



Being in a Landscape: Reconsidering the Poetry of Robert Frost as a Model for Environmental Engagement in an Era of Accelerating Climate Change

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Being in a Landscape: Reconsidering the Poetry of Robert Frost as a Model for
Environmental Engagement in an Era of Accelerating Climate Change

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Abstract

This thesis re-examines several of Robert Frost's poems in light of his identification as a synecdochist and aim of reaching an ever-widening audience to provide that audience with a "momentary stay against confusion." It explores the potential of his poetry to serve as a model for contemporary engagement with the environment. Supported by excerpts from the poet's letters, speeches and prose, it considers these poems as acts of *ecopoiesis* or "making" of the "home or dwelling-place" as defined by Jonathan Bate in *Song of the Earth* and asserts that Frost's poetic celebrations of the reciprocity between humankind and environment serve to subtly challenge assumptions of human supremacy over other inhabitants of Earth.

With a primary focus on poems that were begun or completed during the first decade of the twentieth century – a time when the poet was out of necessity, actively and regularly engaged with a thirty-acre lot of land in Derry, New Hampshire – it argues that the poet's conscious choice to dwell in rural settings where he could engage in a continued practice of reflection within revisited environment enabled the creation of vital poetry concerning what was in existence where he was in existence. Through discussion of John Elder's essay "The Poetry of Experience" an account of his field experience of Frost's enigmatic poem "Mowing," it also explores the educational value of these poems as they provide opportunities for a wide range of readers to engage imaginatively with the environment, an activity of increasing importance as we face the challenges of global climate change in the twenty-first century.

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Dedication

*This work is dedicated to
Sue Weaver-Schopf,
my finest formal teacher,
whose impassioned reading
of poetry
has taught me
to unearth meaning.*

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Thank you to my parents, the artist Robert D. Sutherland and Mary Jane Sutherland, a writer of children's stories.

Special thanks to Lawrence Buell, for guiding me through the gates and empowering me to write from the heart, and to my husband Mark D. Freeman who lovingly listens to wild thoughts, considers them and helps me on my way.

Chapter I

Our place among the infinities¹



Though unconventional, the inclusion of a photographic image here is the most effective introduction to this thesis. This photograph of Earth, known as the “Blue Marble” was taken by the crew of the Apollo 17 on December 7th, 1972.² Since that time, we have become accustomed to this amazing vantage point, but this particular image, a color photograph of the earth in full view, was the first of its kind, the first to enable us to immediately take in the awesome complexity of our planet and its surrounding atmosphere. No language is required for such instant apprehension. Cultural barriers fall away and we are able to instinctively react to what the earth is, our home.

1. Last line of Frost’s poem “The Star Splitter,” version from a 2/12/1923 letter, *The Robert Frost Letters to Louis Untermeyer*.

2. Image courtesy of NASA Johnson Space Center and retrieved from: <http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photos/milestones-space-photography>
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But like all elements of the universe, our home is changing. In November of 2014, the United Nations Environment Programme's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released their *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report*, a report that integrates results of decades-long research conducted by oceanographers, mathematicians, climatologists, chemists, biologists and physicists. Within its "Summary for Policymakers," the IPCC confirms:

Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gasses are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems. Warming of the climate system is unequivocal and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and sea level has risen. (IPCC, 2014 2)

The report also very clearly warns: "(C)ontinued emissions of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" and asserts that "(L)imiting climate change would require substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions which, together with adaptation, can limit climate change risks" (8).

Efforts like those of the IPCC are part of a growing movement aimed at strengthening humankind's collective sense of responsibility toward Earth's environment. The work of the many dedicated individuals that comprised this panel is helping to clear the fog of denial and enable us to collectively face the fact that human degradation of Earth and its environment (as evidenced in part by deforestation, increasing rates of species extinction and extreme weather) has reached a crisis point, one that will force us

all to reconsider the nature of technological development, our individual livelihoods, and our lifestyle choices as they contribute to a global chain of CO2 emissions.

In his 2014 Harvard Foundation Humanitarian of the Year address, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon acknowledged the IPCC's contribution toward the unprecedented December 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, emphasizing the need for "all countries to come together to secure a new climate agreement." He impressed climate change's stark reality upon the predominately college-aged audience, recounting his travels "to the frontlines of climate impacts – from the Artic Circle to Antarctica, from the melting Andes and to island nations watching the tides grow even higher," and reminded them that "(W)e need individuals to do their part through the choices they make, from voting booths to grocery stores." In a necessarily optimistic tone, he assured the entire audience that, through increasing awareness and environmentally conscious choices, they could become part of a potential solution.

The work of the U.N. and the IPCC not only educates us, it affirms that we are alive in a time when human beings possess the intelligence and technology to assess this immensely complicated situation and from that assessment, begin to envision a new course for humankind's stewardship of Earth's environment. So how do we, the planet's most intellectually evolved species, begin to face the gravity of this challenge, move past our inclinations toward denial and push forward into responsible stewardship of our only known habitable home?

All avenues of communication must be explored as we adapt to and try to mitigate the effects of climate change and luckily, for at least a quarter of a century, much of this essential exploration has been occurring within the field of ecocriticism. Also known as

literature and environment studies, ecocriticism is a field in which writers, philosophers, environmentalists, artists and scientists are engaged in efforts to promote consideration and representation of Earth's environment in the works of literature, art and scientific practices that continually shape human culture. Ecocriticism has grown from an essentially conservation focused field to one that incorporates environmental justice, gender studies, animal rights, post-colonial issues and more. The convergence of these diverse perspectives continues to push our intellectual boundaries while encouraging us to respect the interdependency of all aspects of Earth's environment, including ourselves.

In their 2011 *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* joint assessment of progress within the field, Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber specifically address the potential of ecopoetic acts, reminding us that, "Even though, as poet W. H. Auden famously wrote, 'poetry makes nothing happen' in and of itself, the outside-the-box thought experiments of literature and other media can offer unique resources for activating concern and creative thinking about the planet's environmental future." The authors also take a moment to acknowledge American poet Robert Frost's "achievement as the poet of upcountry New England at its turn-of-the-century moment of postagricultural reforestation" (Buell, Heise, Thornber 418). In this thesis, I will expand upon their acknowledgement and show how Frost's poetry, particularly those poems written during his eight and a half years as farmer-in-residence in Derry, New Hampshire are relevant today and can serve to foster twenty-first century environmental engagement.

For over twenty years, Lawrence Buell has been busy sifting through the complex landscape of human art forms that contribute to environmental awareness and publicly refining the concept of ecocriticism. In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature*

Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, he solidified an argument that the established canon of American literature has been dominated by anthropocentric works that background or exclude the natural elements that human beings depend upon for survival. To illustrate ecocriticism's core conviction that literature and art can "reinforce, direct and enliven, environmental concern" Buell revisited Henry David Thoreau's famous 1845 experiment of living for two years, two months and two days in the woods off the shore of Walden Pond in a cabin that he built on a budget of \$28.12, hand-sawn lumber and salvaged parts.

Walden: Or, Life in the Woods is a fitting place for twenty-first century Americans to begin to examine the literature of their culture in an ecocritical light. It marks an early intersection of radical social/environmental experimentation and established American literature. A century and a half later, the poetry woven into Thoreau's accounts of seasonal changes in and around Walden Pond continues to inspire readers to try and "live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau 66).

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper, fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. (71)

Thoreau's art brought local, natural elements into focus, foregrounding them and acknowledging our necessary interaction with and reliance upon them and detailed descriptions of extinct plant species and specific information on annual bloom times

contained in his 1852 to 1861 journals have now begun to inform assessments of how the climate of eastern Massachusetts has changed since the mid-nineteenth century.³

Twenty-nine years after Thoreau retreated to his cabin in the woods, the same year that the U. S. Army raided the final sanctuary of the Kiowa, Comanche and Cheyenne in northern Texas in what came to be known as the Red River War, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco. Frost's younger sister Jeanie was also born there, but in 1885, Frost's father William Prescott Frost, Jr., a politically ambitious, hard-living Bay Area newspaper editor, died of tuberculosis and eleven year-old Robert, eight year-old Jeanie and their mother, Isabelle were faced with the long journey across country to Lawrence, Massachusetts here they buried him and moved in with his parents. Isabelle, an experienced schoolteacher, soon found a teaching position and a place of her own in Salem Depot, NH. And so, Robert Frost came of age in New England, in the shadow of iconoclastic, environmentally attuned writers like Emerson, Thoreau and Dickinson in a time when "poet" seemed like a viable career path.

In a July 15th, 1915 letter to editor Walter Prichard Eaton, Frost expresses gratitude for Thoreau's achievement in *Walden*, citing two influential passages:

I'm sure I'm glad of all the unversified poetry of Walden – and not merely nature-descriptive, but narrative as in the chapter on the play with the loon on the lake, and the character-descriptive as in the beautiful passage about the French-Canadian woodchopper. That last alone with some things in Turgenieff must have had a good deal to do with the making of me. (Frost and Barry 51)

And in the following excerpt from a 1922 letter to his friend Wade Van Dore, he delights in their mutual admiration:

3. For more on how Thoreau's journals are informing this research see Richard Primack's *Walden Warming*.

I like him as well as you do. In one book (Walden) he surpasses everything we have had in America. You have found this out for yourself without my having told you: I have found it out for myself without your having told me. Isn't it beautiful that there can be such concert without collusion? (Burnshaw 11)

In "Reading Home, Thoreau, Literature and the Phenomenon of Inhabitation," Peter Blakemore considers Thoreau's practice of "intentional perception" within the context of a greater American eco-poetic tradition and without specifically addressing it, reveals a commonality between Thoreau's practice and that of the twentieth century poet, Robert Frost:

The practice of walking, of returning slowly, carefully, lovingly, again and again, with an open, receptive, uncertain point of view to the things themselves puts the perceiving subject in a continuously evolving relationship. Developing this type of Useful Ignorance can have momentous consequences. "How much, what infinite, leisure it requires, as of a lifetime, to appreciate a single phenomenon! You must camp down beside it as for life, having reached your land of promise, and give yourself wholly to it," Thoreau decided in the winter of 1852. "It must stand for the whole world to you, symbolic of all things." (Blakemore 120-21)

Neither Thoreau's directive "you must camp down beside it," nor his petition that a single phenomenon "must stand for the whole world to you, symbolic of all things," was lost on the twentieth century poet. Frost and his wife Elinor preferred rural to cosmopolitan surroundings and over the course of their lives together, they maintained several farm residences. These deliberate choices enabled them both to cultivate a continued practice of reflection within a revisited environment.

Frost published his final volume of poetry in 1962 and died in 1963, the same year that the Beatles came to America. Throughout a literary career that spanned eight decades, he continued to incorporate elements of local landscape into his poetry while striving to reach as large an audience as possible. This goal proved to be tremendously

ambitious given the rapid-fire cultural changes and fashions of literary criticism that marked the twentieth century, but then, Frost was an ambitious poet. His dogged early correspondence with editor Susan Hayes Ward after her 1894 publication of his first poem “My Butterfly” reflects this growing ambition. In a January 20, 1895 letter, a twenty year-old Frost gets straight to the point: “If it is seriously I must speak, I undertake a future. I cannot believe that poem was merely a chance. I will surpass it” (*The Letters of Robert Frost. Volume I, 1886-1920*, 37).

And of course, he would. Over the next decade, the aspiring poet would produce most of the poems that would fill his first two published volumes of poetry, but at the time of this correspondence, he had not yet discovered the place that would bring those poems to life.

Chapter II

*Slave to a springtime passion for the earth*⁴

Just as *Walden* presents an accessible opening for re-examination of Thoreau's work, so too, Frost's eclogue "The Pasture" is a clear starting point for reconsideration of his poetry as a model for contemporary environmental engagement. Frost would revisit "The Pasture" many times, as epigraphs to later collections of his work. With its sensually engaging imagery and open invitation "(Y)ou come too," this simple eclogue still coaxes a wide range of readers imaginatively out into the pasture.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long. – You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long. – You come too.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Frost had become discouraged in his pursuit of a "life of letters." He'd turned his attention to raising chickens, selling eggs and crafting local color pieces for journals like *Farm-Poultry* and *The Eastern Poultryman*, but ultimately this proved to be a tragic period for the family. His mother passed away and the Frost's first child, Elliot died of cholera in 1900. At Elinor's urging, Frost's grandfather intervened and bought a farm in Derry, New Hampshire with the provision that the young couple maintain the property for a minimum of ten years. When they took possession of the land, although it was still in the process of recovering from the prior

4. From Frost's "Putting in the Seed," published in 1916.

century of clearing, it had begun to fill in with quince, peach and pear trees, an apple orchard, oaks, maples, beeches and an alder grove. A gravel highway ran through the property and across that highway were two small pastures.

The ensuing years on the Derry farm were by no means idyllic, but they constitute the longest period of time when the poet was able to consistently engage with one environment *before* he achieved fame. In a footnote to *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, editor Mark Richardson draws from an Amherst College transcript of a reading that Frost gave in Ford Memorial Chapel to address questions about his failure or success as a farmer:

When asked, Are you a real farmer? . . . I always say, I was a real one but a bad one. I did not make much of a living. We had a hard time – that makes it all the more genuine. We lived by farming 8 ½ years by actual measure. I was thinking the other day I could tear these books, tear the leaves out, and I could lay the poems pretty nearly to cover the little thirty acre farm; in fact, one of my children made such a map and from her incomplete work could locate as many as twenty to thirty of the poems. (*Collected Prose* xxxi)

Reading through his first three volumes; *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval*, one can see how eight and a half years of engaging with a thirty acre lot of land had worked its way into the aspiring poet's consciousness. In "Putting in the Seed" a sonnet from *Mountain Interval*, although the speaker refers to his activity as "work," evocative sensory details like "white/Soft petals fallen" and "smooth bean and wrinkled pea" reveal it as something more, an activity that could lead to unexpected consequences:

You come to fetch me from my work tonight
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,

Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea)
 And go along with you ere you lose sight
 Of what you came for and become like me,
 Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
 How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Farmers and gardeners will recognize the speaker's habit of turning organic material ("not so barren quite" apple blossom petals) into the soil, nourishing it and preparing it for seed that will grow and in turn nourish the farm's inhabitants. Frost's obvious human fertility metaphor celebrates the interrelatedness of humankind and the land. In the following lines from Frost's "A Prayer in Spring" published in 1913, birds, bees and love abound:

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers to-day;
 And give us not to think so far away
 As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
 All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh give us pleasure in the orchard white,
 Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
 And make us happy in the happy bees,
 The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird
 That suddenly above the bees is heard,
 The meteor that thrusts in with needled bill,
 And off a blossom in mid-air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love, (1-13)

Frost's repetition of the words "love" and "pleasure," here serve to remind us of the potential within this "continuously evolving" relationship. For whether we define our practice as botany, horticulture, landscaping, caretaking or even novice gardening, there

is always a possibility that it may lead to some experience of love. Consider the words of contemporary horticulturist and “passionate plantsman” David Culp:

Gardening often brings me to my knees, by this I mean more than planting, weeding, and fussing, the bended-knee, manicure-destroying grunt work that all of us do. The beauty and diversity of plants often stop me in my tracks, and I am never satisfied to simply gaze at these wonders from above. I get down on my knees to get a closer look, touching the plants and the soil they grow in, a communion that connects me to the earth and to life on Earth in an immediate, almost electric way. (Culp 17-18)

Writers like Wendell Berry have been expressing the importance of this type of communion with some sense of urgency since the 1980’s. In a series of short stories set in his family’s Kentucky homeland entitled *A place in time: twenty stories of the Port William membership*, Berry expresses the beauty and struggle that accompanies sustained communion with the land, first through the thoughts of his pivotal character, Andy

Catlett:

Andy Catlett keeps in his mind a map of the country around Port William as he has known it all his life from the times and lives before his. There are moments, now that he is getting old, when he seems to reside in that country in his mind even as his mind still resides in the country...

And then, in a more direct voice:

But it is possible, even so, to look back with a certain fondness to a time when the sounds of engines were not almost constant in the sky, on the roads and in the fields. Our descendants may know such a time again when the petroleum is all burnt. How they will fare will depend on the neighborly wisdom, the love for the place and its genius, and the skills that they may manage to revive between now and then. (Berry, *A place in time* 14-15)

The Derry, New Hampshire farmhouse and surrounding property where Frost and his family experienced a similar type of communion has been restored to nearly the same state it was in at the turn of the twentieth century, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Lesley Frost Ballantine and the State of New Hampshire. Now known as *The Robert*

Frost Farm, it is a place where, on a summer day, in the hush of twenty-first century airwaves and machinery, visitors can still experience the multi-layered interplay of creature calls emanating from Frost's "little mowing field" and surrounding woods. A path leads visitors from the farmhouse through the woods across Hyla Brook (or "West-Running Brook"). It follows a series of low, tumbling, stone walls that Frost would walk and repair in springtime with his neighbor, Napoleon Guay.

A similar stone wall suddenly appears in Frost's blank verse poem "Two Look at Two" a brief tale of a couple's evening walk into the woods. In "Two Look at Two" the poet reminds us of the reciprocal nature of humankind's relationship with environment, and of how the experience of communion sometimes comes upon us "in a great wave":

A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
 She saw them in their field, they her in hers.
 The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
 Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
 Was in her clouded eyes; they saw no fear there.
 She seemed to think that, two thus, they were safe.
 Then, as if they were something that, though strange,
 She could not trouble her mind with too long,
 She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
 'This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?'
 But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
 A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall as near the wall as they.
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
 Not the same doe come back into her place.
 He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
 As if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
 I doubt if you're as living as you look."
 Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
 To stretch a proffering hand – and a spell-breaking.
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
 'This *must* be all.' It was all. Still they stood,
 A great wave from it going over them,

As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love. (15-42)

In his 1935 introduction to E. A. Robinson's "King Jasper," Frost addresses the act of "correspondence," one of the driving forces behind his desire to live and work as a poet:

It has been said that recognition in art is all. Better say correspondence is all. Mind must convince mind that it can uncurl and wave the same filaments of subtlety, soul convince soul that it can give off the same shimmers of eternity. At no point would anyone but a brute fool want to break off this correspondence. It is all there is to satisfaction; and it is salutatory to live in fear of it being broken off. (Frost and Barry 119)

By 1915, when the family moved into their second U. S. farmhouse residence in Franconia, NH, Frost had already published two critically acclaimed volumes of poetry. Most of his time was now occupied with the promotion and defense of his writing and public image. In a letter written on May 4, 1916, Frost lets his literary ally Louis Untermeyer, in on a secret:

I have often wished that the other sharer of it had perished in the war. It is this: The poet in me died nearly ten years ago. Fortunately, he had run through several phases, four to be exact, all well-defined, before he went. The calf I was in the nineties I merely take to market. I am become my own salesman. Two of my phases you have been so – what shall I say – as to like. Take care that you don't get your mouth set to declare the other two (as I release them), a falling off of power, for that is what they can't be whatever else they may be, since they were almost inextricably mixed with the first two in the writing and only my sagacity has separated or sorted them in the afterthought. (*Letters to Untermeyer*, 28-29)

Roughly ten years earlier, Frost had begun to achieve local notoriety. His poem "A Tuft of Flowers" had been published in the Derry *Enterprise* and he had accepted a teaching post at Pinkerton Academy, making the shift from private to public poet. At the time that this letter was written, Frost was forty-two, in the throes of sudden fame and dealing with sick children at home. Most likely, Frost was defensively claiming a decline

in his own creative output and Untermeyer may have been a good correspondent for this type of venting. Later poems like “For Once, Then Something,” “Never Again Would Birds Song be the Same” and “Directive,” would reveal a depth of wisdom that the “calf” of the nineties had not yet acquired.

In 1939, he wrote “The Figure a Poem Makes” and used it as a preface for the *Collected Poems of Robert Frost*. Here, in perhaps his most forthcoming description of creative process, Frost reveals his own to be one of inception, growth and fruition:

Just as the first mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as meter, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.

It should be the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects or cults are founded on, but a momentary stay against confusion. (Barry 126)

“Delight” is the seed that takes hold and then “inclines to the impulse.” As with the differentiation of apical meristems in plants, a poem “assumes direction” and then “runs a course.” Fruition is not an end in itself or “art for art’s sake,” but a product with potential. For someone, somewhere, at some point in time, it may provide “a momentary stay against confusion.”

In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate delves deep into the poet’s role with regard to environmental stewardship. He argues that by creating opportunities to “engage *imaginatively* with the non-human” (Bate 199) through symbol and metaphor, they raise human consciousness and inspire environmental concern. He identifies the root of our

current environmental dilemma as a “progressive severance of humankind from nature” examining the historical roots of this severance:

The major philosophical revolutions since the seventeenth century have constituted a progressive severance of humankind from nature that has licensed, or at least neglected, technology’s ravaging of the earth’s finite resources . . . writers in the Romantic tradition which begins in the late eighteenth century have been especially concerned with this severance. Romanticism declares allegiance with what Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* called ‘the beautiful and permanent forms of nature’. . . when we commune with those forms we live with a peculiar intensity, and conversely that our lives are diminished when technology and industrialization alienate us from those forms. (245)

Until recently, the technological advances of the nineteenth and twentieth century have been so effective at fulfilling our immediate needs and buffering us from unpredictable environmental forces that we have come to live with illusions of invulnerability, but tragically, events like Hurricane Katrina, Super Storm Sandy, the Moore, Oklahoma tornado of 2013 and recent California droughts have reacquainted us with the consequences of extreme weather. Frost’s “Storm Fear” published in 1915, captures a New England family’s vulnerability to severe winter weather:

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lowest chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 'Come out! Come out!'-
 It costs no inward struggle not to go,
 Ah, no!
 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
 And my heart owns a doubt

Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.

Like Frost, Jonathan Bate is attentive to the powerful influence of weather. In *The Song of the Earth* he walks readers through an analysis of John Keats' ode "To Autumn," tracing the luminous harvest scene that Keats depicts in his September 1819 poem back to the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. In addition to a death toll of over 10,000 people on the island of Sumbawa, this eruption created a massive cloud of volcanic ash that drifted through Earth's atmosphere, covering much of the Northern Hemisphere for several months, causing crop failures and epidemics throughout 1816 - 1818. Apparently, the bounty that Keats conveys so beautifully in "To Autumn" was the result of a period of striking recovery:

1.
Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;

Bate places hope for the future in our ability to engage in the higher act of *ecopoeisis*, an act he defines by its Greek roots: "poiesis/making" of the "oikos/home or dwelling-place," describing it as "a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature" (231). In light of Bate's observations and hopes, let's consider the ecopoetic lifespan of Frost's simple sestet entitled "Lodged" from his 1928 volume *West-Running Brook*:

The rain to the wind said,
'You push and I'll pelt.'
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,

And lay lodged—though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt.

Through observation the speaker knows that the flowers are lodged, but not dead, understanding that something below the surface sustains them. If we substitute the word “hail” for “rain” and “crushed” for “lodged,” we might have a relevant poem for our new century and if we take it one step further and embellish “hail” with the clumsy compound adjective “golf-ball sized,” (though it would destroy Frost’s careful metric balance) it might ring even truer to a contemporary audience. The point here is not to re-write this lovely little poem, but to contemporize Frost’s example of direct engagement with the environment. We may never know how plants “feel” or if they undergo anything at all comparable to human experience, but here, even with its anthropomorphic quotation, outdated language and predictable rhyme scheme, Frost’s sestet still has something to offer.

Sadly, we have become all too aware that what Wordsworth called “permanent forms of nature” are in fact impermanent. Even so, we are afforded daily opportunities to commune with “forms of nature” and achieve the “peculiar intensity” that Bate advocates. Within U.S. culture, our “progressive severance of humankind from nature” may have gradually and sensibly taken root as non-indigenous North Americans struggled against “wilderness” in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for survival, but as the IPCC, the U.N. Secretary-General and so many others have confirmed, the environmental crises of the twenty-first century will require that we all take steps to bridge that severance. Following a literary path broadened by Frost’s life’s work,

Wendell Berry offers us “A Vision⁵.”

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
 to stand like slow-growing trees
 on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
 if we will make our seasons welcome here,
 asking not too much of earth or heaven,
 then a long time after we are dead
 the lives our lives prepare will live
 here, their houses strongly placed
 upon valley sides, fields and gardens
 rich in the windows. The river will run
 clear, as we will never know it,
 and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
 On the level hills will be
 green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
 On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
 the old forest, an old forest will stand,
 its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
 The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
 Families will be singing in the fields.
 In their voices they will hear a music
 risen out of the ground. They will take
 nothing from the ground they will not return.
 whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
 native to this valley, will spread over it
 like a grove, and memory will grow
 into legend, legend into song, song
 into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
 the songs of its people and its birds,
 will be health and wisdom and indwelling
 light. This is no paradisaal dream.
 Its hardship is its possibility.

But of course, on our way to the type of future that Berry envisions, there will be obstacles and Bate identifies a particularly stubborn, embedded one:

Central to the dilemma of environmentalism is the fact that the act of identifying the presumption of human apartness from nature as the problem is in itself a symptom of that very apartness. The identification is the product of an instrumental way of thinking and using language. It may therefore be that a necessary step in overcoming the apartness is to think and use language in a different way. Let us begin by supposing that we

5. “A Vision” is quoted here from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. It was originally published in Berry’s 1977 volume of poetry entitled “Clearing.”

cannot do without thought-experiments and language experiments which imagine a return to nature, a reintegration of the human and the Other” (37).

Understandably, people question ecocritical assessments of art and literature that are based upon the realization of disproportionate representations of human significance. After all, art has been developed by human beings and can *only* be presented through human perspective. It may take time for the majority of us to begin to recognize the consequences of a centuries-old habit of viewing humankind as apart from or above all other elements within Earth’s environment. In an essay entitled “The Last Distinction” in *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2013*, Benjamin Hale describes a mass “oversimplification” of Darwin’s research that continues to support ingrained modes of thinking about our elevated place within the entirety of “Nature”:

“ . . . a pop-semiotic stand-in for the theory of evolution; the left-to-right single-file march of an ape morphing into a man, with its implication that evolution is a teleological progression and *Homo sapiens sapiens* the goal. The illustration does less to explain evolution than to reinforce the inaccurate (and specifically Western) idea of a radical break between humans and other animals. (Hale 11)

Aware of what he’s up against, in this attempt to elevate the status of the poet in our data-driven age, Jonathan Bate seeks reinforcement in E. O. Wilson’s *The Diversity of Life* in which Wilson:

. . . argues with extraordinary eloquence for the beauty as well as the necessity of biodiversity. He has sufficient faith in humankind to believe that if we can be made to understand the importance of biodiversity, we might do something to slow down the rate at which we are eroding it. An anatomist of interlocking ecosystems such as Wilson gives us a technical language with which to understand the inter-relatedness of all living things, of species and environment. (Bate 230)

Emboldened by Wilson’s explication of a keystone species’ role in maintaining the structure of an ecosystem, Bate poses the question, “Could the poet be a keystone sub-

species of *Homo sapiens*? The poet: an apparently useless creature, but potentially the savior of ecosystems” (231).

Wilson’s voice fuses passion for scientific discovery with deep respect for the transformative power of language. Out of his enduring fascination with the process of colonization, he has written *The Social Conquest of Earth* in which he traces mammalian social evolution as far back as scientific evidence will allow, identifying adaptations that have enabled us to become the species with the largest encephalization quotient⁶ on Earth. Unsurprisingly, Wilson attributes much of our success to the development of human language, but also to eusociality,⁷ a set of invaluable survival traits based upon division of labor; tendencies that we share with ants and wasps.

While Jonathan Bate emphasizes the importance of our ability to communicate through acts of *ecopoeisis*, Wilson identifies ongoing adaptations like increasing racial diversity, variations within human sexuality and developing technologies as important contributors to our evolutionary process, and Wendell Berry dares to project a dream of Earth restored one parcel at a time, through respectful interactions with the land and local community. Like Berry, Wilson is compelled to project hopeful message. He concludes *The Social Conquest of Earth* with his own vision:

Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings, or at least the strong beginnings of one. We will do a lot more damage to ourselves and the rest of life along the way, but out of an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay. (Wilson 297)

6. Encephalization quotient is the ratio of actual brain mass to predicted brain mass based on the size of an animal.

7. Eusocial groups - animal groups composed of multiple generations in which members are prone to perform altruistic acts as part of their division of labor.

Though they approach the subject from divergent backgrounds, part the good news that Wilson, Berry and Bate share is that like all other forms of life on Earth, humankind continues to evolve.

Chapter III

*Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.*⁸

In a September 12th, 1912 letter to Susan Hayes Ward, Frost vented his growing frustration with American publishers:

. . . my soul inclines to go apart by itself again and devise poetry. Heaven send that I go not too late in life for the emotions I expect to work in. But in any case, I should not stay, if only for scorn of scorn—scorn of the scorn that leaves me still unnoticed among the least of the versifiers that stop a gap in the magazines. The Forum gives me space for one poem this year; the Companion for two. The Independent, my longest friend, has held one of my poems unprinted now these three years. So slight is my consideration. (*Letters, Volume I* 69-70)

By the time he had inherited the Derry property from his grandfather, Frost had been teaching at Pinkerton Academy for several years and the family (all six of them) had moved into an apartment nearby. He sold the farm and used the proceeds to finance their 1912 passage to England. Much later, Frost would explain this bold move to Untermeyer, “(A)t thirty-seven I had pretty well despaired of a reputation of any make. I went to England to write and be poor without further scandal in the family” (Frost, *Letters to Untermeyer* 7). Once settled in Buckinghamshire, Frost submitted the first of two manuscripts that he had brought over on the ship to the publisher David Nutt. Nutt accepted *A Boy’s Will*, and soon after, published the second manuscript, *North of Boston*. It was 1913 and finally, at the age of thirty-nine, Frost had secured recognition as an American poet of merit.

8. From Frost’s poem “The Black Cottage” published in 1915.

In London, Frost mingled with the Georgian poets and encountered Ezra Pound who had been instrumental in founding the Imagist movement along with T. E. Hulme and Amy Lowell. Pound was then an ardent supporter of struggling writers. He also had a hand in editing Eliot's "The Waste Land" and was instrumental in "modernizing" the late work of W. B. Yeats. He helped to move Frost's career along as well, contributing a positive review of *A Boy's Will* to the May 1913 edition of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

Despite his success, Frost did not remain overseas for long. War-torn Europe was no place to raise his growing family and he and Elinor were fortunate enough to arrange a return voyage to the United States during the early days of 1915. Pound and Eliot remained in England and began to develop and promote their individual styles of "high" modern poetry. By the time that the Frosts were settled back in the U.S., the American publisher, Henry Holt & Co. had sold a reported twenty thousand copies of *North of Boston*.

By the 1920's, the wide range of form and perspective characteristic of Modern poetry was evident in the contrasting styles of America's leading poets. For example, between the years 1920 and 1922: Pound created his famously complex portrait poem "H. S. Mauberley, Part I (Life and Contacts)" a verbal collage written in five languages with extensive footnotes that he used as a vehicle to vent his frustration with fashionable London esthetics, Eliot published his groundbreaking modernist poem "The Waste Land" and Frost continued to turn to the local landscape, creating "Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening."

With the emergence of The New Criticism in the 1930's, Frost's focus on local environment and his use of colloquial language strained against the strictures of traditional poetic form, devices that were so successful in *North of Boston*, became liabilities in terms of garnering critical acclaim. (To the end, he refused to embrace the Modern practice of "free verse."⁹) The general accessibility of his poetry also helped to render it out of vogue. His work was gradually relegated to a "regional" or "second tier" status, below that of the new, High Modern style.

By the 1960's, Frost's reputation as a New England "regional" poet was entrenched. In *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* published in 1965, critic M. L. Rosenthal briefly considers Frost, but in the shadow of E. A. Robinson and with an air of condescension:

He has absorbed one kind of regional experience, and its voices and shadings, as well as any poet has done; he has given us its comic notes, its dramatic crises, its familiar imponderables, its vivid surfaces. But also, he echoes its dreary 'wisdom' and overdependence on a less and less meaningful past. Thought and form in Frost seem therefore weaker, at once more smug and more timid, than they might be. (113)

Yet in 1986, the critic Paul Fussell named Frost in his short list of "exemplary Moderns" along with Edward Thomas, Conrad Aiken and Elizabeth Bishop, drawing a clear distinction between a *Modern* and a *Modernist*:

A *Modernist* is a late nineteenth or twentieth-century artistic theorist who has decided to declare war on the received, the philistine, the bourgeois, the sentimental, and the democratic. A Modern, (one) might conclude, is capable of incorporating into his work, contemporary currents of thought and emotion without any need to quarrel with the past—intellectually, psychologically, or technically. A Modern can embrace the past and not just feel but enjoy its continuity with the present. (Fussell 584)

9. While Frost wrote several poems in blank verse (unrhymed verse, typically structured in iambic pentameter) he likened free verse to "playing tennis with the net down."

The purpose here of contrasting Frost's "Modern" approach with the "Modernist" approaches of his contemporaries Eliot and Pound is not to diminish the brilliant innovation of "In a Station of the Metro," the Herculean literary effort involved in the creation of Pound's *Cantos*, or to devalue the elegant, evocative imagery woven throughout Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It is simply to acknowledge one aspect of a highly influential process of stratification that shaped the development of early twentieth century American poetry.

Perhaps the most articulate defender of Frost's place within the "Modern Experiment" is Priscilla Paton. In her 1998 article "Apologizing for Robert Frost," she reveals how "high" and "low" distinctions that emerged within U.S. culture during the nineteenth century still encourage "condescending attitudes" toward his poetry:

Being American in the early part of the twentieth century did not fit well with being High and Modern. As Lawrence Levine argues in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, we live with attitudes toward "high" and "serious" art versus "low" and "popular" entertainments that were formed at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth – the era when Frost's reputation was formed . . . Thus Frost is caught up in a contradictory trend: a desire for American culture that nonetheless disparaged the local and showed a "deference for things European."

It is well known that Frost, with his "old fashioned way to be new," did not fare well in the emerging highbrow culture. He used conventions that, like God, should be dead. The formalism that developed out of the modern experiment initially devalued "provincial" Frost. Later formalist approaches, however, "redeemed" Frost by reading him as subtle and "modern" – the necessary term for approbation – and they downplayed his Americanness in favor of illuminating his debt to the classical and English traditions. But this shift led to other problems for the poet's reputation, to ignoring or apologizing for Frost's "sugary" poems (Jarrell's word for "Birches"), to condescending attitudes toward his regionalism, his pastoral conventions, and his general popularity. (Paton 79-80)

In the same year that Rosenthal brushed over Frost, critic Nina Baym recognized the shortsightedness of confining the poet's work to a minor, regionalist category, countering the perception of Frost as a "cracker barrel" philosopher with a different take on his work. In "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry" Baym explores an unfortunate consequence of the poet's stubborn resistance to urbane influences – the reduction of his status to "minor" poet:

Many critics have called Frost anti-intellectual or intellectually limited because of his lack of teleology, or because he tends to regard teleological systems with suspicion. Implicit in such criticism is the common view that there is only one way to be truly "intellectual" which is to be teleological, to talk about purpose in the universe. Frost seems rather to have decided, seriously and sincerely, that questions about purpose cannot be answered, and that man must therefore make his way without guessing at final causes. He is therefore, in the view of many, a writer of what can only be minor poetry. (Baym 720)

Baym focuses on Frost's "commitments to the 'poetic' theme" and "conviction that poetry is a unique discipline with its own characteristic subject matters as well as its own uses of language," citing examples from Frost's pastoral dialogues, eclogues and nature lyrics to support his ongoing attempts to express the "mutability of human relations and human existence." She explains how Frost's work was inspired by, yet departed from the example of Emerson:

In these poems, the landscape demonstrates the fact of mutability incessantly and obviously, forcing the speaker into reaction. In these poems, Frost shares with Emerson nothing more than the assumption that nature can be used to uncover and illustrate the underlying laws of the universe, because it operates by such laws. Ultimately, Frost's approach to nature is more scientific than Emersonian, for Frost does not take Emerson's next step, to insist that the laws of outer nature correspond to the laws of the inner mind. Without this step there is no arriving at the transcendental absorption into nature. (715)

Frost considered himself a synecdochist, as in synecdoche—a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole. This tendency to represent something of greater significance through the specifics of metaphor is exemplified in his 1926 poem “In Hardwood Groves:”

The same leaves over and over again!
They fall from giving shade above
To make one texture of faded brown
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again
To fill the trees with another shade,
They must go down past things coming up.
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is the way in ours.

This seemingly simple poem is not merely a series of descriptive passages depicting leaf fall, decomposition and regrowth, but an eloquent reminder of the mutability of all living things.

What Baym presciently acknowledged and what Rosenthal and others failed to anticipate in Frost’s work was his significant habit of writing about what was actually in existence in the places *where he was in existence*. While others were exploring and incorporating “exotic” Eastern philosophies, Frost was continuing on a path of local “intentional perception.” Unlike Pound’s “Pierian roses”¹⁰ or Eliot’s elusive “wild thyme unseen”¹¹ the sturdy seedlings, the darting birds, the bruised apples and pale orchises of Frost’s poetry were all aspects of real, familiar environments. In a 1927 lecture at

10. Ezra Pound “H. S. Mauberley [Life and contacts] (Part I).”

11. T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets*.

Wesleyan College, he remarked:

I'd rather be perfectly free of my material – reach down here in time and off there in space, and here's my two and two put together. Here's my idea, my thought. That's the freedom I'd like to give. It depends so much on the disconnection of things. There's too much sequence and logic all the time, of reciting what we learned overnight. . . . I think what I'm after is free meditation. I don't think that anybody gets to it when he's in anybody's company – only when his soul's alone. (*Collected Prose* 297 [2.6])

Most critics of the mid-twentieth century could not foresee the state of Earth's environment in the twenty-first century or that what Rosenthal dismissed as “dreary ‘wisdom’” was simply, wisdom.

Chapter IV

*The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows*¹²

Frost considered his inverted sonnet “Mowing,” a poem in which a speaker recounts the experience of hand-mowing with a scythe, to be the finest poem of his first published volume and John Elder’s account of a “Robert Frost Day” experience may explain why. Elder was eager to unveil the mystery behind Frost’s “whispering scythe” and so, early on a July morning in 1999, he took a group of curious Middlebury College students to Craftsbury, VT to experience the very same process during an opening session of a “Robert Frost Day” celebration:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
 And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
 What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
 Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
 Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
 And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
 It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
 Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

The hand mowing event began just after sunrise. Elder describes the process in detail:

Plant your feet so that you are facing directly toward the row to be mown, then advance in a slow shuffle. The blade passes through an arc that leaves a cleanly mown edge a foot or more to your right and gathers each stroke’s sheared grass into a windrow about the same distance to your left . . . Both the point and the heel of the blade are always held in contact with the ground, with no tilt and no lift for a backswing. This continuous motion burnishes the blade’s bottom surface and sends a vibration up

12. From Frost’s “Mowing,” published in 1913.

through the stems at an angle, from point to heel, rather than meeting them squarely edge on. Then it rustles back over the stubble at exactly the same height in preparation for the next slice. This dialogue with the grass makes a rhythmic, sibilant sound that is one of the distinct pleasures of hand moving. (Elder 651-652)

Elder explains that at the time the poem was written, “haying in the main fields would have already been carried out by a cutting machine pulled behind a team of horses . . . but (w)et ground, low ground, uneven ground, and little strips of meadow between the woods and a road would have been relegated to an individual worker with a scythe.” In Frost’s “The Exposed Nest” published in 1920, his speaker encounters a child attempting to repair a bird’s nest after a similar “cutting machine” has passed through a field:

You were forever finding some new play,
 So when I saw you down on hands and knees
 In the meadow, busy with new-cut hay,
 Trying, I thought, to set it up on end,
 I went to show you how to make it stay,
 If that was your idea, against the breeze,
 And, if you asked me, even help pretend
 To make it root again and grow afresh.
 But ‘twas no make-believe with you to-day,
 Nor was the grass itself your real concern,
 Though I found your hand full of wilted fern,
 Steel-bright June-grass, and blackening heads of clover.
 ‘Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground
 The cutter-bar had just gone champing over
 (miraculously without tasting flesh)
 And left defenseless to heat and light.
 You wanted to restore them to their right (1-17)

In “The Poetry of Experience,” Elder’s account of that “Robert Frost Day” experience, he recalls the sensory experience of scythe mowing and what it revealed; explaining that the “rhythm of labor,” the sound created by his scythe hitting the stalks and the sight and the sound of cut hay rustling “back over the stubble” induced a near meditative state, one that informed his understanding of the poem’s meaning, particularly

its enigmatic second-to-last line “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.”

Inspired by the experience, Elder attempted to share his new understanding of the poem with a fellow scholar:

After that morning in Craftsbury, I was incautious enough to mention to one Frost scholar that the experience of mowing had opened up a new dimension of the poem to me. His rejoinder was “The scythe in that poem means one thing and one thing only.” And of course it is true that Frost is always alert to shadows of mortality. (654)

Elder’s colleague was most likely referring to the critical perception that Frost’s work reveals a preoccupation with mortality, a perception that has been imprinted onto twentieth century literary history by comments made by the critic Lionel Trilling.

Trilling chose the very public occasion of Frost’s eighty-fifth birthday to acknowledge him as a “terrifying poet” who conceives of a “terrifying universe,” citing his short poem “Design” as an example.

It’s true that a shadow of death can be found in “Mowing,” but mainly because death is inextricable from life. To overlook Elder’s renewed experience of the poem in favor of an old, static assessment misses the point of the whole exercise. Thankfully, Elder was only momentarily ruffled by this colleague’s response. He goes on to both validate Frost’s “down to earth” approach to writing and clarify the purpose of documenting his own “Robert Frost Day” experience “. . . it is to suggest the value of cultivating, in our physical experience, an appreciation of the soil from which the art has sprung” (654). Elder summarizes his enhanced experience of Frost’s poem:

Once the experience of hand mowing had enhanced my sense of the sonnet’s achievement by placing me in the wet field at dawn, I found that the specific ecology of that New England scene also emerged with comparable concreteness. Frost is one of the most gifted and precise naturalists among our poets in English. Over the past twenty-six years of living and teaching in Vermont, I have come increasingly to rely upon him

as a guide to the geology, the forest history, and what Linnaeus would call its “floral calendar.” An allusion in his poetry to a flower is never merely decorative or incidental, despite what many critics seem to assume. It tells an ecological story and evokes a particular living community. (655)

In *Reading the Mountains of Home*, Elder’s account of his September 1994 through mid-summer 1995 hikes across the Hogback Anticline wilderness near his home in Bristol, Vermont (just a few miles from Frost’s final farm residence in Ripton) he “relied upon the parallel guidance of the Forest Service’s topographic maps and Frost’s great poem ‘Directive’” to guide him on his way (Elder, *Mountains* Intro.). Over the course of these months, he discovered ample evidence of Frost’s precision as a naturalist. As his hikes and the seasons progressed, Elder recognized more and more of the concrete environmental details that Frost had incorporated into this late life poem. He immediately recognized the “great monolithic knees” in “Directive” as looming bare cliffs, geological formations that had resulted from glacial movements. Along with an increased appreciation of the poet’s keen eye for details of forest succession, Elder also realized Frost’s accuracy regarding the bloom times of local flora, but perhaps the most pleasant surprise for the author was the way in which Frost’s poem was able to provide a welcome “momentary stay against confusion” during a period of unforeseen personal loss.

Chapter V

*My woods – the young fir balsams like a place
Where houses all are churches and have spires.*¹³

In “Tree at My Window,” a modified English sonnet from *West-Running Brook*, Frost reflects upon the value of trees, exploring humankind’s essential bond with them:

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me.
Vague dream head lifted out of the ground,
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
Not all your light tongues talking aloud
Could be profound.

But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.

“Tree at My Window” reads like a bedtime prayer, but instead of addressing an intangible god-like figure, the speaker reaches out to a solitary, familiar tree, connecting individual human experience to a resilient aspect of the environment. The poet’s words constitute a different type of prayer, one that acknowledges Fate’s “imagination” in putting two “heads together.” Humble recognition of human dependence upon trees flows through the speaker’s wish “(B)ut let there never be curtain drawn/between you and me.”

13. From Frost’s poem “Christmas Trees” published in 1916.

Some of Frost's best-known poems, "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" are reflections upon travel through woods. Images of trees loom large within his body of work and Frost was right on about trees. Trees are "... essential to all life. They absorb vast amounts of carbon dioxide and other pollutants from the atmosphere replacing them with oxygen. Forests help regulate excess water flow and can reduce the effects of flooding and soil erosion. Trees influence weather patterns by increasing humidity and generating rainfall" (Russell 6). Continuous interaction between humans/animals and trees/plants is required to sustain life here on Earth, yet this essential $\text{CO}_2 \leftrightarrow \text{O}_2$ exchange must have become something that we human beings take for granted because "large swaths of forest are being lost every year, often for commercial gain or farming. Now, more than 10% of the world's tree species are endangered. More than 8,750 species are threatened with extinction, and across the world nearly 100 acres of trees are felled every minute of every day" (Russell 6).

To most of us born after the second World War, telephone poles and the wires that connect them are just noise that we'd like to Photoshop out of our landscape photographs, but in Frost's day, the power companies had just discovered a new use for trees. His 1920 poem "The Line-gang" stands as an environmental history artifact:

Here come the line-gang pioneering by,
 They throw a forest down less cut than broken.
 They plant dead trees for living, and the dead
 They string together with a living thread.
 They string an instrument against the sky
 Wherein words whether beaten out or spoken
 Will run as hushed as when they were a thought
 But in no hush they string it: they go past
 With shouts afar to pull the cable taught,
 To hold it hard until they make it fast,
 To ease away -- they have it. With a laugh,

An oath of towns that set the wild at naught
They bring the telephone and telegraph.

Through the lines “(T)hey throw a forest down less cut than broken./They plant dead trees for living, and the dead/They string together with a living thread” the poet directs our attention to the important distinction between selection cutting of a forest and clear-cutting or “breaking” one. He also characterizes this latest destructive path as fulfillment of “(A)n oath of towns that set the wild at naught.” “The Line-gang” is a subtle protest poem, one that questions the concept of progress.

In “Good-bye, and Keep Cold” Frost turns his attention to the life of an orchard:

This saying good-bye on the edge of the dark
And cold to an orchard so young in the bark
Reminds me of all that can happen to harm
An orchard away at the end of the farm
All winter, cut off by a hill from the house.
I don't want it girdled by rabbit and mouse,
I don't want it dreamily nibbled for browse
By deer, and I don't want it budded by grouse.
(If certain it wouldn't be idle to call
I'd summon grouse, rabbit, and deer to the wall
And warn them away with a stick for a gun.)
I don't want it stirred by the heat of the sun.
(We made it secure against being, I hope,
By setting it out on a northerly slope.)
No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;
But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.
"How often already you've had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Good-bye and keep cold.
Dread fifty above more than fifty below." (1-19)

If we get distracted by or feel the need to disapprove of Frost's stylistic “conversation” with an orchard, we miss out on an opportunity to engage with this orchard setting and to imagine what deciduous trees experience as they turn to dormancy in preparation for winter months. These lines also teach about the reality of predation and the danger of

early warming. Today, the line “Dread fifty above more than fifty below” may resonate with growers as they experience the unpredictability of seasonal temperature trends.

“After Apple-Picking” from *North of Boston*, not only conveys the value of trees, but also opens up the question of our value in relation to them and other aspects of the environment. This poem has often been interpreted around its life/death symbolism due to the presence of a ladder image and a sleep metaphor, but close reading may reveal another dimension:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Where he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep. (27-42)

This harvester is clearly grateful for every apple that the earth has produced. Each one has been created to “cherish in hand” to “not let fall” or be treated “as of no worth.” True, exhaustion may have disarmed him to the point where he is just about to relinquish consciousness, but there is more to this poem. It’s denouement or landing phrase “(O)r just some human sleep” opens a path for us to question assumptions of the superior nature of human consciousness. Why else would Frost have included a reference to the woodchuck here? It’s easy to miss the subtle shift of focus, but catching this hint of a question tucked away at the very end of the poem can take us in a different

direction. Here, an artist's cultivated ability to arrange common language has gently guided us to an imagined place where discarded apples, a disappearing woodchuck, and an exhausted harvester all exist on an equal plane.

Chapter VI

We love the things we love for what they are.

In Frost's "A Line-Storm Song," the promise of rain renders imagined lovers part of a landscape:

The line-storm clouds fly tattered and swift,
 The road is forlorn all day,
 Where a myriad snowy quartz stones lift,
 And the hoof-prints vanish away.
 The roadside flowers, too wet for the bee,
 Expand their bloom in vain.
 Come over the hills and far with me,
 And be my love in the rain. (1-8)

Robert Lee Frost and Elinor Miriam White were co-valedictorians in high school. They married in 1895 and remained a couple until she died in 1938. After she died, Frost wrote to Untermeyer that he felt "as a tree that has lost its whole surrounding forest by bad forestry" (*Letters to Untermeyer* 308).

In his 1982 essay "Poetry and Marriage: The Use of Old Forms" Wendell Berry considers rhyme as it applies to this type of extended partnership:

Marriage too is an attempt to rhyme, to bring two different loves – within the one life of their troth and household – periodically into agreement or consent. The two lives stray apart necessarily, and by consent come together again; to "feel together," to "be of the same mind." Difficult virtues are necessary. And failure, permanent failure, is possible. But it is this possibility of failure, together with the formal bounds, that turns us back from fantasy, wishful thinking, and self-pity into the real terms and occasions of our lives. (Berry, 205)

Berry's observations put a different spin on the "lovely, dark and deep" woods of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
 To ask if there is some mistake.
 The only other sound's the sweep
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

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

The winter woods are full of mystery and promise, but the speaker is acutely aware that he must avoid the lure of the unknown. There are “promises to keep.”

The couple's early years were filled with hardship and during the course of their marriage they suffered the unimaginable loss of three of their six children. Biographers and cynics have made much of their troubled family life, but the fact is that Frost credited Elinor as being “the unspoken half of everything I ever wrote”¹⁴ and this was no idle praise. Any serious investigation into their life together will show that E.M.F. was a powerful influence on Frost and a tireless champion of his work. Even back in 1917, during his early years of fame, he wrote to Amy Lowell addressing mistakes in her Frost chapter in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, insisting that she correct each misspelling of his wife's name. Later, he confided to Untermeyer: “I really like least her mistake about Elinor. That's an unpardonable attempt to do her as the conventional

14. Quoted from an October, 4, 1937 letter from Frost to Untermeyer.

helpmeet of genius . . . What a cheap common unindividualized picture Amy makes of her” (Barry 47).

While many aspects of the Derry farm years are reflected in a characteristically controlled way in Frost’s early poems, his eldest daughter Lesley’s *New Hampshire’s Child: The Derry Journals of Lesley Frost* conveys a childhood of early home-schooling by Elinor, daily observations of wildlife, reading and being read to, picking long stemmed violets and general “tramping” in the woods. Lesley’s book contains an extensive, retrospective introduction and photocopies of her February 1905 to August 1909 enthusiastic, misspelled journal entries – rough depictions of everyday “facts of life” and stories of the family’s daily involvement with the farm. These pages convey the immediacy of a young child engaging with the many life forms contained within that farm environment:

There was poetry, poetry and more poetry. There was Keats (“season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” which related apple-picking time); Shelley’s “wild west wind” that tossed the big maples along our roadway; Byron standing on the Persian’s grave (very young we sided with Greece against Alexander) Tennyson’s “The Brook” which could just as well have been Hyla. (Frost Ballantine, Introduction)

Lesley remembers that “Papa was forever clearing the underbrush with axe and clippers” and in one dramatic incident, recalls how her father single-handedly extinguished a meadow fire with a loose board. We encounter a different kind of poetry in the daughter’s words, one that conveys the unabashed joy of a child discovering the small part of the natural world that is being stewarded by her parents. Five year-old Lesley describes one of her adventures:

one day I went down the stones steps and went under the barn
and ther uster be a nest ona bord but that is torn down now and that
is last yers and now unuther ist bilt ther and this ine is bilt quit a while

a go one day we lookt into it we fond five little white eggs in it and
 some time after that rob sead he herd little ones peeping in it
 I was glad
 papa was glad
 mama was glad.

Her adult recollections include a litany of native woodland plants including bloodroot, trillium, arbutus, plantain and hepatica. *New Hampshire's Child* may be a far cry from the sophisticated, form-bound poetry and self-conscious prose of her father, but Lesley's journals, together with the poems that Frost created during the family's time living amongst the hayfields, apple trees and alders have left a detailed record of interconnectedness on a small parcel of New England land during one brief period of our evolving cultural heritage. Lesley explains: "For me, life on the Derry farm was to be a long and passionate borning" adding, "I learned, when I was very young, that flower and star, bird and fruit and running water, tree and doe and sunset, are wonderful facts of life."

After Elinor's death, Frost returned to the Derry property to spread her ashes over Hyla Brook as she'd wished, but discovered a used car business on the site and decided against leaving her physical remains on the degraded property. His attempts to re-acquire the property were unsuccessful, but in 1965, Frost's friend John Pillsbury helped arrange for the State of New Hampshire to take possession. Thankfully, with State funding and under the Lesley's guidance, it has been restored to nearly the same state it was in when the family lived there at the turn of the twentieth-century.

Echoes of the Derry farm experience and reverence resonate in his animation of the reciprocal effects of human voice and bird song entitled "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same":

He would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft,
 Be that as it may, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds' song be the same.
 And to do that to birds is why she came.

Critics have analyzed “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” around its Garden of Eden imagery and speculated as to the source of its inspiration, but the sonnet’s elegiac qualities; Frost’s emphatic use of “never,” his opening tone of lament “(H)e would declare and could himself believe,” its incisive morsel of praise “an eloquence so soft” and consoling resolution “(A)nd to do that to birds is why she came” should help inform us regarding its source of inspiration.¹⁵ And would it be too much to consider that a familiar pair of human beings working together on a fine summer day, when the birds are chattering amid sun-filtering leaves, might fleetingly experience their own version of Eden?

Frost knew the pitfalls of dreaming, but he also understood its purpose. In 1935, he wrote “We must be tender of our dreamers. They may seem like picketers or members of the committee on rules for the moment. We shan’t mind what they seem, if only they produce real poems” (Barry 119). At best, poetry is an art of deep engagement. Understanding the words that we share, divining their meaning, is key to such

15. For more insight into the inspiration for this poem, watch Frost’s recitation of “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” in the Robert Frost episode of the “Voices and Visions” poetry series.

engagement. Frost's attention to local environment along with his respect for the evocative power of common language has left a legacy of environment-focused, accessible poetry that has fallen in and out of vogue, yet survived a century of dramatic cultural change in America. Will Frost's work matter in the twenty-first century? Ask your friends and family.

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