of popularity about which some precision is possible. For in addition to his extensive and important if rather amorphous popularity with the American public at large, Frost is also popular with his professional peers, with the poets and critics who were his contemporaries, from Ezra Pound and Louis Untermeyer in his
earliest period to Randall Jarrell and John Ciardi in his latest. And before the larger questions about the cultural implications of Frost's popularity can be satisfactorily answered, the more specific matter of his popularity with his professional contemporaries must be examined, and it is such an examination which constitutes the subject matter of the present study designed to answer three fundamental questions. First, what have been the principal lines of Frost's critical acclaim from 1913 to the present? Second, what are the traditions shaping Frost's poetry and what is the relationship between those traditions and the critical responses to the poetry? And third, how does the poetry itself support the widely divergent views of Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams—and of those many critics who have taken a posture like Trilling's by claiming a possessively special view of Frost which each would carefully distinguish from all those "other" views responsible for making him that very curious and disturbing phenomenon, a popular poet?
The story of Frost's early life--of his two-year stay in England, of his New England background and character, of his late but sudden rise to literary fame--is told over and over again in the literary reviews and critical articles. Everyone seems compelled to recite the facts of his life, and this is surely a result in part of the emphasis upon his regionalism: here is the poet of New England, both in and out of his poetry. There seems to be little need for this kind of rehearsal today. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's highly readable biography, Robert Frost: The Trial By Existence, 1960, is an excellent source for the details of Frost's life and career. Lawrance Thompson, the poet's official biographer, has just published the first volume of what presumably will shortly be the definitive source for such details. The following sketch is offered merely to help the reader place the critical schools and tendencies, to provide some perspective for the almost fifty years under consideration here.

Frost celebrated his thirty-ninth birthday in England in 1913, and in that year his first book of poetry, A Boy's Will, was published in London by the widow of David Nutt under her husband's name. In 1914, she published
Frost's second book, *North of Boston*. Both books were warmly received by the English reviewers, and, more importantly for Frost as an American poet, both caught the approving eye of Ezra Pound, whose favorable though qualified reviews in *Poetry* in 1913 and 1914 constituted Frost's first really significant recognition at home. When Frost had gone to England with his family in 1912, he had been virtually unknown in America; when he returned in 1915, the first major phase of the development of his career was well under way. A dramatically early and auspicious sign of the change came when Frost, almost immediately upon leaving the docks after debarking in New York, went in search of a newspaper and found on the newsstand a copy of the *New Republic*. Inside was a review of *North of Boston* by Amy Lowell. In March of 1915, Henry Holt brought out the first strictly American edition of *North of Boston*, having published in 1914 a small edition of one hundred and fifty copies imported from Mrs. Nutt. On March 9, the Boston Herald reported that "Boston's literary sensation of the day has been the home-coming of Robert Frost."¹ The poet in Miss Sergeant's words, was "suddenly glimpsing the end of his American obscurity and isolation."²


²Ibid., p. 154.
Henry Holt followed his publication of the first American edition of *North of Boston* with a similar edition of *A Boy's Will* a month later, in April, 1915. Although the books were thereby made available almost simultaneously, it is worth noting that *North of Boston* did come first, in the limited edition of 1914 and in the strictly American editions of 1915. The focus of attention on the newly returned and newly triumphant poet centered on his second book, on the harsh New England countryside and on the toll it had exacted from the characters of *North of Boston*. This emphasis would surely have occurred without the chronological inversion, but with that inversion, the view of Frost as the realistic, regional poet of New England came immediately and clearly into focus. Early reviewers were allowed by the order of publication to convert their reservations about *A Boy's Will* into praise for *North of Boston*. A reviewer for the *New York Times* put it this way:

Had *A Boy's Will* come to us before we had seen *North of Boston*, we should have found a charm in its naivety and entered with sympathy into its conjecture of life; but when one has put aside conjecture and tested life itself, when he has gone to the core of things, as Mr. Frost has done in *North of Boston*, one cannot permit him to play at life again.3

Since Frost's career did not properly begin until 1913 when he was thirty-nine years old, the term "early

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"phase" is something of an anomaly. In a very real sense, his early phase began in 1894 with the publication of "My Butterfly" in the Independent. Surely, the poetry of A Boy's Will and North of Boston was in the making, both literally and figuratively, in that long period of nineteen years between 1894 and 1913. However, the main concern here is not with the development of the poet but with his critical and popular reception; and the career, in that sense, begins in 1913. The first phase of the career is characterized by an intense excitement over the "find" of the New England poet, and the excitement is so intense and so contagious that the first phase is short-lived; Frost does not long remain an exciting "new" poet; he quickly becomes an exciting established poet, for some, even in the very early years, America's foremost poet. The first phase of the career comes to a close shortly after the publication in 1916 of Mountain Interval, a collection characterized by a mixture of the lyricism of A Boy's Will and the realistic narrative technique of North of Boston. Mountain Interval appeared in November; in December Frost accepted an invitation to read his poems at Amherst. After the reading, he accepted a second invitation from Amherst's President Meiklejohn, this time to join the Amherst faculty for the spring term of 1917. The second phase of Frost's career begins with the Amherst reading and the Amherst
appointment. It is the beginning of that phase of the
career which is to add a second and complex dimension, that
of the poet-in-residence and of the platform personality,
to the growing stature of the poet known heretofore
primarily through his published poetry.

Robert Frost the poet was born in 1874. Robert Frost
the mythic American bard, the Robert Frost hovering in the
background of Lionel Trilling's birthday speech, began to
take shape in 1917 as the poet took on the additional roles
of visiting professor and public "reader." The degree of
correlation between the poet and the mythic bard of the
popular image is of vital importance to this study, al-
though it is too early to attempt here to draw the lines
which define that relationship. Obviously, the daily life
and the year by year accomplishments of the poet provided
the raw materials for the creation of the image. Frost
went on writing and publishing poetry from 1917 on, just as
he had been doing since 1894, but he also began in that
year, through his academic associations and his readings,
to widen significantly his audience, which came to think of
him as a poet to be seen and heard as well as read. The
second phase of Frost's career begins in 1917 and in the
sense of the present context does not end until his death.

To sketch in some of the highlights of the life after
1917 is to provide one kind of definition of a popular poet.
Frost received an honorary M.A. degree from Amherst in 1918, thus beginning what was to become in time almost an annual ritual. There was an A.M. from the University of Michigan in 1922; an L.H.D. from the University of Vermont in 1923; a Litt. D. from Middlebury College and one from Yale in 1924. There were degrees from Dartmouth, Harvard, Durham, Oxford, Cambridge and the National University of Ireland, the last three all in the poet's eighty-fourth year in 1957. Lawrance Thompson lists a total of forty-four such degrees in his 1964 edition of Selected Letters of Robert Frost. Frost received the first of four Pulitzer Prizes in 1924 for New Hampshire; the other three coming, in order, in 1931 for Collected Poems, in 1937 for A Further Range, and in 1943 for A Witness Tree. In 1950 and 1959 there were resolutions by the U.S. Senate honoring the poet on his seventy-fifth and eighty-fifth birthdays, respectively. And for those Americans who had never read his poetry, heard any of his recordings, seen and heard him on the lecture platform, read about him in literary journals or in popular and news magazines, he appeared on a national television program in January of 1961, reading, or, more properly, reciting, "The Gift Outright" from John F. Kennedy's inaugural platform.

To designate some forty-five years of a poet's life a single phase, the second phase of his career, calls for
some justification. But when one recalls that in 1918 Frost was forty-four years old, the problem of justification is considerably simplified. The first phase of his career in terms of critical and popular recognition had begun when he was already in early middle age. The widened phase of his career, begun in 1917, found him, not a young man flushed with early victories, but a man of full maturity who would demonstrate repeatedly in the years ahead how well he had learned to bide his time, to refuse to be hurried. And, again in terms not of his development as a poet but in terms of his critical and popular reception, the career is remarkably uniform throughout. There were dissenting voices to be sure; his most ardent admirers admit of some limitations. But in general, Frost consistently demonstrated what Randall Jarrell called the "daemonic gift of always getting on the buttered side of both God and Mammon: of doing and saying anything and everything he pleases, and still getting the World to approve or tactfully ignore every bit of it."^4

Underlying the uniformity of the critical acclaim, the poetry itself is characterized by a thematic unity which is to be demonstrated in the final pages of this study. There

were changes in setting and subject matter, in the partial
turning away in the 1928 *West-Running Brook* from the New
England scene, in the political satire of *A Further Range*,
and in the religious allegories, *A Masque of Reason* and *A
Masque of Mercy*. A recent study sees three phases of
Frost's poetic development based on these turning points.
Donald Edward McCoy would end Frost's first or New England
phase with *New Hampshire*, 1923. For him, the second phase
is introduced to the public in 1928 with *West-Running
Brook*, the beginning of Frost's "critical" phase, which was
"characterized by a meditative and philosophical contempla-
tion of man's eternal problems, his place in the universe,
his struggle against nature." The third and final phase
for McCoy begins with the 1945 publication of *A Masque of
Reason* and is "characterized by Frost's tendency towards
speculation on the universal problems of mankind."5

Almost simultaneously with the beginning of Frost's
"third" phase, there is a significant development in the
record of the criticism in the publication in 1942 of
Lawrance Thompson's critical study, *Fire And Ice: The Art
and Thought of Robert Frost*. Up to that point in time, the
bulk of the critical record is to be found in the reviews

5Donald Edward McCoy, Robert Frost: The Reception and
Development of His Poetry (Ann Arbor, Michigan,
University Microfilm, 1953), pp. 40-42.
of the various books; after 1942 there is an opening out of the criticism into studies which attempt more comprehensive evaluations of the poet. And these broadened interpretations come to rest on the added authority, after 1949, of Complete Poems. The following survey of the criticism relies primarily on the reviews of Frost's poetry up to 1942. Following this part of the survey, the attention is focused primarily on the critical essays which lead us finally back up to the point of our earlier setting forth, the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959.

The emphasis in the reviews of Frost's poetry from 1913 through 1917 is upon his regionalism, and the direction given by that early emphasis, particularly in response to North of Boston, has prevailed, with various modifications, ever since. Frost is foremost in the minds of both his admirers and his detractors the poet of New England, and this central image, this focal point of practically everything that has been said about him, by his critics who speak of his severely limited range and by his admirers who speak of the universal themes of his New England microcosm, is sharply and deeply drawn in this early period. There are three clearly definable, interrelated aspects of the
development of this image in the early reviews: one emphasis upon the regionalism is that used to make the point that Frost is distinctly an American poet; the second emphasis uses regionalism as a point of departure to praise Frost for his realism; and a third focuses upon the naturalness of the speech rhythms and the simplicity and honesty of the diction.

The 1913 reviews of *A Boy's Will* strike a consistent tone in their praise of the new poet's lyricism. His poetry, one says, "is so simple, lucid, and experimental that, reading a poem, one can see clearly with the poet's own swift eyes, and follow the trail of his glancing thought."6 Another finds a "wild, racy flavour in his poems . . . [which] sound that inevitable response to nature which is the hallmark of true lyric feeling."7 And another speaks of his "dream world of elusive shapes and tremulous imaginings" and of his songs which "give us the kind of pleasure that we have in those of *The Shropshire Lad*."8 Ezra Pound's review of *A Boy's Will* contributes to the prevailing tone, for though he finds that


8 William Morton Payne, *Dial*, LV (September 16, 1913), 211-212.
the book "is a little raw, and has in it a number of infelicities" he is aware too of the "tang of the New Hampshire woods" and praises Frost for "the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing . . . as he sees it." But for Pound there is another significance in this first book of poems by an American poet, and that is that it was published in London:

There is another personality in the realm of verse, another American, found, as usual, on this side of the water, by an English publisher long known as a lover of good letters. David Nutt publishes at his own expense A Boy's Will, by Robert Frost, the latter having been long scorned by the 'great American editors.' It is the old story. In 1914, in his review of North of Boston, Pound again, this time even more explicitly, expresses his view of Frost's London publication:

It is a sinister thing that so American, I might even say so parochial, a talent as that of Robert Frost should have to be exported before it can find due encouragement and recognition.

Later in the same review he writes:

It is natural and proper that I should have to come abroad to get printed, or that "H.D." . . . or that Fletcher . . . should have to come abroad . . . . But why, IF there are serious people in America, desiring literature of America, literature accepting present conditions, rendering American life with sober

9Review of A Boy's Will, Poetry, II (May 1913), 72-73.
10Ibid., p. 72.
fidelity—why, in heaven's name, is this book of New England eclogues given us under a foreign imprint?11

This is a valid question arising out of a real issue which Pound did not create even though he may have taken some delight in framing the question against his review of "so American," one might even say "so parochial," a talent. And the issue was at least acknowledged by other reviewers. In 1915 one felt that Boston had lost "the last opportunity to redeem slipping literary laurels when to the English at second hand was left the discovery of the best interpreter New England life has had in a generation."12 Another felt that Frost's recognition first by the English is as curious "as if Masefield should first have been read in this country."13 Amy Lowell, not surprisingly, would kill the issue by refusing to acknowledge its existence:

"North of Boston" was by an American living in England, so its publication on the other side of the Atlantic came about quite naturally, and was no reflection on the perspicacity of our own publishers at home . . . . It is no small pleasure to take up this new edition, bearing an American imprint and feel that the stigma of

11"Modern Georgics," Poetry, V (December 1914), 127-130.


non-comprehension so often put upon us by ex-patriated Americans can never be justified in this case. 14

Other reviewers stressed Frost's distinctly American characteristics with no reference to the issue of his failure to gain recognition at home before the publication in London of his first book. But practically all references to this aspect of the early recognition, to Frost as the most American of poets, rest directly, or otherwise, upon recognition of Frost's regionalism. That is, whatever the individual reviewer chooses to make of the fact, there is general agreement that Frost is an American poet because he is first so undeniably a New England poet. And many of those who focus not on the national but on the regional identification of the poet stress the fact that Frost is faithful to the New England scene, that his landscapes like his character sketches are compelling because of their realism. When Ezra Pound turns from his theme of the poet unappreciated at home, his observations on the characters of North of Boston are very much like those of so many others of the period. For Pound, Frost's people "are distinctly real. Their speech is real; he has known them. I don't want much to meet them, but I know that they exist

14 Review of North of Boston, New Republic, II (February 20, 1915), 81.
Repeatedly, *North of Boston* is praised by favorable comparisons of it with the regionalism and realism of contemporary prose fiction. William Dean Howells, for example, feels that

If we may imagine the quality of Sarah Orne Jewett and Miss Mary Wilkins . . . finding utterance, we shall have such pleasure in characterizing Mr. Frost's poetry as comes to us from knowing what things are by knowing what they are like . . .

Another reviewer admits that reading *North of Boston* prompts one to ask if "Mrs. Wharton knows that she too is a poet? For if these are poems—and one willingly admits that they are poems of a high order—then *Ethan Frome* is also a poem of identically the same school." Still another says that *North of Boston* "leaves such a strong impression of men and women in the mind that one is led to think of it as a new novel rather than as a book of verse." Implicit in most of the references to Frost's realism is an emphasis upon the dark view of the poet which

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15"Modern Georgics," *Poetry*, V (December 1914), 129.

16*Found in Recognition of Robert Frost*, p. 44. Appeared originally in the "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's*, CXXXI (September 1915), 635.


18Alice C. Henderson, "Recent Poetry," *Dial*, LVII (October 1, 1914), 254.
allows him to portray so vividly the harshness of the life of his New England characters. References are made in this context to Thomas Hardy and to Chekhov with whom Frost is compared. Amy Lowell makes the emphasis explicit in her comparison of the poet to Alice Brown, who is also "a poet in her description" but who "unlike Mr. Frost has a rare sense of humor." For her, North of Boston "reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of our New England life, at least in its rural communities."\(^{19}\)

This emphasis on Frost's realism continues in the reviews of Mountain Interval. Writing of that book in 1917, Harriet Monroe says that Frost and Masters are "telling the tale of the tribe, the varying tales of their separate tribes," that is, of New England and of the West. She feels that it is "important that two rich districts of this country, each an individual and powerful personality, are finding modern interpreters" and asks "who will speak for the South and for the Far West."\(^{20}\) Sidney Hayes Cox feels that Mountain Interval like the two books before it, is characterized by an all-embracing quality of sincerity, "sincerity in perception, sincerity in thought, sincerity

\(^{19}\)Review of North of Boston, New Republic, II (February 20, 1915), 81.

in feeling, and sincerity in expression. Mr. Frost believes that 'a poet must lean hard on facts, so hard sometimes that they hurt'. Another reviewer would relate Mountain Interval to North of Boston by the fact that both "envelope in atmosphere things, which, as it seemed, would never be brought within the domain of poetry--kitchen-sinks, stove-pipes, telegraph poles."22

Arising naturally out of this focus upon Frost's realism, attention is called early to his techniques for approximating in his poetry the sounds of the spoken language. As with the emphasis on his realism and on his identity as a New England poet, this attention is to continue throughout the rest of his career as one of the focal points of critical evaluation and in explanation of his popular appeal. Lascelles Abercrombie's observations in 1914 are representative of the general tenor of much that is to follow:

[Frost] seems trying to capture and hold within metrical patterns the very tones of speech—the rise and fall, the stressed pauses and little hurries, of spoken language... The intention itself is not a new thing in poetry; but such complete reliance on it as the chief element of technique, though it holds Mr. Frost's expression rather tight, is rewarded by some


new and very suggestive effects. 23

In 1916, George H. Browne feels that Frost's popularity arises largely from the fact that his readers find in his poetry "the language they speak, vibrant with the feeling and force and form of the familiar spoken sentence"; and that his sentences "record, in an unmistakable tho written notation, the natural tones and inflections which alone give emotional and imaginative vitality to the expression of live thought." 24

The reviews of the 1920's and the 1930's can best be surveyed by means of their relationship to the emphasis in the earlier reviews upon Frost's regionalism. There are, to be sure, other important views finding expression in this period. One begins to read more and more of the "kindly sage" and of the "philosopher" and to come to expect to be told, as William Rose Benet tells us in 1936, that Frost "is a major poet, because he is, for one thing, a significant human being . . . a man we like to listen to,

23Found in Recognition of Robert Frost, p. 23. Appeared originally in a review of North of Boston in Nation (London), XV (June 13, 1914), 423-424. Abercrombie also reviewed A Boy's Will. His two reviews and those of Edward Thomas, who also reviewed the two books, are among the most important in the establishment of Frost's English reputation. Thomas's review of North of Boston for the English Review, XVIII (August 1914), can also be found in Recognition, pp. 29-30.

because wisdom out of deep experience wells through his words."25 And there is some early attention to Frost's symbolism, a subject which is to become increasingly important to the critical canon as time goes on. A 1920 attempt to deal with subject explains vaguely that "in the Frost sense symbolism is a clearing of the beauty to the crystallization point where it has meaning."26 Considerably later, in 1939, Cleanth Brooks tells us that Frost's "best poetry . . . exhibits the structure of symbolist-metaphysical poetry."27 To turn away from these topics here is not to deny their importance, but rather, since they are very much in the minor key in the reviews of the 1920's and 1930's, to postpone consideration of them for a later section of this study. The continuing emphasis upon Frost's regionalism constitutes the central focus of the reviews to about 1940. There is, until the appearance in 1928 of West-Running Brook, a continuation of the emphasis upon the poet's dark vision and upon the limitations and assets of his narrow range. By 1924 there is a new note, an emphasis upon Frost's humor, which Louis Untermeyer insists has gone

unappreciated because of the unwarranted emphasis upon the harshness of the life he portrays. In the 1930's the question of Frost's limited regionalism becomes a question of social and political significance, and the political satire of *A Further Range* brings on some of the harshest criticism the poet has received.

Because of our interest in this study in Lionel Trilling's view of Frost as a Sophoclean poet and in J. Donald Adams' emphatic rejection of that view, we should like particularly to illustrate adequately the point already made that there is a decided early emphasis on Frost's dark view of life. Although the main impetus for this view was *North of Boston*, we have seen that *Mountain Interval* too was read with some of the same emphasis. And in 1920 in the *New Republic* we are told that for Frost nature is "less a background than a hostile and surrounding wall." And that "again and again Frost makes us feel this tragedy of solitude to the soul too small to absorb and surround it. His futile men and women beat frantically against their unutterable loneliness, as against a vast door in which God has turned the key." 28 A 1923 study echoes Amy Lowell's earlier observation about the decadence of Frost's New England: "Some of his best pictures are of grim and

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terrible events, and the whole body of his writing shows a decaying and degenerating New England."29 And a 1929 reviewer of _West-Running Brook_ expresses disappointment because he feels that Frost "has lost or abandoned a view of life which was in its implications, tragic . . . ."30

Closely related to this continuing emphasis on the tragic implications of Frost's regionalism, is the attention paid to the narrow range of that regionalism. David Morton, reviewing _New Hampshire_ in 1923, distinguishes between the limited poetic achievement of revealing "the eccentricities of temperament in a strongly charactered people" and the highest possible achievement which lies in the "revelation of the profound and essential and unusual qualities of the human spirit." For him, there is no doubt that Frost's poetry represents an achievement of the lower order. Yet there is, within this limited range, call for praise, for what Frost "has elected to do he has done vividly and with telling and haunting effect. And that is to present in heightened and intense light and shadow the peculiar character of a people in a special environment."31

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Gould Fletcher sees in the same matter a broader significance, his view having common ground with Pound's earlier concern over Frost's London publication. For Fletcher, "America, for all its recent emergence into the condition of a culture-bearing and art-creating country, is still the land of unfulfilled and creatively starved lives" and Frost's regionalism represents a necessary retreat from a hostile society. He thinks that Frost, "among American poets of the present day is lucky in that he found early an environment which did not stiffen him into resisting bitterly, and did not altogether crush him." On the negative side, however, it appears to Fletcher that "where Frost began by discovering an environment, he has ended by suffering his environment to dictate to him what he should write." He feels that this is the only possible explanation for the long title poem of New Hampshire, which either as a "work of art or as a manifesto ... is deplorably unnecessary." He concludes his review by ranking Frost, as does Morton, "extremely high among poets of the second order," emphasizing that "it is only in the second order that he takes position."32

32Review of New Hampshire, Freeman, VIII (February 27, 1924), 593-94.
narrow range. One reviewer feels that Frost "has de-
deliberately cut himself off from the modern, metropolitan
and commercial scene, and gained more . . . than he has
lost."33 Another begins where David Morton does by observ-
ing that within his "limited emotional range, he is
exquisitively sensitive and searching" and ends, in con-
trast to Morton, by calling him not second-rate but "a
major poet voluntarily operating under self-imposed limita-
tions in a minor field."34 Newman I. White, who wonders
whether Frost's "detailed talk about ax-helves and the
tricky nature of brush fires may in time prove a little
onerous to urban minds," nevertheless finds universal
applications for the regional particularities:

Like the poetry of Thomas Hardy, which it some-
times resembles more than that of any other
recent poet, Mr. Frost's poetry seems destined
to live because the purely local in it is after
all only a suitable vesture for what is general-
ly true.35

At the same time that these reviewers are charting the
course of Frost's realism and his tragic view, others had
begun to chart another characteristic called to attention

33 Virginia Moore, "Robert Frost of New Hampshire," Yale
Review, XX (March 1931), 628.

34 Review of Collected Poems in Christian Century, XLVIII
(February 18, 1931), 242.

35 "Robert Frost's First Collected Edition," South
Atlantic Quarterly, XXX (October 1931), 440.
with the publication of *New Hampshire* in 1923, which Mark Van Doren finds "full of philosophy and fun,"36 and Harriet Monroe, "profoundly humorous in the richest sense of the word."37 A reviewer of *Selected Poems*, also published in 1923, tells us that Frost "has pictured New England life with a wise, humorous, tender touch that is not to be found in the work of any other living author."38 Gorham B. Munson, Frost's first biographer, reports in a 1930 review that *West-Running Brook* "makes inescapable the fact that Mr. Frost is the most humorous of all our living poets. Others may be witty, sardonic, satirical: he stands apart unrivalled by his American contemporaries for sweet, sanative humor."39

Both George R. Elliott and Louis Untermeyer emphasize the importance of Frost's humor, and both sound the familiar theme that Frost has been praised for all the wrong reasons. For Elliott, Frost is "the profoundest humor poet of our time, and has been generally recognized— as everything but that." Elliott also believes that Frost's "ambiguity is vital," that it comes "from artistic integ-

36"Robert Frost," *Nation*, CXVII (December 19, 1923), 715.

37*Poetry*, XXV (December 1924), 146.

38Review of *Selected Poems*, *Outlook*, CXXXIV (August 1, 1923), 521.

39"Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," *Bookman*, LXX (July 1930), 419.
rity in rare union with fluent sympathy. His poetic humor is on the highway toward the richer American poetry of the future, if that is to be. Louis Untermeyer believes that the "change" in New Hampshire "is one of emphasis" and finds it "incredible that most of the appraisers of Frost's previous work spoke chiefly of its grimness, whereas its whimsicality, though less obvious, was equally pronounced." Later, reviewing the 1930 edition of Collected Poems, Untermeyer says that even in the "blank verse bucolics" Frost's poetry is characterized by "a continual fancy beneath the surface realism, an intensification of the quizzical, a downright intellectual playfulness which has never been sufficiently appreciated." Frost is, for Untermeyer, "comic in the purest sense, in the sense that his spirit, responsive to tragedy on every hand, is never tragic. He is . . . one acquainted with the night, but he is not engulfed by it."

In 1936 Frost published A Further Range, which, although it won for him his third Pulitzer Prize, also brought to a new and sharp focus the old question about his

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42"One Singing Faith," Saturday Review of Literature, VII (January 17, 1931), 529.
limited range. Frost's dedication to his wife Elinor is an elaboration upon the title which reveals the theme of the book:

To E. F. for what it may mean to her that beyond the White Mountains were the Green; beyond both were the Rockies, the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and the Himalayas--range beyond range, even into the realm of government and religion. 43

It is the range into the "realm of government," indirect and ironic as that range may be in poems like "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "Departmental," and "Provide, Provide," that brings some of the most serious objections up to this time against Frost's poetry. Even favorable reviews reveal an uneasiness about some of the implications of the social and political philosophy given expression in the book. A New York Times editorial defensively points out that "Mr. Frost is playful and benign," that he does not display the "absurd vehemence of Coventry Patmore." 44 Ralph Thompson, also writing for the Times, reveals a curious ambivalence toward the subject:

Applied to Mr. Frost, the "build soil" philosophy is the right one, because it works, because only out of such a philosophy could have come the greatest of his poems. For the rest of us--but just a moment. There is no need to argue the point, or to quarrel with Mr. Frost's prescriptions. Let us agree to be wary and

43 Quoted by Sergeant in Trial by Existence, p. 348.

turn back to the simple verses in A Further Range, and to the genius they express. One can well afford to leave argument for another place and another day.45

Not everyone, however, is content to thus leave the argument. R. P. Blackmur feels strongly about the limitations of A Further Range:

It is a hard thing to say of a man grown old and honored in his trade, that he has not learned it. Yet that is what Mr. Frost's new volume, with its further range into matters of politics and the social dilemma, principally demonstrates. The new subjects, as they show themselves poetic failures, reflect back and mark out an identical weakness in poems on the old subjects. It is a weakness of craft, and it arises from a weakness, or an inadequacy, in the attitude of the poet toward the use and substance of poetry as an objective creation.

. . . Mr. Frost is proud of his weakness and expresses it in the form of an apothegm at the close of the poem called 'To A Thinker.' 'At least don't use your mind too hard,/But trust my instinct--I'm a bard.'46

John Wheelwright's attitude is similar to Blackmur's although his emphasis is not so explicitly on craftsmanship. Wheelwright observes that Frost "comes not off of the Farm, but back to the Farm" and calls the poet's pastoral thought a "sick sign in body politic." He feels that Frost has "over-extended" himself in A Further Range:

So long as his teaching is only a record of observation, the observation seems accurate so far as the record goes. And it goes


46"The Instincts of a Bard," Nation, CXLII (June 24, 1936), 817-18.
In 1942 Frost published *A Witness Tree*, and Lawrance Thompson published *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*. In his preface, Thompson notes that up to that time most of the critical attention to the poetry has come in the form of the periodical reviews of the various books and expresses the belief that his is the "first published attempt to offer a detailed consideration of those various aims and accomplishments which find integrated expression within the poetry of Robert Frost." From 1942 to 1960, the critical record is primarily a record of relatively comprehensive critical essays, which deal not with specific poems or books but with the attempt, still very much going on, to define Frost's achievement. Obviously, the record was not complete in 1942, but there had been another *Collected Edition* of the poems in 1939, and there

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48p. xi.
was to be the Complete Poems of 1949. And, too, in 1942, Frost was sixty-eight years old, hardly too soon by ordinary standards to begin taking the long view.

There had, of course, been some earlier studies of broader scope than the typical review, many of which, like the reviews, can be meaningfully related to the central, recurring question of Frost's range. Amy Lowell, in the chapter on Frost in her Tendencies In Modern American Poetry, 1920, and Granville Hicks in a 1930 essay in the New Republic are in agreement on the limitations imposed by Frost's regionalism. Miss Lowell feels that in spite of his excellence, "his canvas is exceedingly small" and that "he cannot attain to the position held by men with a wider range of vision." Hicks sees that the small canvas has both advantages and limitations. Frost's limited world view has made it possible for him to write poetry as fine "as any living American," but, at the same time, because his limitations prevent his giving us the "sense of belonging in the industrial, scientific, Freudian world . . . no one would think of maintaining that he is one of the great poets of the age." Hicks significantly qualifies this evaluation by observing that "every poet today is necessarily a limited poet," and that "Frost's relative greatness lies in the fact that, endowed with the power, he had dis-

49p. 135.
covered a way to make the time as favorable for the exercise of that power as it could possibly be."  

The focus upon Frost's limited range shifts for some to a focus upon his "restraint," which, in turn, gives rise to the term "classical." Gorham B. Munson, in the first book-length study of Frost, in 1927, identifies him as "the purest classical poet of America today." He makes a point of distinguishing between Frost's classicism which "depends entirely upon personal discovery" and that of Pound and Eliot who "are in the main loyal to the principle of authority." But for Munson too, although his emphasis is upon the advantages of the restraint rather than upon the limitations, the limitations must be acknowledged: "Frost makes no pretense of great inclusiveness and great profundities. The canniiness of good sense forbids such rash over-reaching of one's self."  

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, in a 1925 study, "Robert Frost, A Good Greek Out of New England," quotes Frost on his belief in "what the Greeks called synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole; skirting the hem of the goddess." For her, the classical restraint does not preclude universality:

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50 "The World of Robert Frost," _New Republic_, LXV (December 3, 1930), 77-78.


52 Ibid., p. 114.
Those who mistake his verse for a product local or provincial have been too literal . . . . The language of his poetry, though so markedly that of New England speech, is symbolic; his subject matter, for all its clear geographical limits, is universal. 53

Among the writers who come to Frost's defense against the charge that his choice of subject matter cuts him off from the modern temper are James M. Dabbs, Robert S. Newdick, and Hyatt H. Waggoner. For Dabbs, many of the poets "more patently contemporary than Frost" are so "at the expense . . . of completeness." While they give us only "modern characteristics, not the modern man," qualifying thereby as "excellent, if limited, historians of the period," Frost "is a poet, creating in the modern spirit the modern man." 54 Newdick examines Frost's war poems to make the point that since "war has engaged the thought of Robert Frost from boyhood through youth, early manhood and maturity," it is hardly accurate to speak of his poetry as an "escapist's idyllic dream-world." 55 Waggoner, in a study defining what he calls Frost's "humanistic idealism," feels that "it is significant that Frost's ideas, where they run counter to what may perhaps be termed the

53 New Republic, XLIV (September 30, 1925), 147.
55 "Robert Frost Looks at War," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXXVIII (1939), 59.
'orthodox' scientific views, are strikingly similar to those of an extremely important and influential scientific and philosophic minority."

Two important studies of the middle thirties are those of Mark Van Doren and Cleanth Brooks. Van Doren, searching for a basis for his "prophecy" that Frost's fame will endure, finds it in the "middle ground he occupies in the present poetical scene."

Mr. Frost's place is and always has been singularly central. He has had nothing to do with the extremes where most of our shouting has been heard. His range has been great enough to carry him close to all the corners, yet he has never quite crossed a line. He has always, in a kind of silence and with a most remarkable integrity, kept to his center.

For Van Doren, "this middle ground, this central position" is the surest basis "for a prediction that he will continue to be felt as an important poet." Van Doren speaks in passing, as many have, of Frost's symbolism, but he does not pursue the point as Brooks does in his study of the poet in Modern Poetry and the Tradition, 1939. After identifying Frost as a regionalist and a traditionalist, Brooks immediately takes issue with the assumption that the structure of Frost's poetry "differs radically from the

56"The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost," American Literature, XIII (1941), 212.

structure" of Ransom's and Tate's who "are reputed to be tortured intellectual obscurantists." He points out that the poetry is "scarcely direct" in spite of certain characteristics, particularly Frost's use of anecdote, incident and character sketch, which make it appear so to the "casual reader." It is not a lack of irony which sets Frost off from his two contemporaries, but rather "the context in which the irony appears, and . . . the level at which it operates."58 Brooks, echoing the emphasis of the early reviewers on Frost's kinship with the prose regionalists, finds the poetry "diluted and diffuse," characterized by an "absence of metaphor" and a "very minimum of imagery."59 His final judgement is that "Frost's best poetry . . . exhibits the structure of symbolist-metaphysical poetry."60

In Fire and Ice, designated at the beginning of this section of our survey a turning point in the critical canon, Lawrance Thompson systematically broadens the study of Frost's poetry along all of the major lines explored by the critics and reviewers before him. In the first of the three sections of his book, Thompson defines Frost's theory of poetry, focusing upon the poet's concept of form, his explanation of the poetic impulse, and upon the significance

59 Ibid., p. 111.
60 Ibid., p. 116.
of meaning to his poetry. He turns in his second section to Frost's poetry in action, where he examines the poet's use of speech rhythms, his "sound-posturing," the function of metaphor in his poetry and the importance to him of the "Yankee manner," which, Thompson points out, is a source of both strength and weakness in the poetry. Successfully employed, the Yankee manner has allowed Frost to "achieve qualities of objectivity, insight, compression, and rich symbolism." Unsuccessfully employed, it has been "responsible for a cold flatness, prosaic lines, extrinsic moralizings, faulty ellipsis, and obscurity." Thompson makes a series of comparisons between the dramatic narratives of Frost and Browning, pointing out, as one of the essential difference between them, that Frost concentrates on "the soul-in-present-action," whereas Browning's emphasis is upon the "nuances of past happenings." In the final section of his book, Thompson turns to a consideration of Frost's attitude toward life. He quotes Mark Van Doren on Frost's "singularly central" position which Thompson feels "has been shaped less by Stoicism than by his New England practicality somehow blended with that genuinely mystical instinct which seems to have been one heritage from his saintly Scotch mother."

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61 Fire and Ice, p. 58.
62 Ibid., p. 107.
63 Ibid., p. 182.
vation on Frost's attitude toward life has to do with his response to systematic thought:

... Frost is kept from trusting dogma because it cannot encompass in rational terms the irrational and continuous flux of matter and spirit. Herein he shows his essential kinship, again, with Emerson. The symbols, the metaphors, through which he reads meanings must be held lightly so that he may be able to translate them into equivalents lest rigidity should freeze and destroy vital flexibility; lest the truths of experience escape us, and subside into dogma.64

The important studies of Frost which come between Fire and Ice in 1942 and the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959 can be broadly classified as belonging either to the cases made against Frost or to those made for him. The former, greatly outnumbered by the latter, bring to a comprehensive focus the diverse exceptions and objection to the poetry heard prior to Malcolm Cowley's 1944 essay, "The Case Against Mr. Frost."65 In 1955, Harold H. Watts also presents his case against Frost in his study, "Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue."66 And in 1948, Yvor Winters indicates by the title of his essay, "Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter

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64 Ibid., p. 203.


as Poet." the general direction his dissent takes. All three of these cases share as important common ground the charge that Frost has failed to commit himself seriously on the fundamental issues of his age; all three are logical extensions of the very early evaluation that Frost's regionalism, his pastoral subject matter and themes, cuts him off from the mainstream of contemporary human experience.

Malcolm Cowley's charge is essentially that Frost is, in a sense, caught between, on the one hand, a significant extension of his New England heritage and, on the other, a meaningful commitment to twentieth century themes and modes. He stands in an unreal world between the two periods, unable to break with the past and, at the same time, unable to identify with the real virtues of that past which could be made vital in the present age. He does not realize, as his New England forebears did, that "the New England spirit, when it stands alone, is inclined to be narrow and arithmetical." Nor, says Cowley, can one "imagine him thundering against the Fugitive Slave Law, like Emerson; or rising like Thoreau to defend John Brown after the Harpers Ferry raid. . . . He is concerned chiefly with himself and his near neighbors. . . ." And yet in spite of his emphasis upon

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68 Cowley, p. 38. 69 Ibid., p. 42.
individuality and "inwardness," he does not "strive toward greater depth to compensate for what he lacks in breadth; he does not strike far inward into the wilderness of human nature . . . . He sets limits on the exploration of himself, as he sets them on almost every other human activity . . .

"Cowley concludes with a harshness only faintly tempered by irony that Frost is "a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill. . . . The praise heaped on Frost in recent years is somehow connected in one's mind with the search for ancestors and authentic old furniture."71

Both Watts and Winters probe deeper than Cowley in their attempts to explain the causes of Frost's limitations. For Watts, the key to those limitations rests upon the distinction Frost makes between nature as "process" and nature as it is manifested in abstract thought and social institutions. There are, Watts points out, two kinds of dialogue in Frost's poetry, the dialogue between man and "nature as process" and the dialogue between man and society. The second dialogue is, in a sense, forced upon Frost, interrupting the dialogue he takes most seriously, that between man and process. His refusal to treat society as

70Ibid., p. 43. 71Ibid., p. 45.
"natural" leads him in the second dialogue to feel "that he is in the presence of material that is of little intrinsic interest and of even less authority over his own spirit."72 Watts uses two of Frost's own lines in the conclusion of his case against the poet:

For I thought Epicurus and Lucretius
By Nature meant the Whole Goddam Machinery.
(from "Lucretius versus the Lake Poets")

But society and man "are also part of the 'Whole Goddam Machinery'; they are cogs that really do mesh with the parts that Frost singles out for his respectful study. Yet Frost's most deeply held belief amounts to no less than this: that there is a part of the 'machinery' that is real and instructive to man and a part that is not."73

Yvor Winters pushes the case against Frost still another step. For Cowley, the limitations arise largely from the poet's failure to pursue the exploration of the inner self, from what might be called caution or restraint; for Watts, the limitations arise from the poet's failure to see clearly the arbitrariness of his limited definition of nature; for Winters, Frost has "willfully refrained from careful thinking."74 Frost's reliance upon instinct and impulse and his denigration of reason and intellect make

72Watts, p. 109.  
73Ibid., pp. 121-22.  
74Winters, p. 62.
him for Winters not only, at best, a second-rate poet, but also, because of his popularity, a dangerous contributor to the widespread vagueness and confusion stemming from "Emersonian and Thoreauistic Romanticism." Frost is an Emersonian who "believes in the rightness of impulse" and who is thereby "of necessity a relativist, but his relativism, apparently since it derives from no intense religious conviction, has resulted mainly in an ill-natured eccentricity and in increasing melancholy."75 Frost inherits from the Romantic tradition "the nostalgic love for the chaotic and the dream-like which along with an habitual but unreasoned hesitancy or fear, ... the heritage of the earlier New England, keeps Frost looking two ways, unable to move decisively in either direction. He is neither a truly vigorous Romantic, such as Hart Crane, nor a truly reactionary Classicist, such as E. A. Robinson."76 Winters tempers the harshness of his evaluation somewhat by admitting that the focus of his attention has been upon Frost at his worst, that is, upon his didactic poetry. Frost's symbolic lyrics constitute for Winters "the bulk of his really memorable work," though even in the lyrics Frost is guilty of "so great a degree of imprecision as to make them curiously unsatisfactory." The focus of

75Ibid., pp. 60-61.  
76Ibid., p. 77.
Winters' case against Frost is upon the fact that his "instinctualism, his nostalgia for dream and chaos, are . . . the symptoms of sentimental obscurantism . . . which do not lead toward intelligence . . . . They lead away from the true comprehension of human experience which makes for great, or even for successful poetry."77

The cases made for Frost between 1942 and 1959, like the cases against him, follow the patterns established by the earlier criticism. The central concern is with the limitations of regionalism; the central question is whether or not Frost transcends these limitations by the development of universal themes. A clearly focused answer to the question is given by W. G. O'Donnell in 1948. For O'Donnell, Frost's major accomplishment is North of Boston, in which the poet reaches "the plane of universal meaning" through some of his most regional poetry. And, although he does not reach that plane outside North of Boston "more than a score of times," the achievement is clearly significant because since "he has given the language thirty poems and some fifteen hundred lines that convey significant human experience, he cannot easily be consigned to the company of lesser poets."78 Howard Sergeant with an emphasis very like

77 Ibid., p. 81.

O'Donnell's feels that "it is his regional outlook and feeling which makes him so indubitably a poet of the universal."\textsuperscript{79} For Mark Van Doren he is "our least conventional poet" and can be "understood anywhere by readers versed in matters more ancient and universal than the customs of one country."\textsuperscript{80}

Other critics approach the same problem from another point of view, trying to explain how Frost's manner and his irony have led to the misunderstanding of his poetry which is responsible for the view that he is something other than a first-rate poet. Sidney Cox, in 1948, wonders whether it is wise art "to confine your deeper meanings to implications which almost no one gets, and so let people love you for your nice colts, funny farmers and . . . birches."\textsuperscript{81} Cox points out that although the poet's teasing "about the bomb, government planning and the federation of the world are against the fashion . . . they are not frivolous. They arise from acknowledging fixed limits with an acceptance that is gay because of 'emotional absolutes' that are his, and that are available to all."\textsuperscript{82} Carlos Baker, in 1957,

\textsuperscript{79}"The Poetry of Robert Frost," \textit{English} IX (1952), 14.
\textsuperscript{80}"Robert Frost's America," \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, CLXXXVII (June 1951), 32.
\textsuperscript{81}"Robert Frost and Poetic Fashion," \textit{American Scholar}, XVIII (1948), 80.
\textsuperscript{82}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 85.
attributes some of the misunderstanding of Frost to his "special kind of reticence" which "should deceive no one into thinking that he has evaded the central fears and tortures of our times . . . . What looks like evasiveness usually turns out to be a complex exercise in argumentation."\textsuperscript{83} For John T. Napier, writing in 1957, Frost has contributed "to closing the present gap between poet and scientist" by demonstrating "with careful logic certain points of congruency in their tasks."\textsuperscript{84} Napier finds in Frost's poetry "the semblance of reasoning."\textsuperscript{85} And for Reginald L. Cook, in 1959, Frost represents "the deliberate and forceful engagement of the modern poet's intelligence with the achievements of science."\textsuperscript{86}

The very early theme of Frost's tragic view, begun in the reviews of *North of Boston*, is still very much in evidence in this period. Peter Viereck foreshadows in 1949 Lionel Trilling's later use of the term Sophoclean to describe Frost:

\ldots The apparent blandness of the Greeks was, as Nietzsche showed in his *Birth of Tragedy*,


\textsuperscript{84}Cox, p. 128. Appeared originally in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXXIII (Summer 1957), 378-94.

\textsuperscript{85}Ibid., p. 136.

\textsuperscript{86}"The Stand of Robert Frost, Early and Late," *English Journal*, XLVIII (May 1959), 239.
the result of their having looked so deeply into life's tragic meaning that they had to protect themselves by cultivating a deliberately superficial jolliness in order to bear the unbearable. Frost's benign calm, the comic mask of a whittling rustic, is designed for gazing—without dizziness—into a tragic abyss of desperation.87

Randall Jarrell, in a wide-ranging "appreciation" of Frost makes repeated references to his tragic view, although he calls Frost "that rare thing, a complete or representative poet" in whose poetry one finds justice done to the "grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things," as well as to "tenderness and love and delight; and everything in between."88 And in 1959, Michael L. Lasser provides a kind of synthesis of the two central themes running through the critical evaluations of Frost from 1913 on, those having to do with the question about his relationship to society and with his dark view of life:

... Frost is certainly no optimist. He finds in the traditional symbol of purity—whiteness—the inarticulate silence of the universe. To overcome this, he concerns himself with the meaning of self, and to find this meaning he plunges into the darkest parts of human individuality.

... His retreat, in actuality, involves a damnation of society... coupled with a

87"Parnassus Divided," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXIV (October 1949), 68.

88"To the Laodiceans," in Cox, p. 103.
suffering, time-utilizing advance into a more agonizing self-knowledge. 89

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Over and over again the critics and reviewers insist that there are two Robert Frosts, the "true" poet with whom they are concerned and the vaguely defined image of the poet existing in the minds of his admirers at large. Thepersistency of the attitude from 1913 on that Frost is really not understood by most of those who admire him is of central concern to this study. The attitude can be largely explained by the poetry itself, in terms of the layers of meaning underlying the deceptively simple narrative, descriptive and lyric surfaces of the poetry, and a detailed discussion of this aspect of the problem is begun with Chapter Three. Here we wish only to make the point that the popular image of the poet about which so many, up to and including Lionel Trilling, have been concerned is nowhere very specifically defined. There has been considerable "gushing" over the poet down through the years; there have been many rather vague "appreciations," published tributes in and out of verse, and many, many honors only

remotely related to poetic achievement. But there is also a rather large body of critical attention, the seriousness of which is attested to by the fact that the major areas of concern of more recent criticism, from about 1942 on, are all foreshadowed and in many instances dealt with in detail in the very early reviews and critical essays. One illustration of this point can be made by turning again to the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959.

The record of the critical responses to Frost's poetry from 1913 to 1959 accentuates the peculiar significance of the Trilling-Adams episode by providing little or no basis for such an episode. Both Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams ignore the fact that Frost has been called a terrifying poet rather consistently since 1914, and by so doing they support the belief that the basis of their episode is something other than a critical reading of Frost's poetry. Trilling conforms to one of the most consistent patterns in the criticism by distinguishing between "his" Frost and the Frost "existing in the minds of some of his admirers." But because so many of the poet's admirers would agree with his evaluation, one is more acutely aware of the vagueness surrounding those admirers with whom Trilling is taking exception. They would presumably not list among their numbers Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe, Gorham B. Munson, Louis Untermeyer, Mark Van Doren, Robert Penn
Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Lawrance Thompson, James M. Cox, Randall Jarrell, Marion Montgomery, Michael L. Lasser or Peter Viereck. Who then are the "admirers" who prompted Trilling's stand? One suspects they are the same admirers who prompted Malcolm Cowley to equate "the praise heaped on Frost in recent years" with the "search for ancestors and authentic old furniture." Every artist has admirers of the kind Cowley had in mind, and perhaps Frost had a larger following of this kind than most. But to focus upon this aspect of the poet's reputation while ignoring the more significant and more clearly definable reputation established in the reviews and critical responses to the poetry is to suggest an interest outside or beyond the poetry itself. James M. Cox has called Trilling's speech "a confession marking the surrender of that hard core of resistance which gathered against Frost during the Thirties."90 But if it is a surrender, it is by no means an unconditional one, for Trilling, like Cowley and more significantly Ezra Pound before him, sets his acceptance of Frost in the context of a charge against that evidently large segment of the American society incapable of appreciating the poet's true merits.

The rejection by J. Donald Adams and his supporters of Trilling's evaluation of Frost is more surprising than the

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90 Cox, in his Introduction, p. 9.
evaluation itself, and the intensity of the rejection also supports the contention that the participants in the episode are more concerned with their respective definitions of American culture than with Frost's poetry. That Frost can be so used and that selective readings of his poetry can be marshalled to support either of the two positions indicates one clear basis for his popularity. Chapter Three provides such a selective reading of the poetry, and we shall return at that point to our focus upon the Trilling-Adams episode as a significant illustration of Frost's popular image.
In 1937 Richard Thornton edited a collection of reviews and miscellaneous essays, critical, biographical and other, entitled Recognition of Robert Frost. James M. Cox in the Introduction to his 1962 collection of critical essays, Robert Frost, considers Thornton's title significant relative to the kind of criticism Frost had received up to that date. Cox feels that there had been general "recognition" of the poet by 1937, but that a true "acceptance" of Frost characterized by a willingness to study his poetry critically in depth was to begin only with Lawrance Thompson's Fire and Ice of 1942 which, for Cox, "provides a point of departure for all that follows."¹ His view is that by 1962, criticism of Frost had passed through the two stages of recognition and acceptance and that it had "at last arrived at the threshold of the third, the phase of understanding, and full discovery."² Our concern in the previous chapter was with the critical record between 1913 and 1959 and its relationship to the Trilling-

¹Cox, p. 6.  
²Ibid., p. 13.  

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Adams episode. Our concern in this chapter is with one aspect of the third "phase of understanding," with the increasingly comprehensive views of Frost's achievement that lend themselves to a consideration of his relationship to the traditions of American poetry.

1

At the heart of the debate about the significance of Frost's achievement lies the question about the degree of his commitment to twentieth century human experience. Does his rural New England regionalism preclude achievement of the highest order in our modern industrialized, urbanized society? Does the poet cut himself off from the realities of his age; does he, indeed, escape from the harshness of those realities into an idyllic pastoral dream world? Or does he, on the other hand, by means of the sharp realistic focus fostered by his regionalism cut through in his poetry to timeless, universal conditions, experiences and values? Does his regionalism make of him, as Cowley puts it, "a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill?"3 Or is he, as J. Donald

Adams would have it, a direct lineal descendent of Emerson, a twentieth century champion of Emersonian idealism? And is there beneath the limitations of the regionalism and the affirmation of the Emersonian tradition a darker view of human experience? Is Frost, indeed, a terrifying, a Sophoclean poet?

Of the many, many terms used to describe or to categorize Frost's poetry, the three most meaningful in terms of an attempt to relate him to the mainstream of American poetry are "traditionalist," "regionalist," and "modern." There seems to be general agreement about the validity of the first two terms; it is the question of his modernity which has been so troublesome. But how one finally answers that troublesome question depends in large part upon how one defines traditionalism and regionalism, the diametrically opposed views of Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams, both of whom see Frost as a significant modern poet, being a case in point.

Frost is a traditional poet first and foremost because of the form of his poetry. He employs traditional rhythms, for him primarily iambic meter, and traditional forms of versification. He has made quite a point about his refusal to be modern in the ways of most of his contemporaries, choosing rather "the old way to be new." His oft-repeated observation that writing free verse is like
"playing tennis with the net down" pretty effectively sums up in a characteristic phrase his attitude toward that aspect of modernity. His blank verse monologues, his quatrains and other regular, rhymed stanzas, his sonnets and his couplets all make quite obvious this most fundamental basis of his traditionalism.

Ezra Pound's early enthusiasm for Frost seems to have arisen from his appreciation of Frost's realism and from his admiration of the poet's ability to "speak naturally and to paint the thing... as he sees it." Pound is here focusing upon an important aspect of the poet's old way of being new. For unlike his formalism which is distinctly and emphatically traditional, Frost's diction is both traditional and modern. It is the simplicity and the naturalness of the diction which attracts Pound, as it is to attract Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe and others. Frost is a "modern" who with his first two books of poetry in 1913 and 1914 made a significant contribution to the early twentieth century rejection of Victorianism. That most of Frost's poetry is characterized by modern diction may be illustrated by the use of a few lines from one of his poems not so characterized. Our understanding of the nature of Frost's poetic development is hampered by an uncertainty about the

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4Review of A Boy's Will, Poetry, II (May 1913), 72.
chronology of the poems, but there are exceptions to this uncertainty and "My Butterfly" is one. It is in *A Boy's Will* in 1913 but it had been published first in the *Independent* in 1894. The striking difference between the diction of this poem and most of the rest of Frost's poetry suggest a line of development for him parallel to that of Yeats. However, in Frost's case there is hardly enough evidence to argue for development; one must settle merely for the observation that what is meant by the modernity of his diction in general is partially defined by contrasting it with this rare example of his use of the cloying diction of the nineteenth century:

> Thine emulous fond flowers are dead, too,  
> And the daft sun-assaulter, he  
> That frightened thee so oft, is fled or dead:  
> Save only me  
> (Nor is it sad to thee!)  
> Save only me  
> There is none left to mourn thee in the fields.  

There are other examples of this kind of diction in *A Boy's Will*, though none other as pronounced as this. And there is some straining of syntax as well in poems such as "The Vantage Point" and "Wind and the Window Flower." But there is also very much in evidence in this first book the poet of *North of Boston*, the poet of natural speech rhythms and natural, "modern" diction, in poems such as "Into My

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5All the quotations of Frost's poetry unless otherwise indicated come from *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1962).
Own," "Storm Fear" and "Mowing." The following lines from "Storm Fear" indicate quite clearly the direction in which Frost was moving, or had quite substantially moved, between "My Butterfly" in 1894 and A Boy's Will in 1913. The voice here comes very close to what is to become Frost's most characteristic and most important voice:

I count our strength
Two and a child,
Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,--
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away.

The naturalness of Frost's poetic voice arising from his direct simple diction and his syntax, which he repeatedly explained in terms of normal speech rhythms, provides one of the important bases of his popularity. For it allows those who wish to view him as a modern to focus upon the naturalness and realism of his poetry and those who wish to view him as a traditionalist to make persuasive comparisons with Robert Burns, Wordsworth, and, more importantly, Emerson. The names which occur most frequently in discussions of Frost's relationship to nineteenth century American poetry in addition to Emerson are Whittier and

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Thoreau. F. O. Matthiessen in his Introduction to The Oxford Book of American Verse singles out Whittier and Emerson in identifying the tradition in which Frost is writing:

Frost does not fit conveniently into either the Whitman tradition or the Poe tradition. The title of his first book, A Boy's Will, comes from Longfellow, but his closest ancestor is the more authentic regionalist, Whittier... Frost is also the poet of individualism, in the Emersonian tradition...

The linking of Frost's name with Whittier's arises naturally out of the identification of the two as regionalists; the linking with Thoreau arises out of the identification of the two as individualists. Frost's retreat to rural New England parallels Thoreau's retreat to Walden, which fact has been used both in the cases for Frost and in those against him. A recent study of "Directive" draws some persuasive parallels between the

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7 Among other important references are those made to Emily Dickinson and E.A. Robinson. Frost seems occasionally to echo Dickinson, as, for example, in "My November Guest," and "To Earthward." Frost admired Robinson with whom he had considerable in common. Radcliffe Squires in The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, 1963), feels that Frost is "like" Emily Dickinson in his use of "ikons and incantations," seeming "at times to write a poetry of superstitution." For Squires, Frost is like Robinson in his appreciation of the "New England disease of incommu­nication" and in his use of "pathetic irony." For both references, see Major Themes, p. 12.

setting of that poem and Thoreau's description in *Walden* of the abandoned sites of vanished dwellings marked only by the holes in the earth which were once cellars. As valuable as these associations with Whittier and Thoreau may be, however, both Frost's regionalism and his individualism can be more meaningfully studied in the present context in terms of his relationship with Emerson, for it has been Emerson thus far who has been central to the development of Frost's reputation. And one of the fundamental questions which must be resolved in any definition of Frost as a modern poet has to do with the definition of the term Emersonian as it applies to him.

A recent valuable consideration of this question has been made by Alvan S. Ryan, who, stimulated by the Trilling-Adams episode, postulates a middle ground for Frost between the extremes defined by those two critics. Ryan feels that while Trilling's view of Frost as a Sophoclean poet is valuable as a corrective to the tendency to minimize that


10Ryan, cited in Note 9.
aspect of his poetry, it is valid only as it applies to one of the extremes of Frost's wide spectrum. The insistence which J. Donald Adams makes for viewing Frost as a direct lineal descendent of Emerson depends, in Ryan's view, for its validity on poetry representative of the opposite extreme. The great body of Frost's poetry is neither Sophoclean nor Emersonian. Ryan focuses in his study upon the support of the second half of this proposition, making an examination in some detail of the distinct and significant differences between Frost and Emerson in their theories and practice of poetry and in their major philosophical premises.

Specifically, Ryan considers four areas for contrasting the positions of the two poets: their views of the poet's role; their theories of poetry; their practice of poetry; and the broader question of their philosophical orientation. In the first place, their views of the poet's role are distinctly different. For Emerson, the role of the poet is "bardic and prophetic," and his definitions of that role invariably have "religious overtones." Frost not only refrains from making such sweeping claims for the poet, but implies by his insistence upon talking about the making of poetry rather than about the poet that such claims cannot be justified. Ryan cites the closing lines of "To A Thinker,"
At least don't use your mind too hard,  
But trust my instinct—I'm a bard,
as an example, not as some would have it of a serious 
commitment to instinct over reason, but rather of Frost's 
"wry humor," and an implicit rejection of the poet as bard.

Ryan feels that Frost and Emerson are closer in their theories of poetry than in their practice, their most significant common ground being in the emphasis both place upon "emblem, symbol, and analogy." But here too there are important differences, paralleling those having to do with their respective views of the poet's role. For in this second area as in the first, Frost is more cautious, more restrained than Emerson. Ryan, making the point that Emerson was "less suspicious of metaphor" than was Frost, quotes Frost's observation that "all metaphor breaks down somewhere." The difference here, though it is one not of kind but of degree, leads to even wider differences in the poetry of the two men. In the first place there is a sense of immediacy in most of the poetry of Frost which one seldom feels in Emerson, an immediacy arising from Frost's "permitting his persons not merely to speculate or muse about experience but to see and to move through the medium of literal action--action which more often than not turns finally into symbolic representation or significant generalization." Ryan singles out "Birches," "After Apple-Picking," "Tree At My Window," "Come In," and "Directive" as clear
examples of this procedure." The unifying principle of Emerson's poetry is "ideational," of Frost's "metaphorical." "Emerson's 'The Humble-Bee,' while symbolic, is also generic; Frost, in contrast, focuses on a particular 'White-Tailed Hornet' . . . ." For Ryan, "the habit of Frost's imagination is, in short, not like Emerson's."11

Upon turning to a consideration of the differences between Frost and Emerson on philosophical grounds, Ryan refers specifically to Trilling's description of Frost as a terrifying poet, which, as far as it is valid, would seem to preclude calling him at the same time an Emersonian poet. Ryan feels that Adams' suggestion that Trilling "come out of the Freudian wood . . . is in line with a widely-held view that both Emerson and Frost are amiable, inspiring, optimistic writers, who prefer to look on the pleasanter aspects of life."12 Ryan not only rejects this view of Frost, but he goes to some pains to demonstrate that it is hardly fair to Emerson as well. He points out that recent evaluations of Emerson deepen our appreciation of his optimism, which, according, for example, to Newton Arvin, does not rest upon a naively limited vision of human experience but rather upon "deep personal experience" and upon a "considered theory of Evil . . . with a long and august tradition behind it in Western thought. . . ." Arvin

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11 Ryan, pp. 10-11.  
12 Ibid., p. 15.
describes the theory as that which "identifies Evil with non-existence, with negation, with the absence of positive Being . . . ."\textsuperscript{13} Such a view of Emerson provides one possible approach to a resolution of the dilemma posed by the diametrically opposed views of Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams. That is, on the basis of the respective "dark" views of life of Frost and Emerson, it may be valid to consider Frost both Sophoclean and Emersonian. But it is not quite that simple. Emerson does work his way to a definite, affirmative, optimistic position, to a position which results not from blindness to the tragedy of life but rather, again in Newton Arvin's words, from having moved "beyond tragedy." This development in Emerson's attitude, this "movement" beyond tragedy, does provide some basis for relating Frost's dark view to his. And while Ryan sees some validity in such a relationship, he places considerably greater significance upon the fact that Emerson's reputation rests largely neither on his earlier dark views, nor on his movement beyond them, but rather on his ultimate affirmative position.

The essential difference between Emerson and Frost depends in part upon the ultimate fixity of Emerson's position. Ryan's summary of that difference provides, at the same time, a definition of the most distinguishing

\textsuperscript{13}"The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense," \textit{Hudson Review}, XII (Spring 1959), 43.
characteristic of Frost's mind:

Between Frost's early and late poetry, there is no such shift of emphasis from impulse or spontaneity to the recognition of evil and limitation as is found in Emerson's essays. Frost has kept the dialogue between feeling and thought through nearly all of his poetry, most nearly in his dramatic monologues, but also in his briefer lyrics. It is chiefly because of this that he is not Emersonian; his interpretations of experience—in his own words, his momentary stays against confusion—are not those of either Emerson, though they are nearer to Emerson's later than to his earlier phase.14

Closing his study, Ryan uses the terms "dialectical" and "dramatic" to describe those central characteristics of Frost's vision which make it most clearly an "unEmersonian" vision.

The distinctions between Frost and Emerson which Ryan makes are all valid. The two poets have obviously different views of the poet's role; their theories of poetry are similar but far from identical; their poetry is only very superficially alike; and most fundamental of all, Emerson ultimately comes to a philosophical position which Frost never approaches, a positive, affirmative position dependent upon a transcendental ontology. Because of the clearly demonstrable nature of these differences, we are forced to ask again why Frost has been so repeatedly classified as Emersonian. We began this phase of our discussion of Frost

14Ryan, pp. 17-18.
and Emerson by noting that it is, in general terms, the "naturalness" of Frost's voice which provides the most obvious basis of his association with traditional English verse and with Emerson in particular. The simple direct diction and the natural speech rhythms of that voice are obviously related to Frost's choice of subject matter, to his New England regionalism, even though he is, of course, not a dialect poet. And that regionalism in the broader sense, like the voice which it gives rise to; naturally calls up an association with Emerson, with the earlier poet of New England. But there is a deeper significance to this association which delineates a complex but unbroken line of development from Emerson to Frost.

The development of nineteenth and twentieth century American poetry parallels that of English poetry of the same period, and the relationship between Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy is in a very fundamental sense very much like the relationship between Emerson and Frost. The poet's central problem by the end of the nineteenth century was to learn, in the words of one of Frost's poems, "what to make of a diminished thing," that is, of the relatively diminished stature of post-Darwinian man. The cultural responses to Darwin and later to Freud and Einstein, even if one thinks more specifically in terms of poetic responses, are, of course, too complex to be treated inci-
dentally. But there were among the significant responses in terms of the poetry produced in the first half of the twentieth century three clearly definable patterns. There were those who, like T. S. Eliot, implicitly denied the significance of nineteenth and twentieth century science by assuming that the traditional values and attitudes of Christian civilization were as valid in the modern wasteland as they had ever been; there were those like Yeats and Wallace Stevens who created their personal myths to replace what, unlike Eliot, they felt had been lost; and there were those like Hardy and Robinson and Frost who attempted neither to deny the loss nor to replace it with personal myth but rather to make poetry out of the diminished thing itself. That Frost's poetry is not predominantly dark poetry, in the vein of Hardy's "for life I have never cared greatly," is explainable in terms of the modifications in Emersonian thought made toward the end of the nineteenth century by the champions of realism, particularly by William Dean Howells.

Emerson's transcendentalism, with its roots in English and German romanticism, differs from its sources significantly because of the political and social climate of America in Emerson's lifetime. It was a climate controlled by a vigorous, often ambivalent, but largely optimistic faith in the democratic process and in the future of the
democratic state. Emerson's *American Scholar* address is a romantic manifesto based upon the fundamental romantic proposition that "in proportion as a man has anything in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form." But it is also a nationalistic tract, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, America's "declaration of literary independence." The mixture of transcendental idealism and practical political considerations is not, of course, unique in Emerson; rather, it is an important factor in establishing his affinity with someone like Thomas Carlyle in particular, the significant difference being that the same general conditions which drove the Englishman to frustration and despair ultimately led the American to an optimistic faith in the worth and dignity of the individual human being. It is a characteristic of Emerson's thought and of his prose style that his expression of this faith is often transferable back and forth, as it were, between the terms of transcendentalism and those of political and social reform. It is an easy and natural step, that is, from the concept of the manifold unity of being in the Oversoul to the concept of the equality of all men in the democratic state. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century this step was taken with something approaching finality by the proponents of realism, particularly as their theories found expression in the writings of
William Dean Howells.

From Emerson's "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low"\(^{15}\) through Howells' "the finest poetry is not ashamed of the plainest fact"\(^{16}\) to Frost's North of Boston is an unbroken and obvious enough line of development. But there has been development; the common and the low in Frost's poetry are not as they were for Emerson signs of anything beyond themselves; they are "realistic" by Howells' definition of that term because they are "bound to no thesis." For Emerson, the literary interest in his time in "the near, the low, the common" was an encouraging sign:

What would we know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;--show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law ... and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.\(^{17}\)

The focus of Howells' realistic theories is precisely the same as that of Emerson's thought here except for one high-

\(^{15}\)The American Scholar.


\(^{17}\)The American Scholar.
ly significant difference: Howells drops the references to "ultimate" reasons and to the unity of the design. Where Emerson speaks in terms of a transcendental rationale for his aesthetic theories, Howells speaks in terms of social and economic need:

Literature, which was once of the cloister, the school, has become more and more of the forum and incidentally of the market place. But it is actuated now by as high and noble motives as ever it was in the history of the world; and I think that in turning from the vain endeavor of creating beauty and devoting itself to the effort of ascertaining life it is actuated by a clearer motive than before.18

Howells knew and liked Frost's poetry, praising North of Boston by comparing it favorably with the work of the prose realists. Frost respected Howells and spoke in a letter to Hamlin Garlin of the "great debt" he owed Howells.19 But the importance of the relationship between the two does not rest upon any very close association, and there seems to be no basis for talking in terms of influence. The importance arises rather from the applicability of Howells' thought to Frost's poetry and the light which this throws upon the poet's relationship to Emerson. Howells' exceptions, for example, to Zola's distortions of reality contain a definition of art which applies as specifically as


any that can be brought to bear upon Frost's poetry:

Each of the [Hougon-Macquart] series is bound to a thesis, but reality is bound to no thesis. You cannot say where it begins or where it leaves off; and it will not allow you to say precisely what its meaning or argument is . . . Life is no more symmetrical than a tree, and the effort of art to give it balance and proportion is to make it as false in effect as a tree clipped and trained to a certain shape.20

This central aesthetic principle, based upon the distinction between "thesis" and "reality," establishes the fundamental common ground between Howells and Frost. But the affinities between the two men are made clear in various ways. Precisely the same kind of objection was raised in the 1920's about Howells' failure to explore the dark side of human experience as was to be raised in time against Frost. Howells was accused of prudery; Frost of timidity, of excessive caution. But by Howells' definition of realism, the "dark" side of life, particularly as it is manifested in the sexual depravity which received so much attention from the naturalists of his time, represents only a fractional portion of human experience. Defending his attitude about the restrained treatment of sex in the novel, he explained that unconventional sexual behavior might not come within the scheme of a particular novel, and "that so far from maiming or mutilating itself in ignoring" such experiences,

"it was all the more faithfully representative of the tone of modern life in dealing with love that was chaste . . . ."

Frost, in a tone very much like that of Howells, on one occasion championed Longfellow on the basis of his moral uprightness, claiming that "inspiration doesn't lie in the mud; it lies in the clean and wholesome life of the ordinary man." He professed here, too, to be "ordinary," to "like the middle way," and to like "to talk to the man who walks the middle way with me." And on still another occasion, in "New Hampshire," Frost catches in humorous, epigrammatic verse the central note of Howells' views of the middle way, of the mean reality between the extremes of tragedy and unqualified joy:

How are we to write
The Russian novel in America
As long as life goes so unterribly?
There is the pinch from which our only outcry
In literature to date is heard to come.
We get what little misery we can
Out of not having cause for misery.

The early responses to Frost's poetry, particularly to North of Boston, emphasize by their repeated specific comparisons of his poetry with the prose realists Frost's relationship to Howells. But this is a fairly obvious relationship based upon the poet's regionalism and his

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21 Criticism and Fiction (New York, 1893), p. 149.

"realistic" objectivity which becomes more valuable when pressed beyond this relatively superficial level. Howells' definition of reality applies to the whole body of Frost's poetry, not only to his specifically New England regional pieces. His definition of reality, of "poor real life," explains Frost's frame of mind, his "middle" position, which is in turn responsible for the vital ambiguity permeating his poetry. One need not, of course, turn to Howells for an explanation of Frost's thought, which has, with considerable validity in each case, been described as that of an agnostic, a relativist, an existentialist, a classicist, and, in the poet's own terms, an environmentalist. But Howells' term, realist, has the advantage of being a more specifically literary term than the others except for classicist, and, to return to our central point, Howells' realism develops out of the Emersonian tradition. The realist's position as defined by Howells and manifested in the poetry of Frost is one distinctly American attempt to make the most of a diminished thing. It is a middle position, a mean between the extremes of romantic idealism on the one hand and naturalistic determinism on the other. It is Emersonian in its affirmation of the goodness of life and of the worth of individual effort in the realization of that good; it derives clearly and emphatically from Emerson's thought in its absence of a transcendental rationale and in
the recognition by its proponents of the positive nature of evil.

Frost is not properly an Emersonian poet, but he is, in a very real sense, in the Emersonian tradition. While neither he nor Howells relegate evil as Emerson does to the role of a negative entity, to "non-being," neither do they go to the other extreme of denying human dignity and value. Frost's repeated definition of the basis of that dignity and that value is cautious and restrained; he is dealing with a changed and changing tradition at the heart of which is a diminished concept of man. But because for Frost man's dignity is only diminished, not denied, we see in him a faith which reflects his fundamental affinity with Emerson. Unlike Emerson, Frost saw "much in nature against us." But his sense of balance, his "realist's" view of human experience prompted him to admit the validity of the

23Frost, in a letter to Lawrance Thompson, speculating about the validity of Lionel Trilling's view of his poetry, made the following specific comparisons of himself with Emerson: "At least he [Trilling] seemed to see that I am as strong on badness as I am on goodness. Emerson's defect was that he was of the great tradition of Monists. He could see the "good of evil born" but he couldn't bring himself to say the evil of good born. He was an Abominable Snowman of the top-lofty peaks . . . . Arnold thought him a voice oracular. ("A voice oracular has pealed today.") I couldn't go as far as that because I am a Dualist and I don't see how Mathew Arnold could because he was Dualist too." See Thompson's Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 584.
opposite view that there is also much in nature on the side of man. Here is the realist's balance, in "Our Hold on the Planet," which results from a synthesis of Emersonian optimism and naturalistic despair:

There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
Take nature altogether since time began,
Including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favor of man,
Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

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Frost's refusal to fit his perceptions of reality into the pattern of a thesis is fundamental to his widespread appeal, finding expression, as it does, in his poetry in a widely varied range of responses to experience. There is something of Emerson in Frost as there is something of Sophocles, and so the poet is admired by both Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams. But this basis of the popularity is also the basis of the most serious criticism of Frost on the part of those who object to his lack of a comprehensive view of modern man in terms of a system or a myth. The most persistent charge brought against Frost has been that his vision is limited, that the body of his poetry constitutes not a synthesis of experience but a collection of fragments, of, at best, in the poet's own words, "momen-
Two book-length studies since 1959 which continue the debate about the restrictions of Frost's subject matter are John F. Lynen's *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, 1960, and George W. Nitchie's *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, 1960. Lynen's thesis is that Frost does have the equivalent of a unifying myth in terms of the pastoral tradition, that "the concept of pastoral reveals the unity in the diverse elements of Frost's art," and that his "retreat" from the modern city to the agrarian world is of "a special sort" which does not result in his turning away from the problems of the world of today. Lynen closes his study with a long quotation from Frost's "Directive," which he introduces with the following summary of his thesis:

> Frost has explored wide and manifold ranges of being by viewing reality within the mirror of the natural and unchanging world of rural life. Pastoralism, whether in Frost or in the poets of Arcadian tradition, will always at first appear to involve an escape from the world as we know it, but actually it is an exploration upstream, past the city with its riverside factories and shipping, on against the current of time and change to the clear waters of the source . . .

George W. Nitchie, seeing Frost in much the same light

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24 *Complete Poems*, p. vii.  
as does Lynen, seeing, for example, that nature for Frost "is primarily an evasion according to plan, a condition of strategic withdrawal" does not agree that in the final analysis there is a unified vision giving direction to all of the poetry. Rather he places the emphasis upon the fragmentary nature of the vision:

Frost's world is fragmentary and meaningless--fragmentary because meaningless, except as an alien entanglement that our wills must confront. It is, once more, 'the vast chaos of all I have lived through,' within which a poem may exist but only as 'a momentary stay against confusion.' One thinks of Oscar Wilde's impressions, of the Imagists' reverential fragments, and if the conjunction of Frost and Wilde is startling, that is partly because Frost has been less consistent than Wilde in abiding by his professed principles; the shining gate may be there after all; the sphere of art and the sphere of morality, or of metaphysics, may not be absolutely distinct and separate. But Frost will not commit himself. And without such commitment, Frost offers us no tragic acceptance--only the drumlin woodchuck's canny adjustment.

Lynen and Nitchie both make valuable contributions to our understanding of Frost's poetic method, Lynen in terms of the pastoral motif and Nitchie in terms of the Edenic myth, and we shall have occasion in the next two chapters to make reference to this aspect of their studies. Here our primary interest is with the contributions they make to the continuing debate about the nature of Frost's achievement, about his stature as a modern poet. They bring into the
1960's with considerable consistency the duality inherent in the appraisals of the poet since Ezra Pound's 1913 qualified praise of *A Boy's Will*. Nitchie's case is the more persuasive of the two, for the truth of the matter is that Frost does not have a system in any of the usual senses of that word, not even the pastoral tradition, in spite of the fact that, as Lynen so ably demonstrates, many of his poems can be intelligently and meaningfully read in light of that tradition. For it is a tradition imposed upon the poetry from without, not a carefully conceived structure giving shape to the poetic development from year to year. On the other hand, Nitchie's emphasis upon Frost's lack of commitment is not altogether satisfactory. Although the terminology is troublesome, Frost has made a "commitment," the difficulty arising from the fact that his commitment is to "non-commitment." The difference between this view and that of Nitchie and of Yvor Winters, among others, is to make Frost something other than a spiritual drifter. He has made a choice and a commitment. One is, of course, free to consider that choice a very bad one, even a disastrous one, but the evidence clearly indicates that the choice was made early and never substantially changed. And it is the nature of this choice which makes Frost the most modern of poets.

Frost's regionalism, his affinities with William Dean
Howells and the prose realists, provided him with the means of making poetry of the materials of an age that was forcing upon other poets the decision to turn away from it, to turn backward in time to tradition or to turn inward to the creation of individual myth. Frost's achievement is not that he is a better poet than Eliot or Yeats but that he found a way other than theirs of writing poetry in the twentieth century. Yeats and Eliot and even Wallace Stevens, the poets most often held up as the most modern of modern poets, all follow the pattern of the nineteenth century of "replacing" what had been lost to the poet as a result of the scientific, industrial and political revolutions of the age. Precisely what it was that had been lost is difficult to define. "Faith" is the best word, though, of course, too general to be fully satisfactory. But it is the loss being lamented as early as Wordsworth's cry that he would rather be a "pagan suckl'd in some creed outworn" so that he might have glimpses that would make him "less forlorn." It is the loss lamented in "Dover Beach" and in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" where the poet finds himself between two worlds "one dead,/The other powerless to be born." It is the loss most forlornly felt by J. Alfred Prufrock who has "heard the mermaids singing, each to each," and who is about as sure as Prufrock can be that they will not sing to him. Frost's modernity rests primarily in the fact that, having
experienced the loss affecting his contemporaries, he turns neither to Eliot's "chambers of the sea" nor to Yeats' prophetic vision of some "rough beast, its hour come round at last," slouching "towards Bethlehem to be born," but rather to the "real" world, to what Howells would describe as the "poor Real life" of the largely impoverished countryside of New England. It is a view of life sometimes sinister, even tragic; it is a view sometimes characterized by unqualified joy; but as it is first of all a view of life "bound to no thesis," it is largely an ambivalent view focusing for the most part upon the large body of experiences between the extremes.
Chapter III

THESIS AND ANTITHESIS: THE POLAR EXTREMES OF THE SPECTRUM

The Trilling-Adams episode is useful in a general sense to the extent that it is representative of one of the main characteristics of the body of criticism of Frost's poetry. Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams find common ground in their mutual admiration of Frost, but each insists on his personal view of the poet with only a very begrudging acknowledgment of the importance of that "other" Frost admired for all the wrong reasons. Thus it has gone from the beginning. But the Trilling-Adams episode is also useful in a more particular sense in the question which it raises about the poetry; the episode places polar limits, as it were, on our reading of the poetry as we question the validity of Trilling's Sophoclean poet who "made plain . . . the terrible things of human life," and of the antithesis posited by Adams' vehement rejection of that view. Alvan S. Ryan believes that the poetry will support these extremes, and it is to an examination of this view that the present chapter is devoted.

In the light of the responses to Frost's second volume, North of Boston, Adams' passionate and unqualified rejection
of Trilling's description of Frost as a terrifying poet is, as we noted earlier, strange to say the least. That is, while he is taking issue with Trilling, the newcomer to the ranks of Frost's admirers, he is at the same time taking issue implicitly with a long line of Frost's admirers who, beginning with Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, saw the poet primarily as a harsh, uncompromising realist. There is general agreement that North of Boston is Frost's most impressive book, particularly in terms of its unity of tone, and there is general agreement too that the tone is darkly somber in its unrelentingly objective study of characters caught and cruelly twisted by circumstances. This is the volume in which Frost tells the story of the death of Silas, the hired man, who returns to the home of a former employer to die. John, the employer, not happy about having the old man on his hands, but knowing, however, that he cannot turn him away, is provoked to the chilling definition of home as "the place when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." But the fact that Silas is taken in and does, at least, die at "home" makes this grim study almost happy beside the unresolved anguish of "Home Burial," "The Fear," and "The Self-Seeker." And the dark tone is even further deepened by the coldly restrained madness of the woman in "A Servant to Servants," who, explaining to people camping on her land (the servants of the title) how she is driven to the
verge of despair by the meaningless and unrelenting monotonous of her daily routine, confesses that she had been once sent away to an asylum. She goes on then to explain that her being sent away stands in contrast to the treatment of her uncle, her father's brother, who, also "mad," was kept at home. Surely the term "terrifying" is not too strong for the poet who has his character remember childhood stories telling how her uncle was kept caged in a place made "comfortable with straw,/Like a beast's stall," and whose memory is seared by the imagination of what marriage had meant for her mother:

And just when he was at the height,
Father and mother married, and mother came,
A bride, to help take care of such a creature,
And accommodate her young life to his,
That was what marrying father meant to her.
She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful
By his shouts in the night.

North of Boston does indeed "make plain . . . the terrible things of human life." And if this were all there were of the dark view in Frost's poetry, it would suffice to give considerable merit to Trilling's thesis. There is in the poetry, to be sure, a fairly steady development away from the grim realism of the second volume in the direction of, in his least significant poetry, whimsy, and in his more serious poetry, ironic detachment. "Brown's Descent," in Mountain Interval (1917), is a good example of a tonal extreme at the opposite end of the spectrum from the extreme
defined in North of Boston. "Brown's Descent" is not without its seriousness; its theme is Frost's central theme, the confrontation of man and the natural world. Brown, caught by an icy wind, is blown from his hilltop farm down the icy slope to the river road two miles below his house. He stays on his feet all the way down, and from a distance all that can be seen of his descent is the wild gyrations of the lantern marking in the night his frantic flailing to keep his precarious balance. But he does stay on his feet, he reaches the bottom intact, he bows "with grace to the natural law" and then sets about returning home the long way around to avoid facing the gale coming down the hill. Brown, of course, triumphs over nature in the limited, carefully defined sense that by means of indirection he accomplishes his goal of returning home in spite of the superior physical force of nature working against that accomplishment.

The resolution here of the confrontation between man and nature is echoed in many of Frost's poems, and it is in its cautious optimism more Emersonian than Sophoclean. Even more importantly in the present context, its tone is antithetical to the tone of "A Servant to Servants" and "Home Burial." In "Brown's Descent" Frost is still the regional poet; Brown is a New England farmer facing the icy New England countryside. But there is no harshness of tone here, no grim, terrifying reality.
The movement away from the harsh tone of *North of Boston* exemplified by "Brown's Descent" is indicative of a major direction of Frost's poetry from early to late. It is not a simple, straightforward movement: in the same volume with "Brown's Descent" is "Out, Out," one of Frost's most grim poems to which we shall return later. But in general, the later regional poetry tends to be lighter in tone as a result of irony, and perhaps all too often, whimsy. George W. Nitchie, echoing the attitude of various critics who have taken exception to the tone of much of the poetry from *New Hampshire* on, says that "the important question is not whether Frost is a good and important poet, but rather why a good and important poet should, with increasing persistence, take refuge in the arch, the cute, the complacent, the trivial, gradually abandoning areas of proven strength . . ."¹ The title poem of *New Hampshire* is frequently cited for its whimsical tone² and in that volume "The Star-Splitter" is very much like "Brown's Descent" in its playful treatment of a serious subject. For the tone


²John F. Lynen notes that "New Hampshire" has been much neglected and that "at first reading everything seems playfully irrelevant." The emphasis on the poem has been largely on that playfulness which Lynen feels has misled many readers who fail to see that "the poem is . . . of great importance, for in it he gives us the fullest and most direct account of the place of regionalism in his poetry." See *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, pp. 61, ff.
established by Brown's wild descent down the icy hillside
is matched by Brad McLaughlin's burning of his house in
order to buy a telescope with the insurance so that he can
"satisfy a life-long curiosity/About our place among the
infinities." This tone becomes particularly pronounced in
_A Further Range_ with its "White-Tailed Hornet," "Department-
al," and "To A Thinker," the last of which admonishes the
reader not to use his "mind too hard." Frost's last volume,
_In The Clearing_ (1962), is the farthest removed in tone from
North of Boston. Like the earlier volume, it too is
characterized by a unity of tone not unfairly represented
by its witty epigram:

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

Trilling's view of Frost can be most dramatically and
most obviously supported by the unified dark tone of _North
of Boston_. And, in spite of the progressive lightening of
tone from that point on, there are poems, character studies
and dramatic narratives, some specifically regional, others
not, which can also be used in that support. For example,
there are in _Mountain Interval_, "An Old Man's Winter Night,"
"The Hill Wife," "Out, Out," and "The Vanishing Red"; in
_A Further Range_, "The Figure in the Doorway," and "Provide,
Provide"; and in _A Witness Tree_, "The Subverted Flower."
These poems are like the dark poems of _North of Boston_ in
that all are harsh, realistic pieces, set either specifically
in New England or in an unspecified environment of comparatively little importance to the poem. In the latter case, as, for example, in "A Subverted Flower," Frost is not specifically the regionalist, but he is, nevertheless, still the realist, focusing upon objective character analysis. Isolating these poems, those of *North of Boston* and the other grimly realistic poems, marshalls a fairly substantial support for considering Frost a Sophoclean poet. And yet if this were all there were of the dark view, we would have to admit that the great bulk of his poetry must be read either in support of Adams' antithetical view, or as representative of a poetic vision between these extremes. But this, of course, is not all there is of the dark view, for we have thus far considered only Frost's realistic character studies, most of which are regional pieces, and which constitute but one of the two most important kinds of his poetry. The other, and it is the more important of the two, is descriptive, lyric and dramatic, and is concerned primarily with man's relationship with the natural world.

There are two poems in *North of Boston* which are distinctly different from all the others. They are "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile," both of which are studies of the relationship between man and nature, a study begun in *A Boy's Will* and continued throughout Frost's career. The natural world figures prominently, of course,
in other poems in *North of Boston*, but the focus in all of the others is not upon the man-nature relationship, upon what Harold H. Watts calls the "dialogue with nature," but rather upon a social dialogue, between two neighbors in "Mending Wall," a husband and wife in "The Death of the Hired Man," a salesman and a professor in "A Hundred Collars," and so on. "The Mountains," "Blueberries," and "The Black Cottage," focus with almost the same intensity upon the natural world as do "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile," except that it is only in the last two that all social intercourse is eliminated—there is one man and his dream of apple trees in the one, and one man and a wood pile in the other. It is this dialogue with nature, carried on in these two poems, with which the most significant portion of Frost's poetry is concerned, and the focus of our attention for the rest of this study will be primarily upon those poems in which that dialogue is defined.

The poems in which Frost's dialogue with nature is carried on are spread out across what Alvan S. Ryan calls the wide spectrum of his poetry, encompassing at the extremes those poems which support the opposed views of Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams. The poems of the social dialogue, like the specifically regional character studies of

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North of Boston, support Trilling's thesis in the early poetry and Adams' thesis in the later poetry as the tone lightens and the grim objectivity of "A Servant to Servants" becomes the ironic affirmation of "Brown's Descent." The poems of the natural dialogue do not change in a similar fashion from the early to the late poetry. There is from the very beginning an ambivalent attitude toward nature which results in poems representative of both the Emersonian and Sophoclean extremes, as well as in poems representative of the middle ground between those extremes. This ambivalence gives rise to a thematic ambiguity, particularly in those poems at the center of the spectrum, making these poems the really controversial, "difficult" poems of the Frost canon. There can be little doubt about the intention of "A Servant to Servants." One may not agree that it is a terrifying poem, but such disagreement rests, not upon the interpretation of the poem, but upon one's definition of "terrifying." Such is not the case with those poems at the very center of the spectrum of the natural dialogue, with, for example, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

There have been many attempts to account for the multiplicity of meaning in Frost's poetry; to define precisely just how he uses metaphor, analogy and symbol. The
unsatisfactory term "natural symbolism" has been used, and "open-ended," a more meaningful though cumbersome term, has been specifically applied to the meaning of "Acquainted with the Night." Cleanth Brooks points to a central factor in the matter in his study of Frost in Modern Poetry and the Tradition:

A thoughtful reading will show that Frost's poetry, however salty and homely, is scarcely direct. The casual reader may receive an impression of directness because Frost works so constantly in terms of anecdote, incident, and character sketch—elements which have no special associations with the pure technique of poetry. But the poetry of Frost does not inhere in these elements; on the contrary, he employs these elements as means to the end of poetry.

It is the "impression of directness" with which we are most concerned here, for it is this impression which accounts not only for Frost's great success with the "popular" reader at large but also with the more narrowly defined popular audience with which we are more specifically concerned, with, for example, J. Donald Adams and his identification of Frost with Emerson. In the most direct sense, all but a few of Frost's poems which are concerned with the natural dialogue are Emersonian, even Wordsworthian in tone. It is a tone positive and affirmative at best and quietly resign-

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6 p. 110.
ed even at its worst, but it is surface tone and misleading when it results in equating the more complex and less positively optimistic poems like "Stopping by Woods," "After Apple-Picking," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," and "The Wood-Pile," with the simpler, unequivocally affirmative lyrics like "A Young Birch," "The Hillsidethaw," and "The Pasture."

John F. Lynen's pastoral thesis provides another helpful explanation of the characteristic with which we are here concerned. His thesis, as we have seen earlier, is that Frost's poetry can be most meaningfully read in terms of pastoral art which draws "upon our feeling that the rural world is representative of human life in general."

Pursuing this point, Lynen provides the following specific explanation of the functioning of the pastoral mode in Frost's poetry:

He says nothing of other places and other times— he gives us only the minute particulars of his own immediate experience; yet . . . in "Stopping By Woods," the things described seem everywhere to point beyond the rural world. The effect is to create a remarkable depth of reference. One senses a powerful symbolism at work in the poem, but when one attempts to specify just what the images refer to their meaning proves too delicate, too elusive to capture.  

Further on in his discussion, Lynen explains why metaphor is not a dominant element in Frost's poetry:

7The Pastoral Art, p. 19.
Metaphor establishes an identity between diverse things, while the pastoralist's technique is to keep the image and the thing it resembles separate so that they may be compared. The result is that pastoralism favors an analogical form, a fact illustrated by its persistent tendency toward allegory—that is, extended analogy.\(^8\)

The problem of meaning in Frost's poetry arises primarily from its deceptive sense of directness which belies the "remarkable depth of reference" in the poetry. The depth of reference is greatest in those poems at the center of the spectrum, the problem of interpretation becoming less acute as one moves away from the thematic center. At one extreme away from that center are those poems which are Emersonian or Wordsworthian in theme and tone; at the other are those poems which can be added to the realistic dramatic narratives, especially those of North of Boston, to support Trilling's view of Frost. One of the best illustrations of the first extreme is "A Young Birch" which qualifies for Alvan S. Ryan's category of poems which are concerned with the "celebration of form" and the "radiance of design in the natural order."\(^9\) At the other extreme is "Design" which, focusing upon the natural world with the same kind of initial innocence, develops implications antithetical to those in "A Young Birch." Because these poems

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\(^8\)Ibid., pp. 23-24.

serve as such clear illustrations of the limits of Frost's dialogue with nature, it would be well to have them set down in part for comparison. "A Young Birch," which is in Steeple Bush (1947), is almost purely descriptive for the first nine lines of its total of twenty-two:

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

The poem makes a characteristic turn after a playful, epigrammatic tenth line to bring man onto the scene in terms of someone who recalls sparing the birch when it was "no bigger than a cane." As it grew, it became obvious that it was meant to be spared:

The most efficient help you ever hired
Would know that it was there to be admired,
And zeal would not be thanked that cut it down
When you were reading books or out of town.
It was a thing of beauty and was sent
To live its life out as an ornament.

Not only is the poem clear, simple and specific; it even sounds like Emerson, particularly the last two lines which remind one of the poet's experience recorded in "The Rhodora," and of the conclusion drawn from that experience that "Beauty is its own excuse for being."

"Design," from A Further Range (1937), is just as clear, simple, and specific in its delineation of the
opposite extreme of theme and tone:

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches broth--
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

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

Neither of these poems requires explication. Both give
the impression of directness characteristic of Frost's
poetry, and here the impression is a valid one. "A Young
Birch" is clearly not the work of a terrifying poet. "De-
sign" is just as clearly not the work of an Emersonian
poet who has completely resolved the problem of evil. One
may again object to the term "terrifying" to describe the
poet of such a poem, but the dark implications are clear and
vigorous enough to make such disagreement a matter of
semantic quibbling. And there is a 'sizable group of poems
which belong just as unquestionably to each of the two ex-
tremes. Poems in much the same vein as "A Young Birch" are
scattered throughout Frost's poetry, early and late. In A
Boy's Will are "Flower-Gathering," "Rose Pogonias," and
"The Vantage Point"; in Mountain Interval, "Pea Brush,"
"Putting in the Seed," "A Time to Talk," and "The Cow in
Apple Time"; in New Hampshire, "Dust of Snow," "Blue-Butterfly Day," and "A Hillside Thaw." The opening poem of West-Running Brook is an interesting poem in this group because of the very subtle shading away from the simple directness of "A Young Birch" in the direction of "Stopping by Woods." The poem consists of two six-line, rhymed stanzas. In the first, the pools, soon to be sucked up by the roots of the trees, are described. The second contains a subtly ominous note in the form of an admonition to the trees about their dark potentialities:

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods--
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.

Frost has moved in his dialogue with nature in this poem toward the center of the spectrum. "Spring Pools" is hardly a dark poem, but there are faint echoes here of the dominant tone struck by poems from the opposite extreme of the spectrum. Before turning to that other extreme, there are several other poems to be identified as belonging unquestionably to the Emersonian side of the spectrum.

"The Tuft of Flowers," in A Boy's Will, and "Two Look at Two," in New Hampshire, are Frost's two most overtly romantic nature poems. Many of the poems listed above in the category with "A Young Birch" are implicitly affirma-
tive about man's relationship to nature. The description of the young birch is such that even without the didactic closing lines the intention of the poem would be clear: man finds meaning in natural beauty, he establishes an affirmative relationship with nature by his appreciation of its beauty. There is but a very fine line between the intention of poems in this category and Coleridge's conclusion that "He prayeth best who loveth best/All things both great and small." Such is the case too with "The Tuft of Flowers" and "Two Lock at Two," except that in these poems the intention is made clearly explicit. In "The Tuft of Flowers" the poet tells of going into the fields to "turn the grass after one/who mowed it in the dew before the sun," and of a desire for a sense of fellowship with that now absent one:

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been,—alone,

'As all must be,' I said within my heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

As he works alone, the poet's eye is caught by a butterfly which circles in seeming bewilderment about the new-mown field, finally turning and directing the poet's eye to a "tuft of flowers beside a brook,/A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared." The poet concludes that the mower had spared the flowers out of love for them which establishes a bond between the poet and unknown worker who has
gone before him. The butterfly and the tuft of flowers have been agents in delivering to the poet "a message from the dawn":

That made me hear the wakening birds around,
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground,
And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
So that henceforth I worked no more alone.

The poem closes with a moral tag in which the poet speaks imaginatively to the departed worker:

'Men work together.' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

Frost has been criticized because his "sense of nature is so like Wordsworth's that he does not play in our time the role Wordsworth played in his," and because he consequent ly "leads us away from rather than to the center of the preoccupations of our time." The group of poems we are now considering offer the best support for this view, particularly "The Tuft of Flowers," which in terms of physical setting, situation, theme, tone, and the imagined sound of the "long scythe whispering to the ground" sounds so very much like Wordsworth's "The Reaper."

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11 John F. Lynen is essentially correct in his appraisal of the relationship between Frost and Wordsworth. He says that "whereas Wordsworth sees in nature a mystical kinship with the human mind, Frost views nature as essentially alien. Instead of exploring the margin where emotions and appearances blend, he looks at nature across an impassable
One of Frost's most successful poems, "Two Look at Two," also belongs to that end of the spectrum of the dialogue with nature where the terms Emersonian and Wordsworthian are most valid. It is a more complex poem than most of those with which we are here grouping it, echoing, as does "Spring Pools," the ambivalent richness at the center of the spectrum. The poem has more integrity, more emotional honesty than either "The Tuft of Flowers" or "A Young Birch," both of which end with moral tags that, while consistent with the experiences of the poems, are not emotionally or intellectually demanded by those experiences. In "Two Look at Two," the conclusion is not an outside moral commentary but an emotional state fairly earned by the experience of the poem. That experience has to do with a couple walking for the love of the walk and the wildness up a mountainside just before dark. The forty-two lines of blank verse of the poem are fairly evenly structured into three parts, the first two of which rise to near-resolutions in wave-like patterns, followed by the third wave which culminates with the real resolution. In the first section of the poem, the couple
move to a point on the mountainside which they feel is as far as they dare go with night coming on. They decide at this point that their expedition is over: "'This is all,' they sighed, '/Goodnight to woods.'" But just as they are about to turn away, they see a doe looking at them across a wall. Since they are standing perfectly still, she is not frightened and, after looking straight at them for several moments, begins to move slowly away. The second near-resolution comes as they decide that "'This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?'" The third section of the poem begins by answering that question in the form of a buck which appears on the scene quietly following the doe. He too looks for a moment at the man and woman and then walks unfrightened away from them along the wall. The poem then closes with its valid emotional resolution:

'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

The great wave going over them, like the message in the tuft of flowers and the near-worship of the young birch, is the result of a response to nature which may be meaningfully and reasonably labeled "romantic." And if one were to stop with these poems, one might be persuaded that Frost's view of nature was indeed very much like Wordsworth's and Emerson's. But the greater bulk of the
poems which make up the dialogue with nature serve to more than balance this impression. Frost's most important poems, to which we shall turn in the next chapter, are neither terrifying nor unquestionably affirmative in the Emersonian sense of that word. And there is a fairly significant group of poems which like "Design" serve to define the antithesis of the Emersonian view of nature. One of the best and most explicit of these is "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" which, like "Spring Pools" and "Two Look at Two," is richer and more complex than those relatively direct poems "A Young Birch" and "Design" so clearly representative of the polar extremes of the spectrum. "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" is not a terrifying poem, but it is clearly a rejection of the romantic view of nature, more specifically of the pathetic fallacy which would ascribe human sentiment to the phoebes of the poem, who frequent the barn, the only building standing on the site of a burned-out, deserted homestead. The poet, who views the desolate scene nostalgically, imagines that the murmur of the birds flying in and out of the barn sounds like a human sigh which comes "From too much dwelling on what has been."

But the poet is a realist, versed in country things, and

12This interpretation was suggested by a discussion of the poem in An Approach To Literature, ed. Cleanth Brooks, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1964), pp. 344-45.
he rejects the pathetic fallacy in favor of a realistic appraisal of the birds' relationship to the scene which is desolate only in human terms:

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.

There does not seem to be any basis for questioning the thematic intention of "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." And there are numerous poems similar to this one in that they suggest a specific application of theme to the broader question of Frost's aesthetic or philosophical principles, although in most instances such application is not entirely unquestionable. An early poem, "Pan With Us," for example, is clear enough in its acknowledgement of the disappearance of the tradition which had made it possible for Pan to play his oaten pipes:

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

What is not quite so clear is just how one is to define the pagan mirth which has been lost and the new terms of worth which have replaced it. John F. Lynen feels that the lines here are "directly relevant" to Frost's verse and that they raise the question about writing pastoral poetry in an age in which the pastoral tradition has lost its
This is, of course, reasonable, but it is also reasonable and more important to view the pipes of pagan mirth no longer of value in the modern world as representative of the romantic poet's affinity with nature, that affinity which Wordsworth describes in terms of the pagan sensibility in "The World Is Too Much With Us." Read this way, the poem may be placed beside "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" as another relatively explicit rejection of the romantic response to nature.

"Hyla Brook" and "Oven Bird" with their emphasis upon a less happy state of affairs which has replaced an era of greater beauty, and by implication joy, also suggest a relevance to the overt recognition by Frost of a distinction between his and the romantic response to nature. "Hyla Brook" is set in late spring when the poet's brook has "run out of song and speed." It has dried up and is "A brook to none but who remember long." The closing

13The Pastoral Art, p. 18.

14A study by William H. Pritchard suggested that these two poems might be meaningfully read as they are here. Pritchard associates these two with "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" considering the three as poems which "define a central attitude toward experience which we encounter in Frost's poetry, an attitude that can be found in a poem as early as 'Reluctance' and which reaches full articulation in later ones like 'The Most of It' and 'Directive'." See "Diminished Nature," Mass. Review, I (May 1960), 488.
lines suggest the analogy between the dried up waters of
the brook and the exhausted tradition which makes it
impossible for Pan to play:

This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.

The "Oven Bird" is set in mid-summer when all the flowers
are gone and all the birds but it are hushed. There is a
melancholy tone arising from the emphasis upon the changed
state and pace of the natural world since spring. And
here too it is the closing lines which remind us of Pan's
question about the dilemma of the post-romantic poet.
Only here there is an answer to the question which applies
so meaningfully to Frost's poetic posture, to his frame
of mind, as to strongly suggest that he intened it to so
apply:

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

We have moved in our discussion away from our
earlier, simpler distinction between the extremes of
Frost's dialogue with nature. The poems we have been dis-
cussing are neither dark poems nor Emersonian or
Wordsworthian nature poems. But they seem, especially
"The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" and "Pan
With Us," to clearly indicate the questionable validity
of describing Frost's view of nature as like that of
either Emerson or Wordsworth. And, of course, independent of these seemingly overt statements about an attitude toward nature, there are those clearly dark nature poems to be grouped along with "Design" at the very opposite pole from "Two Look at Two" and "A Tuft of Flowers." At that dark extreme, Frost's view of nature is hardly romantic. Yet the persistent association of Frost as a nature poet with Wordsworth and Emerson is understandable for several reasons. First, there are those poems representative of that polar extreme of the spectrum. Secondly, Frost's most important nature poetry, which is the subject of the next chapter, is characterized by an ambivalence which makes the romantic association possible. And third, Frost's poetic posture even in the darkest poems is characterized by a poise very much like that of Wordsworth's and Emerson's. That is, like the romantic poets, he reacts to the world he sees with a certain equanimity even though it is a world quite markedly distinct from theirs. Frost sees nature through twentieth century eyes, but he reacts to the frighteningly expansive view with a stoic posture that is traditional in the broadest sense of the word. The modernity and the traditionalism find expression as perception and response in much of Frost's poetry but nowhere better than in the closing stanza of "Desert Places":
They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Frost here takes note both of the physical vastness of the
universe and of the characteristically though not ex-
clusively modern preoccupation with the desert places of
the psyche. But the poet, in something other than a
modern posture, comes to terms with what he sees, and the
poem ends with an air of resolution and a tone of accept-
ance which tends to offset the darkness of the vision of
the first three stanzas.

The poet's sense of alienation in the snow-filled
woods of "Desert Places" is unalleviated except for the
tone of acceptance of the last stanza. It is, as a result,
one of Frost's darkest nature poems. Darker, for example,
than those two with which it is frequently associated
thematically, "Acquainted With The Night" and "Come In."
The dark vision is of course very much in evidence in both
of these poems, but, at the same time, both are charac-
terized by something other than the complete sense of
desolation of "Desert Places." "Acquainted With The Night"
is not so much a nature poem as the others being consider-
ed here except in the sense that the darkness of the night
is in a very real sense the natural world of the poem.
But the darkness is not as overwhelming as is the loneli-

ness in "Desert Places"; the speaker is in control and his final rational judgement on the experience further diminishes its frightening potentialities. The "pillar dark" of "Come In" is held at bay too by the poet's rational control of his destiny, indicated by his choice of stars over the dark of the woods. Both of these poems, so often called Frost's dark poems, are characterized by the ambivalence distinguishing those poems closest to the center of the spectrum, as is, in particular, "Stopping by Woods," and we shall reserve further discussion of the two until we turn to a consideration of that center.

Much more unquestionably representative of the terrifying extreme of the spectrum are those poems which picture the brutal savageness of the non-human world such as "Bereft," "Once by the Pacific," and "Out, Out." In "Bereft," the speaker becomes frightened as he realizes he is alone and begins to imagine that the forces of nature are gathering ominously around him:

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
.......
Somber clouds on the West were massed.
Out in the porch's sagging floor
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.

In "Once by the Pacific" the speaker, overwhelmed by a sense of the destructive power of the ocean feels

.... as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
In "Out, Out," a boy, helping his father cut wood with a power saw, is distracted by the call to supper and puts his hand into the saw, which,

As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting.

Again the duality of the modern perception and the stoic response is in evidence and the poem ends in a state of rest, with a sense of resolution. The boy dies and the members of his family

... since they

Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

This tone of resolution is a characteristic of Frost's poetry which has consistently led critics of Frost, friends and foes alike, astray, although in this particular instance not even the resolution could be called Wordsworthian. A more meaningful description here might make use of the terms employed to describe John Crowe Ransom's intention in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" to "mask the savage irony" of existence.15

15 In a discussion of the poem in Brooks and Warren's Understanding Poetry, pp. 236, ff. "Out, Out" makes an interesting comparison with Ransom's poem. The circumstances of the poems are similar, both dealing with the unexpected death of a child. More importantly, both are highly effective examples of tonal control. Ransom's control depends upon his ironic use of cliches, particularly the "brown study" and upon the fairy-tale quality of the fretted geese provoked by the princess figure of the "little Lady with rod." Although the basis of Frost's
The savage irony underlying the frightfully cold resolution of "Out, Out" makes it perhaps Frost's most terrifying poem, and it is certainly one of his most finely controlled. However, before considering that control further, we must first consider whether it is valid to use this poem as we have done, both as an example of one of Frost's terrifying realistic poems and as one of his terrifying nature poems. Obviously, as we noted earlier, the natural world is in a very real sense a part of Frost's regional character studies, as it is a part of all human experience. That is, man is part of the natural world and any consideration of human experience involves directly or indirectly some consideration of nature. But in poems like "Home Burial," "A Servant to Servants," and "The Death of the Hired Man," the natural world functions almost exclusively as setting. The focus of attention in them is upon human nature in the form of character analysis or in the form of the social dialogue between characters. In those poems in North of Boston such as "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile" in which the dialogue with the natural world is resumed, the possibility of identifying the speaker in regional terms disappears almost complete-
ly. And this is true for the most part of the other poems in which the natural dialogue is carried on. The speakers in "Stopping by Woods," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "Desert Places," "Bereft," and even of "Birches," are not identifiable within the context of these poems as New Englanders. The speaker in each of these poems is the poet, whose identity can only be established in terms of the examination we are now making of the total spectrum of the natural dialogue; he is not identifiable as a New Englander any more than as a southerner or a westerner, the two primary requisites for most of his experiences being woods and snow. Frost's regionalism, like his "romanticism," has been overemphasized.  

The poet or speaker in most of the nature poems can only be meaningfully characterized in terms of the posture which makes possible the range of responses to nature from those registered in "Two Look at Two" to "Desert Places," and our explanation of that posture must wait until we have

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16 Except for the titles of the early volumes, North of Boston and New Hampshire, in particular, and those poems which specify New England geographical features, a persuasive case, it seems to me, can be made against the great emphasis that has been placed upon Frost's regionalism. The taciturnity and ironic detachment which characterize his New Englanders also characterize the country people of the Tennessee hills and of the deep South. Frost's characters are American rural characters usually of north European stock and are representative of such people scattered throughout the country. Faulkner and Frost could exchange characters in many instances with no loss or strain to either.
completed our study of the total range of the spectrum. "Out, Out" is an exceptional poem in several ways, one of which is that it is both very precisely regional and one of Frost's terrifying, perhaps his most terrifying, nature poem.

The synthesis in this poem of objective realism and of the dialogue with nature is made possible by the fact that it is a realistic narrative rather than a dramatic monologue or dialogue. The poem is specifically regional, set in sight of the "Five mountain ranges one behind the other" that stretch "far into Vermont," and it is characterized by the harsh realism of the poems of North of Boston. But unlike most of Frost's realistic, regional pieces, the episode here is given to us entirely in terms of the narrator's consciousness, the subject matter of the poem becoming thereby part of the outside reality to which the narrator is responding. The narrator-poet here is not the absolutely objective reporter of "The Death of the Hired Man" or "Home Burial." Rather, he is very much on the scene in a subjective sense as he confesses that he wishes that the boy had been given the half-hour free from work before supper, "the half hour/That a boy counts so much when saved from work," which in this case would also have saved his life. The fine tonal balance of the poem results from the conflicting emotional responses of the
narrator to the tragedy of the boy's accident and death. The tone becomes highly sentimental when the boy speaks to his sister imploringly: "Don't let him cut my hand off—/
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him sister!" But this emotional appeal is cut short with great skill by the one word comment of the narrator which follows it immediately. Clephant Brooks has said that Frost's most successful poems are "successes in the handling of tone." The abrupt shutting off of the boy's direct appeal to our sympathies with the expressive understatement, "So," is perhaps Frost's most skillfully effective example of tonal control. From that word to the end of the poem, everything is again objective description with the very important exception of the final coldly understated explanation of the action of those who "were not the one dead."

John F. Lynen reads this poem reasonably in support of his pastoral thesis. He feels that the poem takes on added meaning if one sees that the loss of the boy's hand in his particular environment is even more significant than it would be in one which makes less demands upon physical wholeness and well-being. He says, for example, that "in every context the hand is associated with power and creativity; in the boy's world, however, it is not just

a symbol of these things, it is quite literally the instrument." To see "all spoiled" in this context, is to experience a flash of intuitive insight in which the boy realizes "that in losing the hand he has lost the possibility of ever becoming fully a man, not only in the sense of being masculine, but in the sense of achieving the completeness of his nature." This is a persuasive, sensible reading of the poem, but it moves, as explications of Frost's poetry so often do, away from the real poignance and power of the poem in an attempt to fit it into some larger scheme or pattern. The appeal of this poem, of the boy holding up his hand "Half in appeal, but half as if to keep/The life from spilling," is a very fundamental appeal, as is the case with the best of Frost's poetry. It is a mistake to try to make the poetry more intellectual than it really is, as it is a mistake to assume that the artistic sensibility responsible for the poetry is of second-rate intelligence because the appeal is more visceral than cerebral. It is a mistake to believe, as, for example, Yvor Winters seems to believe, that Frost appeals to the instincts and to the emotions in his poetry.

18 The Pastoral Art, p. 33.

19 It is usually pointed out that the title is an allusion to Macbeth's well known soliloquy.
because he himself has not thought very clearly. For the shaping of this poem, its fine control and tonal balance, are the products of the intellect. Frost knows what he is about, which is to give artistic utterance to an experience illustrative of the savage irony of an existence in which the non-human world, the "natural" world snarls and rattles hungrily in anticipation of the inevitable human error and of the equally inevitable consequences, the spilling of human blood.

North of Boston was Frost's first book published in America, and his reputation at home began with a focus upon that book, rather than upon A Boy's Will. This reversal of chronology has surely in itself had some effect upon the shaping of his reputation, although both in terms

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20 There are various interesting affinities between Frost and Hemingway, one illustrative one, I believe, being the similarity of attitude expressed about the simple directness of the styles of each. Jean Paul Sartre's appraisal of Hemingway in the following passage sounds very much like the attitude frequently given expression about the non-intellectual basis of Frost's style: "When Hemingway writes his short, disjointed sentences, he is only obeying his temperament. He writes what he sees. But when Camus uses Hemingway's technique, he is conscious and deliberate, because it seems to him upon reflection the best way to express his philosophical experience of the absurdity of the world." Quoted in "American Novelists in French Eyes," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVIII (August 1946), 114.
of its individual poems and as a unified whole, the second book is considerably more impressive than the highly derivative first. Frost emerged in *North of Boston* as a distinctly new and vigorous voice in American poetry, as a poet whose attention was upon the subject matter so popular with the prose realists of the period, upon the objective analysis of specifically regional characters. And so Frost was labeled early in his public career the regional poet, the harsh, unrelenting, New England realist.

The unified tone of that second volume is dark and somber; the focus of attention is upon deprivation, isolation, fear, insanity and death. Thematically and tonally, *North of Boston* stands as the most persuasive evidence that Frost's vision is essentially a dark and terrifying one.

Subsequent volumes were to indicate that the posture of the realistic regionalist, however, was not a static one. The poet moved more and more into the poetry as a distinct persona, and as he did so the prevailing tone lightened and the theme became either whimsically playful or ironically affirmative. And so as early as "Brown's Descent" in *Mountain Interval* (1917), the vision of the realistic regionalist can no longer be considered dark. From that early point to the end of the career, the objective and harsh realist develops into the New England "character," skeptical, ironic and detached, who comments
from inside the poem on the foibles of man, particularly as a social animal. It is important to see that the later Frost is not a distinct regionalist in the sense that he was in North of Boston. As he changes from realist to satirist, his focus changes from the study of character to the study of social institutions, particularly government and science, in such poems as "Departmental," "Build Soil," "Why Wait for Science," and "The Planners."

A kind of culmination to this development comes in the two masques, "A Masque of Reason" (1945), and "A Masque of Mercy" (1947). The stories of Job and Jonah are far removed from the story of farmer Brown's "descent" down the icy New England hillside. But there is a similarity in technique and, more importantly, of ironic tone which establishes an important affinity among the three.

"Brown's Descent" is a playful treatment of a serious theme; the masques have been damned and praised on the same grounds. 21 The main point here is that the masques along

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21 Evaluations of the masques have varied widely. Randall Jarrell found "A Masque of Reason" a "bewilderingly corny affair" (from Poetry and the Age, p. 32, quoted in Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 200). Sister Mary Jeremy Finnegan in "Frost's 'Masque of Mercy'," Catholic World, CLXXXVI (1958), 357-61, takes both poems very seriously, considering them "an imperishable record of a great poet's greatest avowal." George Nitchie uses the two masques to support his thesis that Frost failed to make "that mortal commitment" to his poetry which Yeats made to his. For Nitchie, the "meaning of Jonah's death, of Job's revelation, slips away from us." Human Values, p. 211.
with most of the dramatic narratives after *North of Boston* lend support to J. Donald Adams' indignant rejection of the notion that Frost is a terrifying poet.

Even before he had begun his early regional character studies, Frost had begun his dialogue with nature, which unlike the regional pieces does not significantly change thematically or tonally from the early to the late poetry. The dialogue is directed by an ambivalent attitude toward nature from the very beginning. In *A Boy's Will*, "Storm Fear" is similar to "Out, Out" in terms of technique, theme and tone. Though not as specifically regional as the later poem, "Storm Fear" is set in a rural, snow-filled environment. But its regional and realistic characteristics are modified by the presence of the poet's consciousness through which we see the storm and feel the fear it engenders in his heart which "owns a doubt/Whether 'tis in us to arise with day/And save ourselves unaided." "Storm Fear," "Pan With Us," and "A Tuft of Flowers" set the pattern in *A Boy's Will* for the spectrum of the natural dialogue that is to continue throughout Frost's career. The limits of that dialogue are to be more explicitly and more dramatically defined later by "Two Look at Two," "Putting in the Seed," "Spring Pools," and "A Young Birch," at one extreme and "Design," "Bereft," "Once by the Pacific," "Desert Places" and "Out, Out," at
the other.

The antithetical views of Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams can both be persuasively supported by selective readings from Complete Poems. There is a distortion resulting from such selectivity, of course, although the poems so used are not in themselves distorted: some register responses to a terrifying, others to an affirmatively reassuring vision of reality. The distortion results from the omission of that vital center which defines the vision responsible for the wide spectrum encompassing those extremes. It is to an examination of that center and that vision which we now turn.
SYNTHESIS: THE VITAL AMBIGUITY OF ROBERT FROST

The thematic center of Frost's dialogue with nature connects the polar extremes of that dialogue and defines the poetic vision which encompasses those extremes. And, too, it is significantly related to the development of the tone from dark to light in the most regional poetry, a tonal scale resulting from the growth of the objective realist in North of Boston into the ironic commentator of "New Hampshire." The realist of North of Boston is not a distinct persona, standing, rather, in accord with the best principles of realism, "outside" the poetry, presumably unmoved by the harsh reality he is depicting. In "Brown's Descent" and in "New Hampshire," however, the realist steps onto the scene as a definable character, as the ironically detached New England sage. The result of this development is to broaden the intense and limited vision of North of Boston into a range paralleling that of the dialogue with nature. That is, Frost is a "dark" regionalist and an ironically affirmative regionalist as he is both a terrifying and an Emersonian poet of nature. But the scope of the dialogue with nature precedes the other in time and in importance. The poet's response to

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the natural world is fundamental, underlying thematically the character studies of both the realist and the regional satirist. His definition of the vital center of the dialogue with nature was begun at least as early as North of Boston with "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile."

Frost set tentative limits to his dialogue with nature in A Boy's Will, with "A Tuft of Flowers" on the one hand and "Storm Fear" on the other. Such extremes, to be more emphatically defined later by "Two Look at Two" and "Desert Places," imply a range or spectrum definable in terms of a center between the extremes. And although the nature of that center is not made clear in A Boy's Will, there are indications that Frost had begun by that time to see that center himself. There are the extremes mentioned above which imply the center; there is the question raised in "Pan With Us" about the nature of the poetic vision in the post-romantic era; and there is the opening poem of the first volume, "Into My Own." The key terms in the definition of the vital center of Frost's dialogue with nature are ambivalence and ambiguity. "Into My Own," like "Spring Pools," makes use of the poet's most characteristic image of ambiguity, the dark trees which attract and repel simultaneously, giving rise to an ambivalent tone, a mixture of fearfulness and melancholy and challenge and affirmation. The closing couplet is characteristic, too,
in the undeniable invitation it extends to make direct application of it to the poet's vision:

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

What Frost seemed most sure of was that that "outside" reality, the natural world, was anything but static, that it terrified one moment, reassured the next, but remained most of the time a challenging, provocative enigma. The center of his dialogue with nature, which is the center of his poetic vision, is characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence because his responses to the natural world convinced him that reality without distortion could be "bound to no thesis."

The two earliest significant expressions of the vital ambiguity at the center of Frost's dialogue with nature are "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile." It is instructive to note that they come in North of Boston, that volume generally praised for its unity of tone, for they are obvious exceptions to the dark tonal unity established by the dramatic monologues and dialogues. And yet, though distinctly different from those poems responsible for the prevailing tone of the volume, the two do not disrupt or detract from that tone. They go well in the dark volume as they would go well in a lighter volume, say New Hampshire, because they stand between the dark and light
extremes as the earliest significant expressions of Frost's synthesis of the romantic thesis of his immediate literary forbears, Emerson and Wordsworth, and its naturalistic antithesis so important to English and American poetry since the middle of the nineteenth century. Frost rejects neither of the extremes, but neither does he ever forget that they are extremes which easily give rise to distorted theses about the nature of reality, that reality which does indeed at times seem to promise to return man's love and at others to "snarl and rattle" in anticipation of the spilled blood sure to follow the proffered hand. More often, however, the relationship between man and the natural world is less precisely defined. More often it is a relationship characterized by the "dialectical" complexity of "The Wood-Pile."

The ambivalent complexity of "The Wood-Pile" and "After Apple-Picking" place the two poems at the center of Frost's poetic vision. And, too, the deceptive simplicity in which that complexity is couched make the poems of central importance to his popularity, providing, as it does, for the characteristic range of possible interpretations. A discussion of "The Wood-Pile" in An Approach To Literature considers the complexity of the poem by focusing on

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the clematis vine that "Had wound strings round and round
it like a bundle."\(^2\) The point is made that the natural
world here seems to be acting, at first glance, as "man's
collaborator and assistant" because it helps hold the
woodpile in place. But the woodpile has obviously become
useless, has gone back to nature, the vine serving also as
a symbol of that reclamation. The final lines of the poem
serve to reinforce the second interpretation in the sharp
contrast drawn between the intended and actual uses of the
wood, left

\[ \ldots \text{far from a useful fireplace} \]

\[ \text{To warm the frozen swamp as best it could} \]

\[ \text{With the slow smokeless burning of decay.} \]

There is a chilling starkness of tone in these last lines
very much like that of "Desert Places," the tone in both
poems arising from the confrontation between man in all his
finite, limited nature and the infinitude of that other
reality, the natural world with its "empty spaces/Between
stars" and its eternal "smokeless burning of decay." And
yet "The Wood-Pile" is not the dark poem "Desert Places"
is because of the different postures the poet, as first-
person narrator, assumes in the two.

In "Desert Places" the poet speaks directly and ex-
plicitly about loneliness, emptiness and fear. He makes

\(^2\)An Approach to Literature, ed. Cleanth Brooks, John
421-23.
the terror real by denying that he is frightened by it. In "The Wood-Pile," on the other hand, there is no explicit recognition of terror; the poet apparently feels no need here to reassure himself or the world that he is not frightened. He moves in the poem from the playful mood of the commentary on the bird "Who was so foolish as to think what he thought," that the poet was "after him for a feather," to the sobering perception of the kind of futility attendant upon all human endeavor. Nature can and will burn the fuel as completely, as irretrievably as man, with or without man's help. But as sobering as the perception may be, it is not terrifying. The poet, unlike the bird which is like one who "takes/Everything said as personal to himself," does not attempt to impose a personal, specifically human evaluation on the relationship he has perceived existing between man and nature. He refuses to romanticize the relationship by considering it tragic, which it can only be when viewed exclusively in human terms. The objectively presented perception of the nature of the relationship contained in the closing lines of the poem is tantamount to an "outside" view of that relationship. From that point of view, man is but one of the many finite entities in the infinite space-time continuum which constitutes the natural world, and the poem, by implication, is another rejection of the pathetic fallacy. But it is
important to see that in order to make that rejection and to refrain from calling man's condition tragic, the poet has had to transcend the human condition, to step aside from his humanity in order not to distort reality by describing it in specifically human terms. The vision resulting from this limited finite transcendence is Frost's central vision which makes possible the rejection of both romantic idealism and naturalistic pessimism.

"After Apple-Picking" is characterized by an even greater sense of ambiguity and tonal ambivalence than is "The Wood-Pile," the dream-like quality of the trees of the former poem moving us closer than does the cut wood of the latter to that central image of Frost's vision, the dark, deep woods. Again a comparison with "Desert Places" is helpful, in this instance toward better understanding the basis of the ambiguity and the ambivalence. For unlike the details of "Desert Places" which, independent of any metaphorical value we may assign them, are "directly descriptive of nature," the details of "After Apple-Picking" are "constantly implying a kind of fantasy." The details of that fantasy, the "strangeness" of the world seen through a pane of ice skimmed from the drinking trough, the cyclic reappearance of "magnified apples," the "rumbling sound/of load on load of apples coming in," and

3From a discussion in Understanding Poetry, pp. 362, ff.
the whimsical comparison of the poet's and the woodchuck's sleep, all contribute to the tonal ambivalence of the poem. As in the terrifying poems a balance is struck between the frightening modern perception of the nature of reality and the stoic response to that perception, so here there is a balance between the serious implications of the desire for deep sleep and the counterpoint provided by the poet's ironic defense mechanism. This may indeed be a poem about the death wish as it is generally taken to be, but Frost here, characteristically, provides multiple avenues of interpretation, all leading away from that most somber one in the closing lines of the poem:

One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether its like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

The tonal ambivalence of these two poems, "The Wood-Pile" and "After Apple-Picking," results in part from a technique common to both and to other poems at the center of Frost's poetic vision. The human self-consciousness ascribed to the bird in "The Wood-Pile" functions, as does the reference to the woodchuck in "After Apple-Picking," to balance the darker ramifications of the poem. The same technique is in evidence in "Birches" in the pretended moment of fear that the fates might "willfully misunder-
stand" and snatch the poet away "not to return"; in the ironic afterthought of "Come In" acknowledging that there had been no invitation in the first place; in the care of the bluebird in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" not to "advise a thing to blossom"; and in the implied question in the horse's shake of the harness bells in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." This ironic counterpoint to the serious, and in some instances dark, ramifications of these poems helps to define the ambivalent center between the Emersonian and Sophoclean extremes. It also provides a focal point for Frost's most serious critics who accuse him of either refusing to follow through on those insights which lead to dark conclusions or of not taking his poetry seriously enough, of, in either case, ironically sidestepping really serious commitments in his poetry. But the ironic counterpoint in the serious poems at the center of the spectrum, like the range of the spectrum itself, constitutes not an escape as some would have it, but rather a clearly defined, persistently reiterated position. Frost's frame of mind is fundamentally that frame of mind most characteristic of American literary thought from

\[\text{\footnotesize\[^{4}\text{Frost confessed in a letter to Louis Untermeyer that for him "any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness . . . . At bottom the world isn't a joke. We only joke about it to avoid an issue with someone to let someone know that we know he's there with his questions: to disarm him by seeming to have heard and done justice to his side of the . . . argument." See Lawrance Thompson's Selected Letters, pp. 299-300.}]}\]
Hawthorne to Hemingway. It is a commitment to non-commitment, to a genuinely pragmatic response to experience that substitutes methodology for ontology, and an open, running dialogue for traditional systematic thought. In the very best of his poetry, the definition of his commitment is implicit as it is in "The Wood-Pile" and "After Apple-Picking," but he has some successful poems which are quite explicit on the subject, among which

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Hawthorne's technique of ambiguity as evidenced in particular in The Scarlet Letter in the various multiple interpretations of events, of the appearance of the meteorite and of the true signification of the letter A among others, is a manifestation in his art of his private reservations about committing himself to that art. The reservation and the ambiguity is most often explained in terms of Puritanism, of an inherited distrust both of aesthetics and of the intellect. However the case may be, the conditions are pervasive ones in American literature, figuring prominently in the works of Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Twain, Henry James, and, in our time Ernest Hemingway. Robert Penn Warren has pointed out that Hemingway's anti-intellectualism is not unlike Wordsworth's in that both are revolting against the results of the intellectualism of the immediate past, pointing thereby to the important fact that Hemingway's anti-intellectualism, like Wordsworth's, is arrived at by means of an intellectual process. (Robert Penn Warren, "Novelist-Philosophers--X: Hemingway," Horizon, 15 [April 1947], 156-79.) Emerson preached American cultural independence, Hawthorne regretted America's lack of a cultural past, Twain attacked those manifestations in America of English and European culture he considered pretentious and false, and Hemingway and Frost are both in this mainstream. They were in revolt not against the immediate past leading up to World War I, but rather against that literary and social culture from which the American came and against which, in revolt, it had to define itself.
are "For Once, Then, Something," "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," and "Skeptic."

"For Once, Then, Something" is one of Frost's most overt treatments of his attitude toward truth. He speaks directly in the poem to those who taunt him "with having knelt at well-curbs/Always wrong to the light . . ." and with having never seen anything in the water of the well but his own reflection. He comes to his own defense, however, by telling of the occasion upon which he did see something, momentarily, through the mirror-like surface:

Through the picture, a something white, uncertain, Something more of the depths--and then I lost it. Water came to rebuke the too clear water. One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple Shook whatever it was lay there at the bottom, Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness? Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

Though the tone of this poem is one of high irony, the description of truth as something only rarely sensed and never more than vaguely perceived is a serious and central statement of Frost's frame of mind. The reflection on the surface of the water is the phenomenal world of which the poet is always aware. The "something," the "pebble of

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6 Reuben A. Brower provides a perceptive reading of this poem in The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1963), pp. 136-39. He says that "nowhere in Frost are poetic art and philosophy more completely one than in this light reading of an oracle from a well-curb." He points to the playful sophistication of the poet's reflection in the well, framed with leaves and clouds, like "a poet-Zeus" looking down from a "gleaming baroque sky."
quartz," the "truth" behind that world of phenomena is the unknowable noumenal world, the presence of which the poet is willing to admit but about which he feels little meaningful can be said. Yet, by admitting its presence he has, as in "The Wood-Pile," achieved a moment of transcendence beyond the "natural" human state, clarifying again his position between romantic transcendentalism and naturalism.

"Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" and "Skeptic" are almost as explicit as is "For Once, Then, Something" about the elusive and ambiguous nature of truth and about man's persistent and vital exploration of the phenomenal world in search of the momentary glimpse of the "something" behind it, in spite of the elusiveness and the ambiguity.

"Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" is Frost's poetic counterpart to Melville's treatment of the same subject, the primordial attractiveness of the sea, in the first chapter of Moby Dick. And, as with Melville's account, the attraction of the sea is equated with the unquenchable de-

7Lawrence Perrine's explication of the poem supports and illustrates my use of it. He says that the poem is "an expression of Frost's humanism--his belief in human dignity, in creative effort, and in 'man's unconquerable mind.' It belongs with such other of his poems as 'Sand Dunes,' 'A Considerable Speck,' 'The Trial By Existence' . . . . Its tone is not one of scorn for man's foolishness in attempting to solve the unsolvable, but of admiration for man's perseverance in the effort to add to a stock of knowledge which can never be complete." Explicator, "Frost's 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep',' VII, Item 46 (1949).
sire to know, tempered by the resignation that that desire is not to be fulfilled:

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

Again man's finite nature is emphasized as he stands with his physical and intellectual limits so clearly drawn against the immensity of the ocean, symbolizing here the infinitude of the natural world, of the "empty spaces between stars" where the "slow smokeless burning of decay" goes eternally on. The same juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite is strikingly made in the last stanza of "Skeptic":

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.

The determination to keep the dialogue with nature open and free is threatened on one side by traditional systematic thought and on the other by the temptation to reject the outside, objective world as completely unknowable. "For Once, Then, Something," is saved from the extreme of solipsism by the momentary perception of the "something" behind the reflection of the poet's face. "Skeptic" comes much closer to that extreme, saved from it only by the admission that it is only at "times" that one "feels" that the limits of his being are also the limits of the universe.
The introduction of the caul into a poem concerned with the immensity of the universe results in one of the most dramatic statements of Frost's central preoccupation in the dialogue with nature. Here is the juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite with a vengeance! The image again reminds one of Melville, of his description in Chapter Ninety-Three of Moby Dick of Pip's lonely sojourn in the middle of the ocean after he has jumped from Stubb's boat, which moves Ishmael to ponder over the "awful lonesomeness" of such a situation, of "the intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity." The associations with Melville made here and in the discussion of "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" are given added significance by the recognition of the similarity between Frost's and Melville's use of white as a symbol of the elusive, ambiguous nature of reality. Melville has Ishmael speculate about the significance of the whiteness of the whale and frame part of that specula-

8The following note comes from Nitchie's Human Values, p. 47: "Citing 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep,' with Whitman, Emerson, Melville, and Hemingway, Richard Chase suggests that 'these sea images should serve to illustrate how very strong in American writers is the tendency to find among the objects of nature only an occasion for responding to the hypnotic spell of the unconscious and the infinite. Richard Chase, Walt Whitman Reconsidered (New York, 1955), pp. 171-172."
Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and then stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as an essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows--a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?9

Ishmael's speculations here are as directly applicable to much of the whiteness in Frost's poetry as to Moby Dick himself, particularly to the "something white, uncertain" of "For Once, Then, Something," to the "blanker whiteness" of "Desert Places," and to the ominous dead whiteness of the "snow-drop spider" and the "white heal-all" of "Design."10 And even in a relatively simple poem such as "Afterflakes," Frost makes use of whiteness in such a way as to further establish this affinity between his art and Melville's. The speaker of the poem, struck by the darkness of his shadow against the whiteness of snow, turns to look toward the sky, as man habitually does to explain the mysterious:

I turned and looked back upward.
The whole sky was blue;
And the thick flakes floating at a pause

9Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale."

10For an interesting summary and analysis of the various kinds of ambivalent feelings of which Frost's "snow is a vehicle," see Nitchie's Human Values, pp. 97, ff.
Were but frost knots on an airy gauze,
With the sun shining through.

The term "metaphysical," used with some frequency in discussions of Frost's poetry, has its most valid application in poems like "Skeptic" in which there is a "yoking together" of the heterogeneous ideas of the clinging membrane of the caul and vast, impenetrable reaches of the universe. In "Afterflakes" there is something of this same quality, as there is too in "Desert Places," resulting from the sudden shift of focus from the clearly and darkly outlined shadow of the man on the blank whiteness of the snow to the emptiness of the blue heavens from which the snow comes. Beyond that emptiness there is "something," symbolized in this case by the sun which functions very much like the pebble of quartz in "For Once, Then, Something." These poems all make use of one or more of the various modifications of one of Frost's most successful and most characteristic symbols of ambiguity, the central symbol of "whiteness," seen sometimes as only vaguely defined beneath rippling water, or, still only vaguely defined, as the blinding brilliance of the sun, or as the blank whiteness of the snow, or the lifeless white of moth wings, or the "airy gauze" of the infinite reaches of space. The whiteness and the metaphysical quality of these images constitute one of the two major motifs of Frost's nature poetry. The second of the two stands in sharp con-
trast to the first, characterized as it is by an apparent simplicity, a "naturalness" of metaphor as opposed to the metaphysical, and by a focus upon the absence of light rather than upon the source, upon darkness rather than upon whiteness. At the very center of the spectrum of Frost's dialogue stand those poems for which he is best known and in which nature is present in its most commonly defined sense, in the sense of the living plant world, for Frost, usually specifically trees or woods, and at the very heart of the spectrum, "dark" trees and "deep" woods.

Although the use of a metaphorical term such as spectrum in a discussion of a poet's work and his vision, is, of course, arbitrary, the metaphor is a useful one, particularly as one attempts to define the fundamental characteristics of the poet's achievement. That is, as we come now to the absolute "center of the spectrum," the metaphor seems more meaningful than ever in terms of that one poem which best represents and explains the whole range of the dialogue with nature. And that poem is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The dark trees and woods of Frost's poetry function very much as do the images of whiteness, that is, as symbols of ambiguity which illicit ambivalent responses from the poet. Nature is reassuring and threatening, attracting and repelling man who catches momentary glimpses of something beyond the phenomenal world and who
is urged on into the woods even as he is repelled by their darkness. This is the ambiguity and the ambivalence first in evidence in "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile," and present, too, though less obviously, in Frost's most popular nature poems such as "Birches," "Mending Wall," and "Two Tramps in Mud Time," where we are cautioned to "Be glad of water," but not forget "The lurking frost in the earth beneath/That will steal forth after the sun is set/And show on the water its crystal teeth." And it is an ambiguity and an ambivalence best caught by Frost in the images of the dark trees of "Into My Own," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "The Sound of Trees," "Spring Pools," "Come In," "A Leaf Treader," and, most successfully of all, in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

"Stopping by Woods" deserves consideration as a central and perhaps a key poem in any discussion of Frost's achievement for several reasons. In the first place, the woods function so effectively as a symbol of the ambiguous nature of reality as to place the poem at the center of the dialogue with nature. Secondly, as much as any poem he wrote, "Stopping by Woods" is characterized by that sense of directness and that apparent simplicity distinguishing his poetry in general. And third, the poem is probably his best known and is certainly one of his most closely examined. Frost himself said of the poem that he had "been more
bothered with it than anybody has ever been with any poem in just pressing it for more than it should be pressed for. It means enough without its being pressed.  

Almost any reading of the poem but the most superficial involves one in a discussion of the complexities of both Frost's poetic technique and his vision. But, in passing, it must be acknowledged that the poem certainly can be read with meaning on a very superficial level as a rather pleasantly sentimental experience before some lovely old woods. It is presumably this kind of reading which the poem receives from that large, amorphous, "popular" audience for the deception of whom Frost has been, on occasion, roundly damned. Discussions of the poem that are a matter of record, however, all attribute more to it than does that level of reading.

The central question raised by all those who see Frost as more than a purely descriptive nature poet concerns itself with the symbolic meaning of the woods, which are most persistently read as a symbol of death. A second closely associated reading equates the woods with art and the traveler's dilemma with the conflict arising from his sense of social obligation on the one hand and his desire

to devote himself entirely to his art on the other.\(^{12}\) John F. Lynen would resolve these two interpretations (along with the other possibilities of reading the poem as an account of a fundamental conflict in which the woods could represent any desirable pursuit or goal from which the traveler turns away because of a sense of moral or social obligation) in terms of the "pastoralist's technique" which "keeps the image and the thing it resembles separate so that they may be compared."\(^{13}\) The result of this technique, according to Lynen, is "extended analogy" and while "we can delimit the general area of meaning behind the symbol . . . this area contains an indefinite number of referents, none of which can be chosen as the right one."\(^{14}\) George W. Nitche, in an approach which has some common ground with Lynen's, considers "Stopping by Woods," along with "Into My Own" and "Come In," in terms of an Edenic myth. Nitche says that "in a fairly direct fashion, all these poems are concerned with an imagined withdrawal from the complicated world we all know into a

\(^{12}\) For examples of interpretations involving both of these considerations see René Wellek and Austin Warren's Theory of Literature (New York, 1949), pp. 194-95, and Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor's Poems For Study (New York, 1953), pp. 597-600.

\(^{13}\) The Pastoral Art, pp. 23-24.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 25.
mysterious loveliness symbolized by woods or darkness." All of these approaches to the poem have real value, but, at the same time, all are characterized by a kind of straining which results from "pressing" the poem "for more than it should be pressed for." The tendency to over-read Frost is just as real and almost as misleading as the much-lamented tendency to read him too superficially. Lynen and Mitchie both manage to avoid over-intellectualizing the appeal of the woods, but both find it necessary to resort to specifically and highly artificial literary concepts, the pastoral tradition and the Edenic myth, in order to do so. They move in the right direction in their analyses of the poem, but neither moves quite far enough.

15Human Values, p. 94.

16Relative to the subject of misreading Frost, Lawrance Thompson, in his Introduction to Selected Letters, pp. xiv-xv, tells how consistently the ironic point of the sigh in "The Road Not Taken" has been missed because the "irony had been handled too slyly, too subtly." According to Thompson, the sigh was inspired by "Frost's amusement over a familiar mannerism of his closest friend in England, Edward Thomas," who in walks with Frost would frequently "regret the choice he had made and would sigh over what he might have shown Frost if they had taken a 'better' direction . . . . Frost pretended to 'carry himself' in the manner of Edward Thomas just long enough to write 'The Road Not Taken.' Immediately, he sent a manuscript copy of the poem to Thomas, without comment, and yet with the expectation that his friend would notice how the poem pivots ironically on the un-Frostian phrase, 'I shall be telling this with a sigh'." Thomas, like so many readers since, "missed the gentle jest."
Frost himself once said that "Stopping by Woods" contained "all he ever knew." And Lawrance Thompson describes an important aspect of what he knew in the following way:

One of his central insights was that every individual should try to confront, recognize, and accept the circular relationship between constructive and destructive forces of personality; relationships which might make intelligible (even if not always controllable) 'the good of evil born' and the evil born of good. He was fascinated by any human capacities for integrating such ambivalent forces, no matter how faultily and provisionally.

While surely not all that Frost knew, the central insight given artistic utterance in "Stopping by Woods" is the central insight shaping the poet's responses to the natural world from one end of the poetic spectrum to the other. The dark woods here and in his poetry in general function most meaningfully as dark woods, not as symbols or allegorical equivalents of something else. They strike a responsive chord in the traveler at the irrational level, forcing upon him an awareness of the affinities between his own nature and nature in the broadest sense of objective reality, between the "constructive and destructive forces" of his own personality and the ambiguous signals, alternate-

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17Quoted by Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost's Asides on His Poetry," American Literature, XIX (January 1948), 357.

18Selected Letters, p. x.
ly threatening and reassuring, that he receives from the natural world at large. To read Frost's dark woods as "woods" and to call their attractiveness the force of irrational impulse is to account in large part for the effectiveness of his "natural" symbolism, of its universality and its multiplicity. And to focus upon the conflict raised in the traveler's mind as one raised by his confrontation with the wilderness allows us to read the poem as one of several significant expressions of that major theme of American literature, the wilderness theme.

Man's fascination with the wilderness as wilderness is much older than America. But the American continent provided modern man with a wilderness of such scope, beauty and potentiality that the old awe before the grandeur and mystery of the natural world came back with a renewed vigor that continued to haunt the American consciousness down through the middle of the twentieth century. It is this sense of awe which gives direction to the Leather-Stocking series; it is of central thematic importance to Walden, The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn and "The Bear." It is very much in evidence in Hemingway's Big Two-Hearted River where not surprisingly it finds expression in terms similar to Frost's.

The Deerslayer, Hester Prynne and Huck Finn had in common the desire to escape the complexities of civiliza-
tion by crossing the frontier into the great American wilderness. They embody that highly significant aspect of the American dream which holds that it is always possible to start fresh in the rich new land west of the horizon. But even in Cooper's time, and most emphatically in Twain's, it was apparent that the dream was only that; the frontier continued shifting, the new land grew old quickly, and the escape was always doomed to failure. The urge to flee into the wilderness is an understandable one, but it is the wrong choice, the wrong turning, prompted by illusion, perhaps by irrational impulse. The rational, mature judgment of the attempt to escape to the wilderness is that it is wrong for practical reasons because it is simply unworkable, and for moral reasons because it is an attempt to deny the human condition, to negate the promises we must all keep and avoid the miles we must all go.

It is possible to escape the human condition and to negate the promises of moral responsibility in at least two ways. One is by dying--hence the perfect validity of the reading of the dark woods as death. Another is to become less than human, to obey those irrational impulses by which we are related to the animal kingdom and to escape literally into an uncivilized, primitive world of real dark woods. The view of man as a composite creature who realizes his greatest potentiality by the triumph of his
rational human nature over his irrational animal nature is at least as old as Christian civilization. But as with the fascination with wilderness, the new American continent provided a dramatically new and vitalizing environment for the old concept. The frontier society prompted man to recall what was never really far below the conscious level, that he had animal impulses which at times strongly challenged the rational, human control of his destiny. One of the most explicit and forceful statements of this awareness is made by Thoreau about an experience in the woods near Walden pond:

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.19

Thoreau was much more explicit about the choice between the "higher life" and the "primitive . . . savage

one" than are most poets and novelists largely because of the kind of writing he was doing in Walden. But the dilemma he gives expression to in the quoted passage is, in modified form to be sure, the dilemma faced by the Deerslayer, Hester, Huck, Isaac McCaslin, Nick Adams, and the traveler in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Hemingway's treatment of the theme in Big Two-Hearted River bears some striking similarities to Frost's in his poem. Nick Adams, fishing the Big Two-Hearted river which is clear and bright under the sun, is uncomfortably aware that the river runs into an almost impenetrable gloomy swamp to which he feels reluctantly drawn. Near the end of the story, Nick sits on the bank of the river, smoking and looking into the swamp:

The river became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid. It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. That must be why the animals that lived in swamps were built the way they were, Nick thought.

From this point to the end of the story our attention is focused upon Nick's preoccupation with the swamp. We are told that "Nick did not want to go in there now." And that "in the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down stream any

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20In Our Time (New York, 1955), pp. 210-212.
further today." After cleaning his fish he heads back to camp, stopping for one final look and deciding that "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp."

Nick does not find the swamp as attractive as Frost's traveler does the woods, but he is, nevertheless, powerfully drawn by the swamp. The implications of the "now," of the "any further today," and of the last line are perfectly clear: he knows that he will have to face the challenge of the swamp another time. And his attitude toward the inevitability of the encounter is one of at least reconciliation subtly touched with a suggestion of anticipation. Nick is one of a long line of Hemingway connoisseurs of life who have learned to savour experience by not rushing it; they have learned to approach the important encounters of life coolly, with something almost of coyness, whether the encounters are with women, game, enemies or death. And the swamp sounds very much like a symbol of death with the cedar trees, the gloom, and the necessity of keeping "almost level with the ground."

Like Frost's snowy woods, Hemingway's swamp may validly be read as death and Nick's reluctance as a subtle flirtation with death. But as with Frost's woods, the swamp too functions with considerable depth as swamp.

Hemingway shared Frost's reluctance to have his art "pressed" for too much meaning. Both writers bristled at
the word symbol: woods are woods, a swamp is a swamp. Hemingway's description of the swamp suggests that it is symbolic of death. But Nick's attitude toward the swamp suggests something else. He thinks he understands why swamp animals are built the way they are, and he thinks that he too would have to get close to the ground like them to move through the swamp. He feels that fishing in the swamp would be a "tragic adventure." From this point of view the swamp becomes not death but another kind of life, a dark life with tragic ramifications. Nick is attracted and repelled at the same time, and, though there is a difference of situation and temperament and therefore one also of emphasis, the cause of his ambivalence is the cause of Thoreau's when he felt the impulse to eat the woodchuck raw, and of Frost's traveler who considers going into the woods but doesn't. For all three the struggle is between an irrational impulse stimulated by the wilderness and the usual rational control over their lives. All three choose, at least momentarily, to reject the irrational impulse and to return to the normal "human" pattern of conduct, with its prescribed miles to be traveled and its promises to be kept. All three find a means, to pick up Lawrance Thompson's words again, of "integrating such ambivalent forces, no matter how faultily and provisionally."
Frost speaks in "Tree at My Window" of "inner" and "outer" weather, the former referring to his, the human condition, the latter to the trees "taken and tossed" by the elements. He speaks in "Desert Places" of the empty spaces between stars and of his own empty spaces, and in "Acquainted With The Night" he distinguishes implicitly between his recognition of the great outer darkness and his own finite "otherness" which is not solely defined by that darkness. In "Come In," he chooses stars over the temptation to go "into the dark and lament," the woods here functioning almost identically with those of "Stopping by Woods" to suggest a turning inward to the exploration of self. The objections of his most severe critics that the exploration never really takes place in any depth are valid. Frost's view of the ambivalent depths of the psyche, like his view of the metaphysical whiteness beyond the phenomenal world, is limited and cautious. But to consider that caution anything but deliberate and strategic is to badly miss the point of the poet's oft-repeated major premise that the human condition as he has experienced it cannot be defined in either the idealistic terms of transcendentalism or the harsh terms of mechanistic determinism. Man is more than the latter would have him and less than the former, and he cannot be "explained" by either metaphysics or psychology. Frost's
vision is the principal manifestation of his "old way of being new," for its major premise, dating back through more than two thousand years of western cultural history, is that man is a finite, limited being, who is always conscious of the weight of his animal body even when he is feeling his not infrequent aspirations to climb "toward heaven" without ever hoping or even really wanting to get there. That Frost does succeed, however, in being new with the old way has all too seldom been admitted by either his friends or his foes, the former loving him for his traditionalism, the latter scorning him for his inability to break with it. But his expression of the old vision is as new as pragmatism, that distinctly American philosophy, and existentialism, that brightest of new international bottles for the best of old wines. Frost is at least as modern as Albert Camus, whose major philosophe-

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21Radcliffe Squires considers "West-Running Brook" the "summit" of Frost's poetry, and in his discussion of the poem makes some interesting comparisons with some correspondence from William James to Henry Adams. Following is an excerpt from his evaluation of those comparisons: "I look, then, on James's letters and Frost's poem as coordinates in a course charted through a universe of Einsteinian relativity . . . . Specifically, Frost's poem, like James's letters, says, yes, the fires of the universe may be burning out and our lives may be running down, but that very detritus is a form of energy, a movement which can create other things and which, therefore, apes the origin of all things. The poem worships, in other words, the God which science imposes upon the consciousness of modern man." The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, 1963), p. 103.
ical premise serves without qualification as the definit-
itive principle of the poet's vision:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning
that transcends it. I know that I do not know
that meaning and that it is impossible for me
just now to know it. What can a meaning out-
side my condition mean to me? I can understand
only in human terms. What I touch, what resists
me--this is what I understand . . . . What other
truth can I admit without lying, without bring-
ing in a hope I lack and which means nothing
within the limits of my condition?22

The study of Frost's poetry in this and the preceding
chapter has been made to demonstrate the validity of the
view that his vision encompasses a wide spectrum, marked
at one extreme by those poems registering responses to a
brutal, terrifying reality, and at the other by those
poems of unqualified affirmation that "earth returns"
man's love. A schematic-like summary of that demonstra-
tion can be made by placing key poems along a horizontal
line representing the spectrum of Frost's vision. At one
extreme go the Sophoclean poems of terror represented by
"Out, Out," "Desert Places," "Bereft," "Once by the Pacif-
ic," "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," and "A
Servant to Servants." At the other extreme go those
Emersonian poems of idealistic affirmation such as "Two
Look at Two," "A Tuft of Flowers," "A Young Birch,
and "All Revelation." And if there is any absolute center

22The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays (New York,
to our arbitrary schematization, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" undoubtedly belongs at that center as the poem which most naturally and thereby most characteristically catches the essence of the vital ambiguity directing and balancing Frost's poetic responses to experience. Other key poems at this center are "The Wood-Pile," "After Apple-Picking," "Birches," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "Into My Own," "Come In," "Skeptic," and "Afterflakes."

The high degree of selectively by which this study is characterized has been guided by two considerations beyond that of theme, used to "place" the poems along the line of the spectrum. In the first place, there is general agreement that Frost's most important and most successful achievement is definable in terms of the poems we have been considering, in terms, that is, of his realistic narrative poetry and his nature poetry. In the second place, regardless of how one rates these poems in terms of the total achievement, they are the poems by which he is known, upon which both his critical and popular reputations rest. He is foremost in the minds of those who know him the poet of New England and the New England countryside; he is before all else, a regionalist and a nature poet. And before we turn to the final chapter of this study and to the bearing of his poetic vision upon his reputation, there is one final relationship between the regional and the nature poetry to be drawn.
Lawrence Thompson, in his Introduction to Selected Letters of Robert Frost, speaks of the need to be aware of the masks, of the "ironically assumed postures" in both Frost's letters and his poetry. He tells there of the ironic posture responsible for the sigh in "The Road Not Taken," and of the widespread misunderstanding of that poem as a result of the failure to distinguish between Frost and the poetic mask or posture assumed for that one poem. 23 And James M. Cox, in 1962, suggested that "a serious study of Frost's poetry" would "discover how much its structure emerges in terms of a central character—the poetic figure of Robert Frost." 24 The poems used in the study just concluded of the wide spectrum of Frost's vision suggest two broad classifications in terms of significantly related, assumed postures or masks. One is the posture of the lyric nature poet; the other, of the regional satirist who is closely related to the realist behind the poems of North of Boston.

Frost's poetic posture in the early realistic character studies, particularly those of North of Boston, is that of the completely objective realist, which is to say that it is a posture defined negatively, by the total

23Cited above, Note 16, p. 144.

absence of a persona or mask. This posture is responsible in large part for the many associations made in the early criticism between Frost and the prose realists. *North of Boston*, in particular, "fixed" one of the central images of the career, the image of the realistic regionalist who invited comparison with Edith Wharton, Alice Brown, and Mary Wilkins Freeman. But the posture responsible for that image was to evolve into and in time be almost completely replaced by the distinct mask of the New England "character," ironically detached from the subject matter almost as if he too were a "realist" except for his actual presence on the stage. That presence on the stage is more than a posture, it is a definable persona or mask whose primary effect upon the poetic vision was to broaden its range from that of the intense but limited perception of the early "outside" realist into that of the more human "realist" who is on the scene and who can be made to register emotional responses in spite of his detachment and objectivity. This mask, that of the New England character, has been the most widely recognized and is most often spoken of in terms of humor, lightness of tone, and whimsy. This is the mask in the sense that it functions in "New Hampshire" and "Brown's Descent," and in the later political and scientific satires of *A Further Range*, *Steeple Bush*, and *In The Clearing*. But there is, in
particular, one specifically regionalist poem of a much
darker tone than these which establishes a significant
relationship between the posture of the realist and the
mask which contributes to the unity of those poems con­
stituting the dialogue with nature.

"Out, Out" is very much like the poems of *North of
Boston* except for the first person narrator who makes
possible both a realistic report of the incident and a
specifically defined attitude in terms of a recorded
response to it. The response is a limited and finely
controlled one; there is only one first person pronoun in
the poem, and all else is presented as objectively as is
"The Death of the Hired Man" or "Home Burial." But the
subjective response to the brutal reality is there, and
it is in the same vein as the responses to the natural
world recorded in the poems of the natural dialogue.
That is, "Out, Out," which has so much in common with the
realistic narratives of *North of Boston*, and something in
common with the satiric poetry because of its regionalism
and its first person point of view, is most significantly
related to "After Apple-Picking," "The Wood-Pile,"
"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Desert Places,"
etc. Although the poet-narrator, the persona or mask, of
"Out, Out" assumes the posture of the realist, his con­
trolled response to the episode he is describing is so
very much like the controlled responses of the poems of the natural dialogue we have been considering as to suggest that all emanate from the same consciousness. This consciousness is that "central character--the poetic figure of Robert Frost" of which James M. Cox speaks. As "Stopping by Woods" is the central statement in the dialogue with nature, so the traveler in that poem is Frost's central poetic character or mask, a mask which is comprised of elements of both the objective realist of North of Boston and the whimsical satirist of A Further Range. The traveler moves in his dialogue with nature from experiences like that recorded in "A Tuft of Flowers," on the one hand, to those recorded in "Out, Out," on the other. Each of his experiences leads to a sudden, limited clarification of what is meant by human experience, to what James Joyce called an epiphanic experience and what Frost himself described as "a momentary stay against confusion." The range of these experiences, the wide spectrum of the poetic vision, is made possible by the traveler's fidelity to experience, to his realistic orientation. The traveler, thus central to the poetic vision, is central, too, to Frost's wide appeal, to his popularity with Lionel Trilling, on the one hand, and with J. Donald Adams on the other, and, as we shall demonstrate in the next chapter, fundamental to the most meaningful definition of Frost as a popular poet.
Chapter V

POPULAR IMAGE OF A POET

Stephen Spender recently raised, in the following terms, the old question about the relationship between the American poet and an American public:

It is difficult for an English poet to understand that so many American poets seem to think of being a poet as the tragic vocation of a hero doomed to neglect, even when he plays out the drama of his being misunderstood before large university audiences . . . . But the death of Jarrell and of Roethke, the recurrent breakdowns of Robert Lowell and John Berryman, the fury of a poet as gifted as Shapiro at his colleagues who still write formal verse—all seem directly or indirectly the result of the extremely unhappy relationship of the American poet with an American public.1

This enigmatic, unhappy relationship has been of central concern in American letters since at least the death of Edgar Allan Poe, and the English poet's difficulty in understanding it is shared by everyone who considers the matter. For it is of such fundamental cultural significance as to preclude explanations in terms of simple, one to one, cause and effect relationships. The Calvinist sanctification of work, the practical demands of a pioneer

society, the profit motive of laissez-faire capitalism, and the constant and frequently overwhelming challenges of providing just the material necessities of a dynamic, constantly expanding, urban-industrial society, all contribute to the uneasy self-consciousness of the man who decides to follow, in Hawthorne's terms, the "idle" profession of a writer. There is a kind of real continuity in American history in terms of the relationship between the problems of the struggle for existence in the frontier settlements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and those raised by the 1965 riots in Harlem and Los Angeles. This land has always needed men of action to cut forests, clear and plow fields, build roads, bridges, and cities, to put out fires and to rebuild again and again. In light of this continuity, the contempt in which Hawthorne imagined himself held by his ancestors still has its bite today:

'A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!' 2

The unhappy relationship between the modern American poet and an American public of which Stephen Spender speaks has deep roots. The popularity of Robert Frost is one of the most recent and illuminating chapters in its long
Frost's popularity may be defined in a number of ways, the most obvious and least disputable being in terms of honors and awards, national and international public appearances, and the sale of his books, which probably totals something near to half a million volumes. The basis of this popularity is usually ascribed to his subject matter, to the "sense of directness" which his natural diction and logical structure give the poetry, and to his "platform personality." There is no basis for quarreling with the facts and figures of the definition in the first place, and little if any basis for quarreling with those factors thought to be responsible for the popularity. But there is a serious gap in our knowledge between that description of the poetry and the man which accounts for his popular reputation and the generally unquestioned assumption that most of his "popular" audience just naturally does not understand him. There has been much talk about a "mythical Robert Frost" existing in the minds of the American people. Attention needs to be called to the fact that in order to sustain the first myth, the creation of a second has been made necessary, for it has been necessary for those who object most strenuously to the popular Frost to make some broad

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3 Figures cited in Note 1, p. 1.
assumptions about the popular audience which is defined over and over again as those readers who do not understand the poet. For although there is little or no evidence to indicate what the popular audience--by definition, in the area of poetry, an anonymous, silent audience--thinks and feels, the central thesis of the criticism and appraisals of Frost from 1913 on has been that his popularity is based on a lack of understanding. What emerges from this central concern is a definition of a "popular" American mind and by implication a definition, generally denigratory, of American culture. Implicit in the critical record of Frost's reputation is an answer to de Tocqueville's question about the irresistible leveling tendencies of democratic societies: and the answer is that the leveling tendencies have been made manifest; that the "popular" American mind is the central index to the resulting cultural poverty; and that any artist popular with an audience made up of such minds must be suspect and is almost surely of not more than second-rate significance. Hence, Frost's popularity must either be explained away or used against him.

An illustrative consideration of this problem for "popular" consumption appeared in a cover story on Frost in Time magazine in 1950, in which, in a typical stroke, Time manages to simultaneously insult and applaud the
"U.S. readers." After making the point that "Vermonters find nothing outlandish or alarming about Robert Frost," the article makes the following appraisal:

Neither do U.S. readers, to most of whom the word "poet" still carries a faint suggestion of pale hands, purple passions and flowing ties. They understand what he writes—or understand enough of it to like what they understand. They find his dialogue poems as invigorating as a good argument, his lyrics as engaging, sometimes as magical, as Mother Goose. In a literary age so preoccupied with self-expression that it sometimes seems intent on making the reader feel stupid, Robert Frost has won him by treating him as an equal.

In short, Robert Frost is a popular poet.4 Obviously, except for the last line quoted, nothing in the appraisal is or can be supported by any kind of evidence. But as delightfully imaginative and as wholly indefensible as the "pale hands, purple passions and flowing ties" are, the piece is valuable because its insubstantiality is representative of much that has been said on the subject.

The formal criticism is, to be sure, characterized by greater care in the matter of defining the popular audience than is the Time article. John Ciardi, writing for the commemorative issue of Saturday Review in 1963, visualizes a possible popular image, strikes the familiar chord about distortion, but also points to a source of that distortion:

4"Pawky Poet" (October 9, 1950), p. 76.
Let me yet hope that no man, for sentimental reasons, will be moved to eulogize the confectionary image of a kindly, vague, white-haired great-grandfather when there is the reality of a magnificently passionate man to honor . . . .

He was our best. And certainly to honor him in the truth of himself is a least homage. Yet the sentimental distortion remains fixed in the public mind, and has marred every public recognition tendered him from honorable sentiment but in the blindness of sentimentality.5

M. L. Rosenthal, writing in response to the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959, attributes the popular image to the "publicists," who "turned him into the sagacious and humorous country-poet Mr. Adams loves . . . one variant of that grand archetype the Good Grey Poet into which they have relegated Whitman and Sandburg . . . ."6 Singling out the publicists and the phraseology of occasions of public recognition moves in the right direction of specifying what one means by popular image. But the fanfare of publicists and the obviously ceremonious language of public occasion are hardly taken seriously enough to account for the scope and depth of the concern over Frost's popularity.

Yvor Winters, Robert Langbaum and George W. Mitchie, all probe deeper into the relationship between Frost as

poet and Frost as public figure. For Winters, there is a
real and unhappy relationship between the two. As he sees
it, "Frost's confusion is similar to that of the public,
and most readers of poetry still regard poetry as a vague
emotional indulgence: they do not take poetry seriously
and they dislike serious poetry." And Winters is perhaps
the most explicit commentator of all when it comes to
specifying the causes of the confusion at the basis of
Frost's popularity:

The principles which have hampered Frost's
development, the principles of Emersonian
and Thoreauistic Romanticism, are the
principles which he has openly espoused,
and they are widespread in our culture.
Until we understand these last and the dan­
gers inherent in them and so abandon them
in favor of better, we are unlikely to pro­duce
many poets greater than Frost, although
a few poets may have intelligence enough to
work clear of such influences; and we are
likely to deteriorate more or less rapidly
both as individuals and as a nation.7

Langbaum and Nitchie both speak on the subject in
terms which have much in common with Winters, though
neither sees the matter as darkly as he does. For
Langbaum, Frost's poetry "delivers us from the poignancy
of the historical moment to place us in contact with a
survival-making eternal folk wisdom. We can live by

Frost's poetry as we could not by Yeats' or Pound's.\(^8\)

Nitchie's summary is characterized by the same kind of explicit thoroughness as is Winters':

\[\ldots\text{.} \quad \text{Frost is important as a kind of American culture hero, as an index of certain persistent American characteristics. Discussing V. L. Parrington, Lionel Trilling has aptly characterized this aspect of Frost. Parrington's 'best virtue was real and important . . . . He knew what so many literary historians do not know, that emotions and ideas are the sparks that fly when the mind meets difficulties.' Like Parrington, and like the perhaps mythical representative American, Frost 'admires will in the degree that he suspects mind.' Like Parrington, Frost 'still stands at the center of American thought about American culture because . . . he expresses the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality.'}^{9}\]

All three of these men have serious misgiving about the cultural ramifications of Frost's affinities with his public, but they do not resort to the quite common procedure of explaining away the popularity on the basis of a lack of understanding. For Winters, to be sure, there is misunderstanding, but it is a mutual affair; both Frost and his public are confused. For Langbaum and Nitchie, the affinities are real, but at the sub-rational level of folk wisdom and cultural hero worship.\(^{10}\) There is the


\(^{10}\)Langbaum calls attention to Reginald Cook's use in The Dimensions of Robert Frost of the term "sabiduria" to denote the kind of folk wisdom Frost gives expression to.
implication in the latter two of the attitude made explicit by Winters that Frost's popularity is the result of something other than positive, desirable cultural conditions. That is, the position here is not that Frost's public is incapable of understanding him, but that, alas, they "understand," in the sense that they respond to those very values the poet would have them respond to, all too well. Frost's popularity is not explained away; it is, in a very real sense, used against him and in a critical assault upon those peculiarly American traits of mind from which it springs. Consideration of this assault leads us back again to our early point of setting forth, the Trilling-Adams episode of 1959.

The duality of the Trilling-Adams episode is representative of the duality running through the criticism of Frost's poetry since Ezra Pound's observation that Frost is "vurry Amur'kn" with at least "the seeds of grace." And it is a duality which has its roots in the nineteenth century literary concern for a definable American culture distinct from its European sources. For when Adams and his supporters object to what should be considered high praise, the favorable comparison of Frost with Sophocles, what they are really objecting to is the reinterpretation of the poet in the broad terms of western culture as opposed to his reputation as an unmistakably American, and even more specifically, a New England poet. Trilling, much like
Winters and Nitchie, sees the popularity of Frost negatively as a reflection of a regrettable definition of American culture in rural terms. 'Winters' "Emersonian-Thoreauistic Romanticism," Nitchie's "opposition between reality and mind," and Trilling's manifestly "rural" America, are all aspects of the same definition of American culture, of that definition which places great emphasis upon the physical importance of the new continent and upon the challenge of the wilderness in the shaping of that culture. And all three men are wholly or partially rejecting that definition as the most important one; for them, the values of American culture are the values of western European culture—for Winters, "the principles of Greek and Christian thought," for Trilling, urban, cosmopolitan culture—and America in the most important sense is not a new culture at all but rather an extension of the old into a new environment. It is this concept which J. Donald Adams, who considers "The Gift-Outright" one of Frost's great poems, rejects in his objection to Trilling's enlargement of the poet's achievement in terms of Sophoclean tragedy. For Adams, Frost is an Emersonian poet, a poet of the new land and the new vision, the answer to Emerson's plea for "the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await."11

11 The Poet.
Trilling called his speech and the responses it evoked a "cultural episode," and the cultural significance of the episode is that, serving as a kind of microcosmic summary of much of the criticism of Frost's poetry, it involves not only an appraisal of Robert Frost the poet, but also various definitions of the culture which he represents. Trilling and Adams stand at opposite poles in their respective estimations of the central nature of Frost's achievement, and read selectively, the poetry provides considerable support for both views, neither of which accounts, however, for the vital center of the vision making possible the extremes. Frost is more optimistic than pessimistic, more affirmative than negative, and in this respect Adams is closer to the truth of the matter than is Trilling. But the two poetic postures central to Frost's achievement, that of the realistic regionalist and that of the traveler of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," raise terms other than those used by Trilling and Adams and define Frost's affinities with his "public," the basis of any meaningful popularity, in terms of a synthesis of the old and the new, of the inherited, antithetical traditions of romanticism and naturalism. This synthesis is responsible for a poetic vision distinctly modern and even more distinctly American. Whether poetry can indeed be written about "anything" and from any point of view is, to
say the least, highly debatable. Matthew Arnold pointed out in *Culture and Anarchy* that "the great works by which . . . the human spirit has manifested its approaches to totality and to a full, harmonious perfection . . . come, not from Nonconformists, but from men who either belong to Establishments or have been trained in them." The point is as vital today as it ever was in evaluations of poetic achievement. Frost neither belonged to the Establishments nor was he trained in them, and it is because of this very fact that he is most distinctly a modern American poet, for modern America has a distinct, definable culture primarily in terms of its continuing attempts to free itself from the "Establishments." Whether the best poetry can be written in such an environment without the kinds of adjustments made, for example, by Eliot and Wallace Stevens is also a matter for debate, although not the issue here. The point here is that Frost is indeed very American, in part because of his faithful portrayal of New England character and the New England countryside, but more importantly because of his American frame of mind, because of his refusal to subordinate experience to abstract, systematic thought. For him, as for Hawthorne, Melville, Howells and James, in particular, before him, "reality" was characterized before all else by a dynamic, vital ambiguity which would allow itself to be bound to no thesis.
Robert Frost's popularity can be explained in terms of his personality, his "platform" personality more particularly; in terms of his poetry; and in terms of the cultural conditions responsible for making the matter such a significant one. We have not been concerned in this study with the first of these factors, primarily because discussions of successful platform personalities, of effective, dramatic speakers, of showmen, always turn ultimately on quasi-mystical explanations involving indefinable qualities responsible for the magic rapport between speaker and audience. Frost's physical appearance, his voice, his wit, and his sense of timing, all made him the popular success he was on the lecture platform. But no one who has ever heard or seen him read will be satisfied with this or any other explanation of the appeal. This is not to praise him too highly; indeed, many will consider it hardly praise at all to call his appeal that of the successful showman, but that is largely what it was. The fact that his poetry was his script made it, to be sure, a special kind of entertainment, but the poet was too easily lost—as he frequently is whether he is a talented reader or not—to the platform personality. Frost could conceivably have made a name for himself reading someone else's poetry, so separate and distinct are the talents of
reading and writing. But he blurred the line between the two since he was reading his own poetry, and one of the various popular images of the poet is that of the kindly but sharp-witted old man, pausing for the laughter sure to come, or finally, fumbling in the bright sunlight and an irreverent breeze with a scrap of paper on a presidential inaugural platform.

Frost's platform personality, his public "mask," might well have been developed with little or no relationship to his poetry. But there is a significant relationship between the two in terms of the poetic mask of the New England sage who makes his appearance in "Brown's Descent" and who becomes increasingly conspicuous from that point on. This is the mask of "New Hampshire" and of the political and scientific satires of the 1930's and 40's in particular. The public mask and this poetic mask are practically identical. Reading "Brown's Descent," "New Hampshire," and from the last book, In The Clearing, "Some Science Fiction" is very much like seeing and hearing Frost himself performing, creating the public mask, so closely related to its counterpart in the poetry. So it is possible to speak of a second popular image which has its roots in the poetry itself and which is practically indistinguishable except for that fact from the public, platform mask.
There are at least two more definable images in the poetry itself which bear upon the explanation of Frost's popularity and they began developing earlier than either of the two masks above. The first image is that of the realistic regionalist of *North of Boston*, and this image, which does not qualify for the terms "mask" or "persona," is of fundamental importance to Frost's early popularity with his peers, with Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell in particular. This is one of the most specific of the images because so many of the early reviewers and critics focused upon it as the poet's distinguishing characteristic. One can say with assurance that Frost's early popularity depended in very large part upon the image defined by the critics in response to *North of Boston*. Frost was pictured time after time as the grim realist, extending to verse the traditions and techniques of the prose realists. This is the most narrowly defined image of all, standing at the far extreme from the wise, patriarchal figure reciting from the presidential inaugural platform. And the narrowly defined image is the more precise of the two: the record is clear and sure about the virtues of the realistic regionalist; what Frost meant to the much larger audience who heard him recite "The Gift Outright" in 1961 is far from being precisely defined, if indeed it is definable at all.
Frost's central poetic character, as we have seen earlier, is that of the traveler through the natural world, and this character began taking shape even before the development of the realistic posture of *North of Boston*, in the nature poetry of *A Boy's Will*. The traveler does not mature in that first volume; one of the important influences upon his development was the realistic posture developed at first independently in *North of Boston*. The traveler in "The Wood-Pile" and "After Apple-Picking" is the traveler of *A Boy's Will*, but the traveler seasoned, much more cautious, much more determined to hold himself objectively aloof in his evaluations of experience. He is much more the realist except that he does respond subjectively in the poems; we are aware of his presence, and of his determination to maintain control of the relationship he sees existing between himself and the natural world around him. The traveler comes to full maturity in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" where we see him bring to a full synthesis the "constructive and destructive" forces of the natural world that is both outside of him and in his own human nature. This synthesis, this control, is central to Frost's poetic achievement and to his popularity. It makes possible that interpretation of his poetry to which Trilling and so many other critics have objected, that interpretation which completely robs the
poetry of its terror, of its vision of evil, of its most modern sense of nausea at the perception of the infinite reaches of space, of the "empty spaces/Between stars--on stars where no human race is." The image of the traveler from this point of view augments the image of the public mask, of the kindly platform personality. He is from this point of view a descriptive nature poet who calmly surveys and sweetly portrays an innocent pastoral world.

Such a view does not, of course, do justice to the traveler's vision. Nor does it provide a very meaningful definition of Frost's popularity except in negative terms. That is, if Frost's central poetic character is as widely misunderstood as so many would have it, then his popularity is a result not of his poetry but of the limitations of his audience, a measurement not of his achievement but of the cultural poverty of his environment. The popular audience from this point of view is necessarily an inferior audience not capable of nor really interested in understanding the poet. The focus of this study has not been to take issue with this point of view, but rather to examine the basis of it. Neither Frost's poetry nor the record of the criticism of that poetry provides a satisfactory explanation of the cultural episode that began with Ezra Pound's emphasis upon Frost's early failure to gain recognition at home and received the relatively late
re-emphasis shortly before Frost's death in terms of the
debate between Lionel Trilling and J. Donald Adams. That
cultural episode, that persistent preoccupation not so
much with the poetry as with the poet's popularity, is
best explained in terms of the uses to which the popular-
ity can so conviently be put in the continuing debate
about the quality of the mass culture of a democratic
state. Frost's most ardent admirers have felt compelled
to explain away his popularity by saying that he is simply
not understood by his popular audience; one of his most
perceptive critics, Yvor Winters, has seen the matter
rather in terms of a confusion "widespread in our culture."

In the final analysis, it is explanations like those
of Winters and Nitchie that are most meaningful in an
attempt to understand the cultural phenomenon of Frost's
popularity. This is not to say that theirs are the best
or that they are even wholly valid explanations, but rather
that the most meaningful approach is the one which they
take of attempting to explain the basis of the appeal which
the poetry has for the popular audience instead of trying
to explain away that appeal as a result of widespread mis-
understanding. And one of the best explanations of the
basis of that appeal can be made in terms of the central
image in the poetry which is of Frost's principal poetic
character, the traveler through the natural world.

We have considered earlier certain affinities between the traveler as he appears in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and Thoreau in the posture he assumes in Walden and Nick Adams in Big Two-Hearted River. If Frost's popularity is to be explained positively rather than negatively, it can best be explained in terms of the central image of the poetry which has so much in common with that recurrent and most popular image in American literature, the solitary man confronting the natural world, usually the great American wilderness. Frost's traveler is very American in the sense that Leatherstocking is very American; and in the sense that Ishmael, Hester Prynne, Thoreau as he appears in Walden, Huck Finn and Nick Adams are very American. All of these but Ishmael have in common their confrontation with the American wilderness which has been the most important symbol at both the literary and legendary levels of the principal challenge of the American experiment, the breaking with the traditions of the past. The central question has been whether or not civilized man could realize the potentialities of the new Eden, if he could indeed break with the human condition as it had been defined by more than two thousand years of western civilization and begin truly anew in the new world. That the answer to the question is so obviously
no does not make the question any less important to an understanding of American culture. Indeed, the very men responsible for articulating the question repeatedly said no to it themselves: civilization overtakes Leatherstocking; Hester stays in Boston; Huck's final desperate cry pales into insignificance against his repeated failures to escape; Frost's traveler turns away from the woods. But the hope of moral rejuvenation has been hard to give up and there is still faith in man's ability to wrest it physically from the natural environment. And the man to do this is the practical, simple man close to nature, the man who knows about birch trees, axe-helves, rock walls, pasture lands and snowstorms. This is the man who strides through Frost's poetry—he is more American than New England, and he is responsible more than any other factor for Frost's appeal. As there is a merging of the public platform mask with the poetic mask of the New England sage, so there is a merging of the personality of Frost the man, in still another role of his, that of, the simple, plainspoken farmer, with the poetic mask of the traveler through the natural world. And it is the combination of these final two which is responsible for the most significantly popular image of the poet.
A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY


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EXAMINATION AND THESIS REPORT

Candidate: Dendinger, Lloyd Nash

Major Field: English

Title of Thesis: Robert Frost: Popular Image of A Poet

Approved:

[Signatures and titles]

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

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