# Robert Frost's Pragmatism

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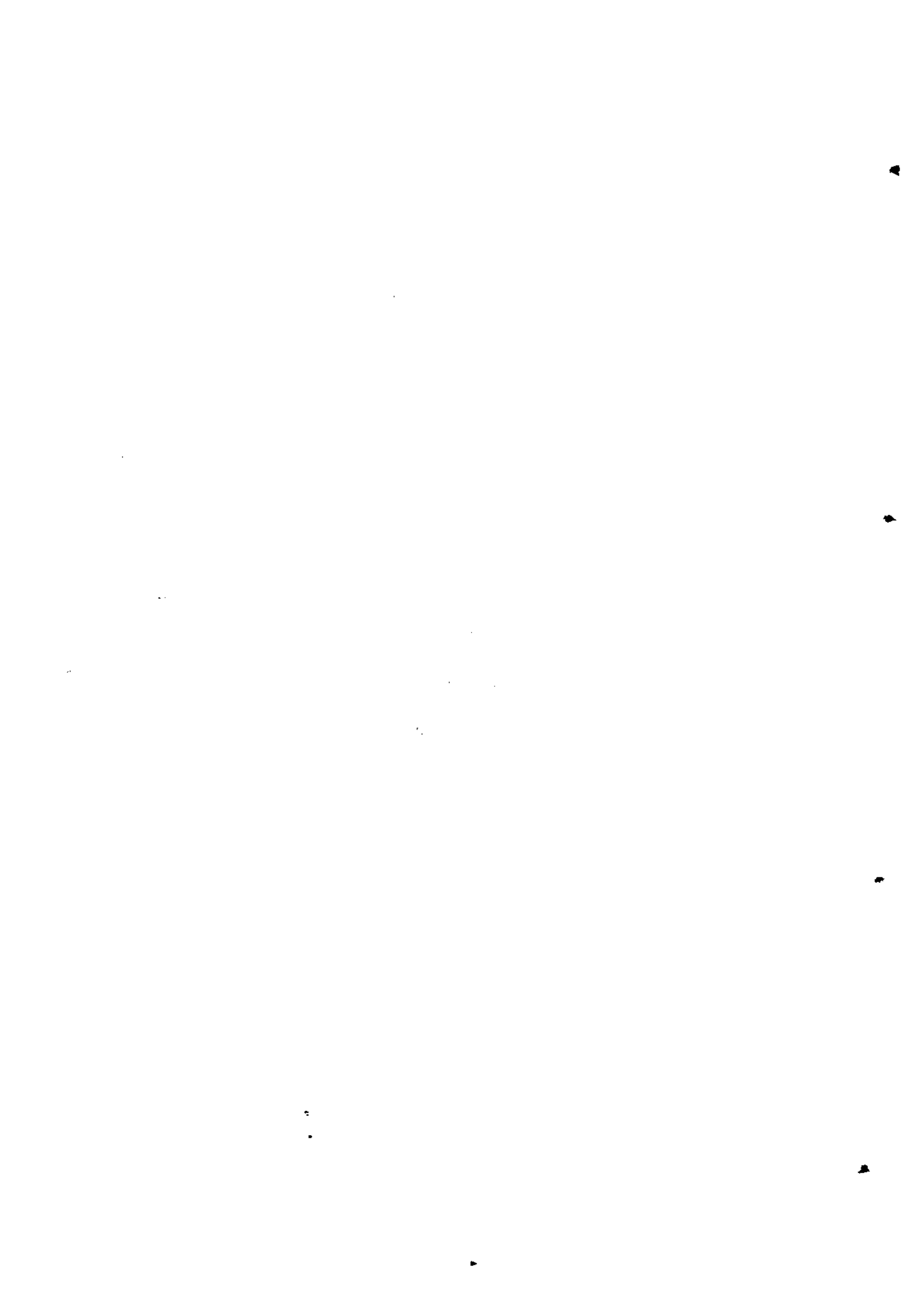

## Robert Frost's Pargmatism

In "Experience, Emerson looks into the abyss of the incommensible and the abyss of solipsism, and finds that they are somehow the same: "an Other" that is too vast and non-human to comprehend, turns out to be hard to distinguish from "an Other" that is nothing at all. Under the expansive influence of the Lord Reality, he can feel thankful to have arrived "not at a wall, but at interminable oceans."[1] Under the conteractive influence of the Lord subjectiveness, he can observe, half-lamenting and half in awe. "Thus invitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself." In one case, he confronts the Pascalian silence of the infinite spaces; in the other case the self becomes a kind of black hole; but in either case the result is that the self is isolated and enclosed. But Emerson also sees that between these two abysses or the two ways of looking at the same abyss, is the realm of human experience. This realm is partly under the constructing rule of Temperament, and its succession of Lords might seem haphazard; nonetheless, in the realm of experience, if anywhere, it is possible to find what will suffice.

Emerson foreshadows the modern and postmodern confrontations with a void of unmeaning; yet for Emerson, there is a foundation, however vague, for human belief: a divine force that, when experienced, rescues meaning from the abysses without and within. Emerson questions but also leans on the nineteenth century's more liberal forms of Christianity, leans

hard on them and almost topples them, but finds support in them nonetheless. Robert Frost is farther along the staircase where Emerson stopped to ask his disconcerning question, "where do we find ourselves?" He and his readers, are perhaps a bit less surprised to find themeslves on that staircase, a bit more likely to take uncertainty as his birthright. Frost confronts what has been called a modern "crissis of consciouness," a problem of the status of the self in a world where established systems of belief no longer command assent and the ability of consciousness to register a transcendent "reality" has been thrown into question.

J. Hillis Miller diagnoses this modern crisis of consciousness in his early study of *Five Victorian Writers, The Disappearnce of God.*[2] Miller locates the modern crisis in the experience of "the dispersal of the cultural unity of man, God, nature and Language,"[3] in the nineteenth century. In Miler's account, God gormerly was experienced as immanent in the world and in the self, but the nineteenth century experiences His withdrawal, leaving the self isolated and distitute. This transformation is related to other unfortunate changes in society, language and the self. Industrialization and urbanization transform the world into a "vast agglomeration of bricks and people" which "mirrors back to man his own image" and leaves no room for what is not human, including God.[4] Along with this change goes a spiritual

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porter (New York: Liberary of America, 1983), pp.9-11.
[2] J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p.3.
[3] *Op. Cit.*
[4] *Ibid.*, pp4-5.

and linguistic transformation in which God's world, a closed system filled with His intelligible symbols, gives way to an infinite universe of distant objects behind which God is apparently hidden. In such a world, humans find themselves limited to private experience; they are alienated not just from God, but also from nature and other people. A new historical sense appears: people become aware of "the relativity of any particular life or culture,"[1] and lose faith in the possibility of the "right" culture, religion or philosophy. Divided from all external supports, the self is to empty it: in Mathew Arnold and other Victorian writers, after the withdrawal of God, "the soul confronts at last the horror of its own nothingness."[2]

An empty subjectivity confronting an indecipherable world: as Miller has shown, the modern crisis of the self already appears in Robert Browning and Mathew Arnold, the Victorian poets who meant the most to Robert Frost. Many of the elements of the crisis which Miller discusses appears in Frost's poetry as well. Although an examination of Frost's reference to God in his poems is beyond the scope of this study, these refrences are sufficiently ambiguous and unconsoling to lead one critic, Howard Mumford Jones, to conclude that "in Frost God is either a human construct or a being so remote from man as to be meaningless."[3] Certainly it is no longer possible in Frost's poems to read God in nature, as Emerson hoped to do. In Frost's "Design" the speaker's attempt to read the symbolic significance of a natural incident

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[3] Howard Mumford Jones, *Belief and Disbelief in American Literature* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p.140.

(a spider which has killed the moth) leads him to conclude that either it was caused by a "design of darkness to appall" or (more terrifyingly) that design does not "govern in a thing so small."[1] Frost's distrust of Industrialization and urbanization appears in such poems as "A Brook In the City," "The Line Gange," "Alone Striker," and "The Self Seeker," among others. And the "Black Cottage" reflects his sense of historical relativism ("Most of the change we think we see in life / Is due to truths being in and out of favor"), complicated by a sense that the self can provide a refuge for "the truths we keep coming back and back to."[2]

Frost's poems also register a sense that the self is threatened with emptiness, most memorably in "Desert Places," where the speaker, watching a field fill up with snow, begins to feel as "absent-spirited" as the scene, feeling and fearing within him "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express."[3] Yet, on the whole, Frost's poetry testifies to the self's ability to cope with the threat. Frost, drawing upon the pragmatism of William James, believes that it is precisely the function of consciousness ti construct manageable human sized versions of the world and the self, narratives of the self in the world which creates ( as poetry does) "a momentary stay against confusion."[4]

Norman Holland, a psychoanalytic critic who looks for the "identity

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[1] Robert Frost. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p.302.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 296.
[4] "The Figure a Poem Makes," cited in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 18.

themes" which influence both the writers' and readers' approach to texts and to experiences, admirably sums up Frost's identity themes: "to manage great unmanageable unknowns by means of small knowns."[1] Indeed, most of Frost's poems set out to manage "great unmanageable unknowns," and his most interesting poems retain an ironic awareness that what the poems manage is in fact "unmanageable." The act of managing is privileged, but the poems acknowledge their inability to manage the unknown completely. This ironic awareness is presumably what Frost had in mind when he wrote, in January 1, 1917 letter to Louis Untermeyer:

> You get more credit for thinking if you restate formulae or cite cases that fall in easily under formulae, but all the fun is outside saying things that suggest formulae that won't formulate --- that almost but don't quite formulate. I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to the casual person altogether obvious.[2]

Despite Frost's obvious pleasure in feeling the "casual person," there is more at stake in this passage than mere trickiness. To "suggest formulae --- that but don't quite formulate" is to acknowledge well our formulae help us to cope with experience (well enough to mislead the "casual person"), but at the same time to suggest that, in actual "cases", there is always something unmanageable that escapes our effort at management.

Despite the inadquacies of our formulae, Frost sees the formulating impulse as inescapable --- a belief he shares with William James, and moreover, as something we should not necessarily want to escape. Frank

[1] Norman Holland, *The Brain of Robert Frost*. (New York:Routledge, 1988), p. 38.
[2] Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 47.

Lentricchia, writing about William James, discusses the self's "theory – desire":

> There is no escape from theory because, in James' characterization of rationalism --- theory is "an appetite of the mind" --- Part of the self. We are all beset by the theoritical impulse, or theory-desire, as I have called it--- by the need to make the place clean and well ordered. In its simplist and yet most far-reaching implications, theory is the need to generalize, to forget, and to obliterate differences: a description I'd offer as an equally fair characterization of concept-formation (the obliteration of percepts) and of imperialism both as goreign policy and as a feature of the ordinary, casual imperialism of every day life (the obliteration of persons)."[1]

Lentricchia's formulation is interesting both for its suggestion that the theorizing impulse is unavoidable and for his suspicion of that impulse. (Lentricchia argues that James shares this suspicion.) Frost is much lessdubious about the consequences of "theory-desire" than Lentricchia. Recognizing that there is no objective "high ground" outside cultural desire, no vantage point offering "freedom" from theoritical formulations, he embraces what he calls his "prejudices". In a May 15, 1920 letter to Wilbur L. Cross, Frost dicsusses his withdrawal from teaching at Amherst College:

> I discovered what the Amherst Idea was that is so much talked of, and I got amicably out. The Amherst Idea as I had it in so many words from the high custodian [presumably the college's president, Alexander Meiklejohn] is this: "Freedom for taste and intellect." Freedom from what? "freedom from every prejudice in favor of taste, home, church, morality, etc." I am too much a creature of prejudice to stay at [sic] listen to such stuff --- I'd no more set out in pursuit of the truth than I would in pursuit of a living unless mounted on any

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[1] Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p. 124.

prejudices[1]

One can admire the fine pragmatic irony of the metaphor in the final sentence and yet feel uneasy about the attitude expressed. Playing with and evading the usual opposition of "truth" and "prejudice," Frost activates the dead metaphor of the "pursuit of truth" and creates a formula that does not quite formulate. The pursuit of truth is a hunt (perhaps a fox, since the truth in Frost's work is foxy) in which it is efficient to ride on noe's prejudices, as on a horse; without one's prejudgements, one presumably could not keep up with the pace of the hunt. And Frost's suspicion of the Amherst Idea's claim to "freedom from prejudice" anticipates the contemporary suspicion of such claims expressed by Michel Foucault and others. On the other hand, this still ionized relience on prejudices seems already a bit too comfortable, foreshadowing the later Frost who, still mounted on his prejudices, finds truth all too easy to capture, the opinionated conservative whose formulae formulate all too well. As Lentricchia warns,

> "theory --- tentatively holding itself as belief, becomes a tool for getting our work done, for exploring the shifting situations we call history, but pragmatism (the vigilante within) is always on the averge of vanquishment, of giving belief over to theory (the totaliterian within.)"[1]

In Frost's best poems, the vigilante triumphe over the totaliterian.

Frost's optimism about the self's ability to manage great

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[1] Lawrance Thompson, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt. Rinehart and Winston. 1964), p.250.

unmanageable unknowns by small knowns results in part on his choice between two modern metaphors having to do with the way consciosness is situated in relation to incomprehensible Other (the opposite of consciousness). Frost, following William James, chooses to set off consciousness against a chaos of unmeaning, rather than setting it off against the unconscious.

Frost often discusses the importance of metaphor in shaping experience: "Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy, and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend"[2] In one of his most interestingletters, his sense of the way one metaphor replaces another seems to anticipate Thomas Kuhn's theory of "paradigm shifts" in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions:*

> Isn't it a poetical strangeness that while the world was going full blast on the Darwinian metaphors of evolution, survival values and the devil take the hindmost, a polimical jew in exile was working up the metaphor of the state's being like a family to displace them from mind and give us a new figure to live by? Marx had the strength not to be overowed by the metaphor in vague, --- We are not toadies to the fashionable metaphor of the hour. Great is he who imposes the metaphor --- I am not going to let the shift from one metaphor to another worry me. You'll notice the shift has to be made rather abruptly. There are no logical steps from one to the other. There is no logical connection.[3]

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[1] Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p.124.

[2] "The Constant Symbol," cited in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost,* ed., Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p.24.

[3] Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p.285.

One of the twentieth century's most productive metaphors opposes consciousness to the unconscious; it originates in the earlier version of Freud's "mental topography", set forth in "A Note on the Unconscious in Psychanalysis" (1912) and "The Unconscious" (1915). While Freud would not regard his model as merely a metaphor, he does not acknowledge that, in the absence of evidence localizing the conscious and unconscious systems in particular parts of the brain, "our hypotheses can --- lay claim only to the value of illustrations."[1] Although current research on the brain does not suggest that Freud's "mental topology," in either its earlier or later version, can be physically localized, its explanatory power as metapgor continues to dominate twentieth-century thought about the self. As Fracoise Meltzer has suggested, the unconscious way be "the twentieth-century version of the methologies humankind always generates to explain the explicable, to chart the "unknown brain" which always remains mysterious in (and to) the psyche."[1]

But there is another metaphor for the relationship between consciousness and the Other, a metaphor that does not necessarily contradict the Freudian metaphor but may serve as a counterweight to it. The second metaphor opposes consciousness to nothingness, chaos, or the universe conceived as lacking intrinsic meaning. It imagines that, as Richard Poirier suggests in *The Renewal of Literature*, consciousness arises from "the desire

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[1] "The Unconscious," rpt. In Sigmond Freud, *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Reiff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 124.

that there should be more than nothing."[2]

Frost's adherence to this second metaphor probably owes something to his study of the writing of William James. In 1960, toward the end of his long career, Frost recalled the importance of William James in the formation of his ideas: "there was --- a teacher I never had that did more for me than anybody else in the world --- The teacher I never had was William James."[3] Frost, after reading James' *The Will to Believe*, had attended Harvard in 1897-1899, hoping to study philosophy with James. Unfortunately, because of his illness, James' one volume psychology: *Briefer Course*, an 1892 abridgement, with revisions, of James' monumental two-volume, *Principles of Psychology* (1890) --- with James' friend Hugo Munsterberg."[4] In 1911, Frost taught psychology at the New Hampshire State Normal School, he chose James' *Talk to Teachers on Psychology: Briefer Course* as his texts.[5]

Thus Frost would have been aware of James' discussion in *Psychology: Briefer Course* of how human experience is shaped by acts of selective "attention":

> Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this notion and ignoring that, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade ---.

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[1] Francoise Meltzer. "Unconscious," in Frank Lentricchia and Mc Laughlin, eds. *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 162.
[2] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 14.
[3] Reginald L. Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (Amherst: University of Massachusets Press, 1974), p.239.
[4] Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Wimmick, *Robert Frost: A Biography* (One-volume edition; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winstin, 1982), pp.102-106.
[5] Thompson and Wimmick, *Robert Frost: A Biography*, p.150.

> Attention --- out of all the sensation yielded, picks out certain ones as worthy of its notice and suppresses all the rest. We notice only these sensations which are signs to us of things which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us ---.
>
> The mind --- chooses certain of the sensations to represent the thing most truly, and considers the rest as its appearances ---.
>
> Next, in a world of objects thus individualized by our mind's selective industry, what is called our "experience" is almost entirely determined by our habits of attention ---.
>
> If now, leaving the empirical combination of objects, we ask how the mind proceeds rationally to connect them, we find selection again to be omnipotent ---.
>
> If now we pass to the aesthetic department, our law is still more obvious. The artist notoriously selects his items ---. That unity --- which gives to works of art their superiority over works of nature, is wholly due to elimination ---.
>
> Ascending still higher, we reach the plane of ethics, where choice reigns notoriously supreme --. The ethical energy --- has to --- choose which interest out of several, equally coercive, shall become supreme ---. [One's] choice really lies between one of several equally possible future characters.[1]

I wish to make three points about James's paradigm. First, all the elements of consciousness are built up from "what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis." Consciousness is a construction built upon a chaos of unmeaning. Second, consciousness is a process of elimination, siplification and concentration, which makes the raw data of experience manageable. Third, atristic activity is a special case of the process of selective attention which constitutes all conscious activity. Interestingly, the same three points apply to the following statement from

[1] William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, (1892; rpt. In Gerald E. Myers, ed., *William James: Writings 1877-1899*, (New York: Liberary of America, 1992), pp. 169-172.

Frost's 1935 letter to a student newspaper at Amherst College:

> The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so? --- We like it, we were born to it, born used to it and have practical reasons for wanting it there. To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider it, I suppose, for how much less it is than every thing.[1]

As Frost's final sentence suggests, it makes a difference what metaphor one uses to situate consciousness and its small figures of order and concentration. Fro Freudians, as for Platonists, conscious experience is "less than everything." If the Other is the unconscious, the location of primal drives, then consciousness is likely to appear as a deflection of that primal energy, a veneer of repressions, rigid orders as opposite to fluid power. (This is especially true in the work of post-structuralist Fruedians like Lacan and Kristeva.) But if the Other is "black and utter chaos," then unconsciousness and what Kristeva calls "the symbolic order" are to be valued: they represent order rather than chaos, meaning rather than unintelligibility, something rather than nothing.

Significantly, James anticipates contemporary theory by dispensing with the idea of the self as "soul" or "transcendental ego." In his psychology, the "I" (the self as knower, as opposed to the "Me" the self as known) is only the thought of the present moment:

> The consciousness of the self involves a stream of thought, each part

[1] *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p.107.

> of which is as "I" can remember those which went before, know the things they knew, and care paramountly for certain ones among them as "Me" and appropriate to these the rest. This "Me" is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The "I" which knows them can not itself be an aggregate, neither for psychological purposes need it be an unchanging transcendental Ego, viewed as "out of time." It is a thought, at each moment, but appropriatitive of the latter, together with all that the latter called it own."[1]

Although James dissolves the self as entity, as "transcendental ego," he retains it as a purpositive activity. "Mental life is primarily teleogical; that is to say, that our various ways of feeling and thinking have grown to be what they are because of their utility in shaping our reactions on the outer world. Primarily, then, and fundamentally, the mental life is for the sake of action of a preservative sort."[2] And this activity, though it does not arise from an unchanging "self," is available for conscious inspiration: it is not hidden behind a repression barrier, kike the drive activity of Freud's unconscious.

Frost's poem "All Revelations" is perhaps his most complete exposition of the Jamesian Model of the mind's activity.

> A head thrusts in as for the view
> But where it is it thrusts in form
> Or what it is it thrusts into
> By that Cyb'laean avenue,
> And what can of its coming come.
>
> And whither it will be withdrawn,
> And what tahe hence or leave behind,
> These things the mind has pondered on,

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[1] William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course,* (1892, rpt., in Gerald E Myers, ed. *William James: Writings 1878-1899,* (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 208.
[2] *Ibid., pp.13-14.*

A moment and still asking gone.
Strange apparition of the mind!

But the impervious geode
Was entered, and its inner crust
Of crystals with a ray cathode
At every point and facet glowed
In answer to the mental thrust.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
Thus concentrating earth and skies
So none need be afraid of size
All revelations has been ours.[1]

The first two stanzas are deliberately vague, as if to emphasize the "background [of] hugeness and confusion" into which the mind thrusts "as for the view." All the metaphysical questions which the mind might like to have answered, questions about its origin, purpose, and ultimate destination, and about the "reality" it encounters, are treated as unquestionable. But the third stanza becomes suddenly specific, as if, when such metaphysical questions are set aside, concrete statements about experience are possible. The "head" of the first stanza turns out to be a cathode ray, thrusting into the hollow center of a geode. The geode stands for the earth from which it comes: like the geode, the earth is apparently impervious, but when split open and lit by the cathode ray's "mental thrust," it glows with the crystallization of discovered meaning. The pattern displayed is "in" the geode but also depends on the illumination of the cathode ray.[1]

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[1] *The Poetry of Robert frost*, pp. 332-3.

The final stanza of the poem generalizes from the metaphor in the third stanza: just as the action of the cathode ray reveals the concentrated pattern within the geode, "eyes eeking the response of eyes / Bring out" similarly concentrated pattern ---, stars, flowers --- from the background of "hugeness and confusion."These figures of "order and concentration" make experience manageable once having brought them out, we need no longer be "afraid of size." But this suggests that our "mental thrust" has not just illuminated reality, but also diminished it, reduced it to a size that we can feel comfortable with. The final line is ambiguous and potentially ironic: "All revelations has been ours" could mean that we have had a total (or totalizing) revelation, but it could also mean that, any revelation we have had, has been merely "ours."

This deliberate separation of the human from the "natural" is characteristic of Frost's work. Nature, and indeed the New England forests in which he loved to walk, became associated with "black and utter xhaos;" the human is temporary recognization of chaos. Frost's speakers are often surrounded by woods, seduced and resisting the pull of a borderless, disorienting complexity that defeats all linguistic markers.[2] These woods are

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[1] Richard Poirier has suggests that the "mental thrust" of the cathode ray into the geode is also a sexual metaphor. (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, Oxford Univ. Press. 1977, p.20.) Since Cybele is a goddess of motherhood and fertility, the mental thrust into the "Cybl'eaen avenue" suggests that the "intercourse between the ray and the geode gives birth to meaning.

[2] For variations on the theme of the threatening, yet seductive woods, see such poems as " Into My Own," "In Hardwood Groves," "The Mountain," "The Wood Pile," "In the Home Stretch," "Birches," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Spring Pools," and "The Last Mowing." (Another series of poems about the threat of the incommensurable centers

at once seductive in their non-human beauty and threatening to the constitution of human selves. Their vast, dark, undifferential stretches are the background against which, as acts of survival and creativity, human beings carve out and tame a farm, earn a livelihood, construct a self. The abandoned rocky fields of New England filling up again with trees and the desolate cellar-holes of lost forms constantly remind Frost's speakers that the process is only provisional; here one need not to expect a form or a self to last more than a lifetime. If Frost's work nonetheless seems optimistic, it is in part because the work of construction may suffice on its own, regardless of the impermanence of a form, a self, a truth, a poem: these provide momentary stays against confusion, the satisfactions of experiences composed and resolved which John Dewey identifies as the key to life and art.[1]

Frost's style celebrates the human voice as a part of these sheltering constructions; his "sentence-sounds" are alive with the activity of taking sides, building upon pragmatic prejudices; his speakers' voices celebrate the human self and execlude the ego-dissolving, meaning-devoring Other. Frost typically speaks from within a community of selves that incorporates even the town thief, though can not incorporate the stars.[2]

"The Birthblace" (264-265) illustrates how Frost celebrates the constructive power of metaphor, even while acknowledging that "all

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upon snow imagery.) for illustrations of the protective, constructive, boundary, marking activities of humanity, see many of the poems already listed.

[1] See John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Capricrn Books, 1958), chapter 3, "Having the Experience." (pp35-57.) Frost uses the phrase "a momentary stay against confusion," in "The Figure a Poem Makes," *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p.18.

[2] See "The Star-Splitter,". *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, pp. 178-179.

metaphor breaks down somewhere."[1] Here, the speaker's father "furthers up the mountain slop / Than there was even any hope," constructs a metaphor as much as a farm: his labor turns the mountain briefely into a nurturing mother. But only briefely: The mountain pushed us off her knees. / And her lap is full of trees."

"The Birthblace" evokes the myth of the poor but happy frontier family, living in the lap of nature, in a way that verges on sentimentality. Frost knows that, if we do not live in such myths, we rewrite our past as if we had. But he does not develop the myth, because he is less interested in the metaphors we live by than in the way they break down having permitted something to be accomplished in the meantime. An image which could be violent , surreal or farcical, the lap full of trees, signals the breakdown of the metaphor of mountain as mother; but its force is contained by the stability of the reminiscing colloquial voice and by the tetrameter couplets (one of the most stable, balanced forms in English-language poetry). A threat is passed off as a clever pleasantry: typical of Frost's way of identifying threats and dismissing (or overcoming) them at the sdame time. And although the metaphor of mountain as mother has been shattered, rendered ridiculous, although the humanized image of the mountain is pierced by the trees which return the mastyered field to themes in a dark parody of human sexuality and generation, nonetheless the metaphor has made it possible for the field to be birthblace; something has been occomplished, not a permanent stability but a

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Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p.41.

renewal. The mountain of human generation both continues the father's project and transforms it beyond any prospect of return to its mountain origin: "Today she [the mountain ] would not know our name. / (No girl's of course, has stayed the same.)"

Thus human activity creates temporary borders, clearing a space for language and the life that language organizes. Around the cleared spaces, the woods loom as a hidden depth, a depth within which all things, sooner or later, will be hidden.

Story-telling, whether in artistic form or in the form of the narratives we construct about our own lives, is like other human activities in that it takes chaotic situations and organizes them into useful, unified incidents, the process that Dewey calls "Having an experience."[1] But Frost, unlike Dewey, views these human transformations of experience with some irony: he sees that our narratives are not just useful but, a bit too convenient. This is especially apparent in the well-known but often misunderstood poem "The Road Not Taken."

Reading *Psychology: Briefer Course*, Frost might have been intrigued by the following passage from the chapter called "The Self." It appears in a subselection entitled "Mountains and Multiplications of the Self:"

> The most frequent source of false memory is the accounts we give to others of our experiences. Such accounts we almost alwayscmakecbothvmore simplecand more interesting than the truth. We quote what we should have said or done, rather than what we really said or did; and in the first telling we may be fully aware of the

[1] John Dewey, *The Art of Experience*, (new York: Capriçorn Books, 1958,) chapter 3, "Having an Experience" (pp35-57).

> distinction. But ere long the fection expels the reality from memory and reigns in its stead alone. [1]

This passage is a good description of the "mutation of theself" in "The Road Not Taken." Frost liked to warn audiences that if it was a tricky poem, and recent critics such as Jay Parini and William H. Pritchard have pointed out that it is not the simple assertion of triumphant individualism of taking "the road less travelled by," that might appear to be.[2]

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
> And sorry I could not travel both
> And be one traveler, long I stood
> And looked down one as far as I could
> To where it bent in the undergrowth
>
> Then took the other, as just as fair
> And having perhaps the better claim,
> Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
> Though as for that, the passing there.
> Had warn them really about the same.
>
> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence;
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I …
> I took the one less traveled by

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[1] William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, 1892 rpt. In Gerald E. Mayers, ed., *William James: Writings 1877-1899*. (New York: Liberary of America, 1992), p.200.

[2] William H. Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, (Oxford University Press, 1984), p.128; Jay Parini, "*Robert Frost*" in Emery Elliot, gen. Ed., *Colombia Literary History of*

And that has made all the difference.[1]

"The Road Nnot Taken" is about the gap between the confusion of experience in the present and the subsequent reinterpretation of that experience in a manner "both more simple and more interesting than the truth." The poem itself constitutes the first layer of reinterpretation. A putatively actual situation is already transformed in the opening lines into a symbolic "choice of two paths," a situation which, as George Monteiro has pointed out, has a long literary and pictorial history.[2] The first line announces this theme with an almost geometrical simplicity and brevity, "two roads diverged in a yellaw wood," and the speaker does not give any context to make his dilemma anymore specific; this choice of roads could be any choice.

Yet the adjective "yellow" troubles the stability of the poem's geometry by setting it in autumn, a season of change and decay. Whichever road the speaker takes will be a road unique to his moment of experience, a moment of flux, both roads are covered with a transitory layer of "leaves no step had trodden black".

The first half of the poem reenacts the speaker's hesitant and unsuccessful attempt to find a basis on which to make a choice. Unable to see very far into the future the two roads represent, the speaker wants to choose

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the *United States*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1988), pp. 944-945.

[1] *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p.105.

[2] George Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p.44.

the road less traveled by and tries in vain to persuade himself that he is doing so. His hesitance and self contradiction is depicted by the use of conjunctions and adverbs that turn against one another:

> Then took the other , as just as fair,
> And having perhaps the better claim,
> Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
> Though as far that, the passing there
> Had worn them really about the same.

Monteiro suggests that the two roads are "not very much different from one another, for passing over one of them had the effect of wearing them really 'about the same'."[1] But even this reading grants too much difference to the roads. Monteiro wants to read "had worn them" as "would have worn them," but the conditional mode makes no sense here, since the speaker actually does take the second path, and, in any case, the speaker's "passing there" would "wear" only the road he actually took, not both of "them." It is simpler to assume that the "passing there" of previous travelers has actually worn the roads "about the same." The speaker can momentarily convince himself by looking only at the second path that it "perhaps" has a better claim, but "really" there is no basis for choice.

"Oh, I kept the first for another day!" the speaker asserts to keep his spirits up, only to contradict himself again in the following two lines: Yet knowing how way leads on to way / I doubted if I should even come back." Yet, there is a double irony in the word "kept." In the unstable autumn landscape of this

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[1] *Ibid.*, p.45.

poem, "keeping" the road not taken would seem to be precisely what can not be done: on another day, in another season, the road might still be "fair," but not in the same way. Yet, in the only sense in which a road not taken can be "kept ... for another day" at all, kept in mind, that is to say, the speaker has in fact kept it for another day: the day of the poem. So, the road has been kept, the title of the poem, in effect, says so by naming it, but it has been transformed into "the road not taken," then the unexplored alternative that the speaker can not forget. His unexplored alternative and his unjustifiable choice stand in this poem for the "hugeness and confusion" against which the speaker creates the poem, his "small man-made figure of order and concentration."

But the moment of the poem is not the end-point of transformatio: in the final stanza, the speaker looks towards the future and forcasts a further transformation "ages and ages hence." The exaggeration "ages and ages hence" performs sevral functions: it places the final stanza in a remote and unknowable future, about which no more can be said than that the speaker will find himself "somewhere," telling his story to someone: it suggests that the speaker will by the have gone through a whole series of "mutations" as different from one another as the "ages" of human history or Shakespeare's seven ages of man; and by evoking vast stretches of time, it sets the tone for the heroic narrative which the speaker's future self will construct.

"Two roads diverged in a wood and I --/ I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." William H. Pritchard asks, "Is it not the high tone of poignant announciation that really makes all the difference?" He points out that "an earlier version of the poem had no dash

after the 'I'; presumably Frost added it to make the whole thing more expressive and heartfelt."[1] This is admirable as far as it goes; I wish only to add a comment on the ambiguity of the speaker's "sigh." It is a sigh of satisfaction at a choice well made, or a sigh of lamentation over a choice for which the speaker will have paid the consequences? Does the added dash signify a pause of self-aggrandizement or of rueful regret? What momentous "difference" will the choice seem to have made? The question is undecidable, because the speaker does not know what consequences the choice will turn out to have had "ages and ages hence." What he does know is that, no matter how his life turns out, he will turn it into a dramatic narrative in which he has made a heroic choice, a choice which has made "all the difference."

It is significant that the poem is narrated not y a speaker who has already transformed his experience into a heroic narrative, but by a speaker who knows that this is what he will have done "ages and ages hence." The joke is not on him, the speaker seems to say, but on human nature. But he acknowledges that knowing what he will do to his story in the future will not prevent him from doing it. The Road Not Taken" suggests that we naturally construct such fictions around the self, and that (given the alternative of blankness and confusion) we are lucky to be able to do so. The self, like a poem, is "to be considered for how much more it is than nothing." That is Frost's ironic yet reassuring answer to the "modern crisis," and it retains some of its reassurance even when Frost takes a sidelong look at the

frightening "nothing" he hopes to exceed.

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[1] William H. Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered,* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p.127.

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