

**THE EFFECTS OF MUTABILITY IN THE  
POETRY OF ROBERT FROST**

**BY**

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IN THE POETRY OF  
ROBERT FROST

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Margaret B. Suter

February 1977

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Margaret B. Suter entitled "The Effects of Mutability in the Poetry of Robert Frost." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education with a major in English.

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Wayne E. Stump

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THE EFFECTS OF MUTABILITY

IN THE POETRY OF

ROBERT FROST

What man that sees the ever-whirling wheele  
Of Change, the which all mortall things doth sway,  
But that thereby doth find, and plainly feele,  
How Mutability in them doth play  
Her cruell sports, to many mens decay?<sup>1</sup>

Mysticism, pragmatism, and realism intertwine to weave the Frost image of life, an image of mutability. Existence is always in flux. When it is evolving upward, we hardly notice mutability. When it spirals downward, deep melancholy envelops us. Another poet, John Keats, in "Ode to a Nightingale" momentarily escapes the mutable world. The sense of loss he feels as he returns to reality is expressed: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self."<sup>2</sup> Like Keats, all of us must face the ever changing future.

Fate or man's fickle nature moves the Frost characters into uncharted valleys of change. The young couple in "West Running Brook" will survive because they sway with the current of fluctuation. Amy of "Home Burial" must face reality, or the change she now welcomes will destroy her. Silas in "Death of a Hired Man" is a failure because he refused to take affirmative action to help himself. Mutability is ever present and we will be looking at how it affects the Frost people.

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), p. 442 (VII. vi. 1-5).

<sup>2</sup>John Keats, Selected Poems and Letters, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1959), p. 207.

The philosophy of William James and his mother's Swedenborg-Calvin religion helped shape Frost's view of the mutable world. In the definitive biography of Frost, Lawrance Thompson<sup>3</sup> quotes the poet concerning the philosophy of Swedenborg; he says, "There is a good deal of it that's left with me. I am a mystic. I believe in change and in changing symbols."<sup>4</sup> Frost's poetry often exhibits his "ideal of submission, acceptance, obedience, formulated for him in childhood by his mother, within a Christian frame of reference."<sup>5</sup> He believed in accepting people and life as they are and in accepting the turning points of existence.

Another influential person in the development of Frost's philosophy was William James. When young Frost enrolled at Harvard, he hoped to study under the famed psychologist-philosopher. James was in poor health and never taught Frost in the classroom, but his philosophy is often reflected in the thought and poetry of the New Englander. "Like James, Frost wanted to be 'pluralistic' in the sense that he could combine naturalism and idealism, physics and metaphysics, skepticism and mysticism."<sup>6</sup> Frost and his poetic personages believe what fits their greatest needs. The following quote about William

<sup>3</sup>Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 550.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 586.

<sup>6</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 246.

James could be describing Frost: "The human person is placed at the center of his philosophy. . . . From man's total personality emerges a philosophy which is humanistic, pragmatic, and experiential, vindicating man's faith in his highest ideals and encouraging his noblest efforts for the well being of himself and his fellow men."<sup>7</sup> Frost does not judge the poetic figure, but he does notice changes in his physical and psychological being.

Some of the changes are brought on by nature or evolution. Others occur because of the action of the persona. One of Frost's best known poems concerns the progression of life because of the direct action of the narrator. Frost gives a very candid view of how one brings about change in the pattern of one's own life in "The Road Not Taken."<sup>8</sup>

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 worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
 In leaves no step had trodden black.  
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

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,  
 And that has made all the difference.

(p. 131)

<sup>7</sup>Bernard P. Brennan, William James (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 52.

The traveler through life makes many irrevocable decisions. One can never return because each decision has its effect on us and time is constantly changing everything: settings, people, ideas. Each step we take is a finality, "And that has made all the difference."

A finality we cannot control or sometimes even bear is the death of a loved one. All of life must seem hopeless when the loss is your own child, and, at least momentarily, the world would seem evil. Like John Keats, one would like to take flight. In "Home Burial" all of the pathos of such a loss is portrayed, but the tragedy in the poem is the "conflict between the husband and the wife over the way the loss should be handled."<sup>9</sup> The wife does not want to give up grief because it is the only way she can stay close to the memory of her child; she resents others, especially her husband, being able to talk about ordinary things. In the poem she says,

"Friends make a pretense of following to the grave,  
But before one is in it, their minds are turned  
And making the best of their way back to life  
And living people, and things they understand.  
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so  
If I can change it. Oh, I won't. I won't!"  
(p. 72)

The husband tries to console his wife without success and then searches for a method to make things better:

"My words are nearly always an offense.  
I don't know how to speak of anything  
So as to please you. But I might be taught  
I should suppose."  
(p. 70)

<sup>9</sup>John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York: Hafner, 1962), p. 36.

"The tragic situation is heightened because each is partly right. But the woman's stubborn and unbalanced perseverance in turning her back on the yearning love of the man heightens the sense of tragedy."<sup>10</sup> As the poem unfolds, Amy is determined to hold on to her grief and thus destroy the marriage. She recalls her husband's remarks to a friend on the day he was digging the grave, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build" (p. 72), but she cannot transfer the significance of the remark to what stress is doing to her marriage. The poem ends with the husband saying, "I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will" (p. 73). But the physical presence of Amy will not preserve the relationship. The mutability is within her breast, and she must turn away from her grief or the marriage, as the birch fence, "will rot."

In the hundreds of readings Robert Frost presented, he never read "Home Burial." He told his close friend and biographer, Lawrance Thompson, it was "too sad" to him to read aloud.<sup>11</sup> Robert and his wife, Elinor, lost their first born, Elliot, while living on a New England farm. Frost denied the poem was autobiographical, but the hurt the Frosts felt at their loss must be embodied in the rendition of a similar occurrence.

<sup>10</sup>Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice (New York: Henry Holt, 1942), p. 110.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 597-598.

"Love and a Question" published prior to "Home Burial" seems to anticipate the struggle between Amy and her husband. A young man on his wedding night looks out at the world. Now, his bride is safe inside but soon they will venture into the future. All of life is before him and the groom senses the shadows of the future: "And wished her heart in a case of gold / And pinned with a silver pin" (p. 9). The consequence of such a wish being realized is expressed in "Song" from William Blake's Poetical Sketches:

He caught me in his silken net,  
And shut me in his golden cage

He loves to sit and hear me sing  
Then laughing, sports and plays with me:  
Then stretches out my golden wing,  
And mocks my loss of liberty.<sup>12</sup>

For Blake, cages and nets symbolize a loss of liberty. Love becomes possessive and selfish. The groom in "Love and a Question" knows he cannot keep his bride in a cage, but he is fearful of what life and new circumstances will do to their love. They could be Amy and her husband in a happier time.

In "Provide, Provide," Frost warns his reader to prepare for the unforeseen changes that are sure to occur in every life. Abishag, the withered hag, finds out too late:

No memory of having starved  
Atones for later disregard  
Or keeps the end from being hard.  
(p. 404)

<sup>12</sup>William Blake, The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, (New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 404-405.

There seems to be a lesson here related to the lives of some past writers. John Keats and Lord Byron could not accept the mutability of life and died young in disillusionment. George Bernard Shaw, William Blake, and Robert Frost lived full lives into old age. Each hoped to influence others and all were irrepressible. They influenced change when they could and accepted mutability when it was a finality. Frost, himself, was never content to sit back and live on his past successes. At sixty-three, he published his last book of poetry, A Witness Tree, and a dramatic dialogue, A Masque of Mercy. Eleven years later, he read the poem, "The Gift Outright," at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. Less than a year before his death at eighty-nine, he accompanied the Secretary of the Interior on a trip to Moscow where he read "Mending Wall." He continued to meet the public until his final illness.

It was this acceptance of change that allowed Frost to develop almost without emotion the tragic story in "Out. Out--." A pleasant scene of a young boy cutting wood is suddenly marred when his hand slips into the blade and is severed. Life is fleeting and the boy is dead. Amy would have had disdain for the crowd who "turned to their affairs" (p. 172), but they are not callous or uncaring. They are the same people who would bring supper if he were only sick. Death is a finality, and man cannot change it.

Now, the couple in "The Death of a Hired Man" reflect on Silas's life but soon they will return "to their affairs." They recall his skill at building a load of hay; his arguments with the young college lad who worked on the farm one summer; his lack of loyalty when he was needed. Silas took the road of least resistance; he was always chasing a falling star and thinking too late. Early in life, he had alienated himself from family or at least his brother, the only relative mentioned in the poem. Mary speculates on why the brother and Silas are estranged:

"I can tell you.  
 Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him--  
 But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.  
 He never did a thing so very bad.  
 He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
 As anybody. Worthless though he is,  
 He won't be made ashamed to please his brother."  
 (p. 54)

Silas is a pathetic character, not because his family expected too much of him, but because he expected so little of himself. It is Silas who questions his own worth.

Some years ago, Abraham Maslow developed a theory of need satisfaction leading to self-actualization. On the basis of his "Hierarchy of Needs,"<sup>13</sup> poor old Silas doesn't even meet the preconditions for need satisfaction. The only thing he could really do well was to build a load of hay. Trying to elevate his self-concept, he keeps recalling

<sup>13</sup>Frank G. Goble, The Third Force: The Psychology of Abraham Maslow (New York: Grossman, 1970), p. 52.

the summer he worked with the young college boy. Mary sums up his life when she says,

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be  
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.  
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.  
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,  
And nothing to look backward to with pride,  
And nothing to look forward to with hope,  
So now and never any different."

(p. 52)

Silas too readily accepted his plight, and "that has made all the difference." There was something in his character that would not let him take a hard look at what was happening in his life. He had an intuitive feeling he was as good as anyone, but his actions were always based on expediency. Unchanging, his own actions lead him down the ladder to total failure. Mary did not let Silas destroy her faith in man, yet she knew he would never change. Now, it is finished because Silas has found the finality of the grave. Conventions of society sometimes drive Frost characters to seek change. Estelle in "The Housekeeper" refuses to accept her situation, and when the opportunity for a break comes, she takes it. "Better than married ought to be as good / As married" (p. 106), said John, her common law husband, but for Estelle the lack of marriage vows was unacceptable. Her mother says of her, "She thinks if it was bad to live with him, / It must be right to leave him" (p. 105). But the tone of the poem is against Estelle's decision to marry another. Poor John Hall, who has given everything to mother and daughter but his signature on a marriage license, must face loneliness on the run down farm. Here is a paradox so familiar in Frost's poetry. Estelle is trading a safe haven for an unknown.

All the characters feel it is a mistake, but they also understand what forces her decision. John made a misjudgement when he refused to abide by the conventions of society. Estelle is trading the security and warmth of John Hall's home for a marriage license. She may return, but it will be hard to recapture the atmosphere her mother describes to the neighbor.

A twist of fate has left John to face the same isolation pictured in "An Old Man's Winter Night," the final stage of life:

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him  
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,  
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.  
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze  
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.  
 What kept him from remembering what it was  
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
 He stood with barrels round him--at a loss.  
 And having scared the cellar under him  
 In clomping here, he scared it once again  
 In clomping off;--and scared the outer night,  
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar  
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,  
 But nothing so like beating on a box.  
 A light he was to no one but himself  
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
 A quiet light, and then not even that.  
 He consigned to the moon, such as she was,  
 So late-arising, to the broken moon  
 As better than the sun in any case  
 For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,  
 His icicles along the wall to keep;  
 And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt  
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,  
 And eased his heaving breathing, but still slept.  
 One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,  
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

(p. 135)

Life seems to stand still for the old man, but it was not always as pictured in the poem. He was once young and vigorous but existence changes. We feel empathy with the old man because if life goes on long enough our winter night may hold the same loneliness.

Frost encourages his characters to take the road that will lead to fulfillment but he foresees many pitfalls that will throw them into cages of despair. Acceptance of a bitter reality is related to the stranger in "A Servant to Servants" by Len's wife. Life lost its sweetness for her when as a child she viewed the cage used to house her father's crazy brother. Now, she has had her turn at the state asylum. Len has faith things will be all right, but it is not shared by his fatalistic wife, who says, "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going: / Other folks have to, why shouldn't I" (p. 82). Her acceptance reflects the religious philosophy taught to Frost by his mother. Later, in a poem titled "Acceptance," the same thoughts are related to nature as the bird says, "Let the night be too dark for me to see / Into the future. Let what will be, be" (p. 313).

Toffile's son and wife, living on the little farm behind the mountain in the "The Witch of Coos," accept their fate. Frost in his uncanny use of conversation tells us in two short lines, "They were a man's his father killed for me. / I mean a man he killed instead of me" (247), why the mother relating the story is not quite right. The murder was a finality she accepted, but the acceptance took its toll. The story sounds like a modern gothic tale similar to the ones related by "the old gentleman with the haunted head"<sup>14</sup> in Washington Irving's Tales of a Traveler. Like the old man who says of one of the

<sup>14</sup>Washington Irving, Selected Prose, ed. Stanley T. Williams (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 241.

tales, "The truth of which I can undertake to vouch,"<sup>15</sup> Frost wants us to believe his tale; but it is with his same determination to blend mysticism and realism that the poem ends:

She hadn't found the finger-bone she wanted  
 Among the buttons poured out in her lap.  
 I verified the name next morning: Toffile.  
 The rural letter box said Toffile Lajway.  
 (p. 247)

For many years she lived with a lie, but now the mutability of existence has brought her to the point that she cannot remember why she cared "enough to lie--" (p. 252). Frost characters usually accept what they cannot change. If they must escape, it is usually a mental flight from reality rather than deep melancholy used by many poets.

Frost is reluctant to take firm stands because he sees existence constantly changing. He has the minister in "The Black Cottage" say,

". . . why abandon a belief  
 Merely because it ceases to be true.  
 Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
 It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
 (p. 77)

William James said, "Reason does not encompass all of reality,"<sup>16</sup> and certainly the reality of Frost's poetry does not always seem reasonable. "For Once, Then, Something" captures the spirit of Frost's refusal to come to any concrete answer:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
 Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
 Deeper down in the well than where the water  
 Gives me back in the shining surface picture

<sup>15</sup>Irving, p. 236.

<sup>16</sup>Brennan, p. 47.

Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.  
 Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
 I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
 Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.  
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.  
 (p. 276)

It is more than a reflection of life that Frost captures in his poetry. He tells us, "We like to talk in parables and hints and in indirections--whether from diffidence or some other instinct."<sup>17</sup> Fred and his wife in "West-Running Brook" weave fantasy and truth together until the brook symbolizes the source of life. Fred says,

"And there is something sending up the sun.  
 It is this backward motion toward the source.  
 Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
 The tribute of the current to the source.  
 It is from this in nature we are from.  
 It is most us."  
 (p. 327)

"In the very nature of the drift to nothingness, there exists a counter drift toward renewal."<sup>18</sup> The brook runs counter to the other brooks, but it has a part that runs counter to itself. It is Frost at his best, refusing to make a total commitment in any direction. His verse is often hard to define because of the physical juxtaposed to the intuitive. Doyle says in The Poetry of Robert Frost, "Poetry does

<sup>17</sup>Robert Frost, "Education of Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," Amhurst Alumni Council News, IV (March, 1931) rpt. in Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, eds., Selected Prose of Robert Frost (New York: Collier, 1949), p. 37.

<sup>18</sup>Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 99.

not give nor intend to give final answers; it gives the human, the full blooded, the living scene."<sup>19</sup>

Seasons are the classic metaphors for mutability. Spring mutates into summer, summer into fall, and fall into winter. The seasonal cycle corresponds to the cycle of man. In "Spring Pools," nature will soon use up the water of the pools for the generation of summer. Frost makes a plea for the new stage to remember what has passed before and to retain some of the spirit of youth and spring:

Let them think twice before they use their powers  
To blot out and drink up and sweep away  
These flowery waters and these watery flowers  
From snow that melted only yesterday.

(p. 303)

A blending of stages and ages helps control the harshness of change.

Just as there is progression in nature, man matures from child to adult. Frost likes to soften the mutability of age by blending it with youth, and in the same instance, he intertwines mind with heart and reality with intuition. This blending of mind and heart is the theme in "Birches" and "Wild Grapes." In the poems, the transportation to the dream world is by a flexible branch of the birch. "Birches" is related by a mature adult who likes to imagine "some boy's been swinging them" (p. 152), but he knows "swinging doesn't bend them down to stay" (p. 152). In "Wild Grapes," the story is related by a young girl who ventures out into the world with her brother. Eager for her to meet the world, the brother brings the branch to meet her hands; but without

<sup>19</sup>Doyle, p. 35.

his support, the dreams control the girl:

I said I had the tree. It wasn't true.  
 The opposite was true. The tree had me.  
 The minute it was left with me alone  
 It caught me up as if I were the fish  
 And it the fishpole.

(p. 240)

It is the age old story of the idealistic youth hoping to build a Utopia. Often, the dream controls the individual, and he forgets the proper means to arrive at the end. Every generation has its young people with dreams who fight blending idealism with realism. Henry Thoreau, who wrote, "I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me,"<sup>20</sup> would tell the little girl to hold on with her heart, but the narrator in "Birches" would caution the girl to blend the dreams of her heart with the dictates of her mind in order to stay part of the ever changing world.

"Wild Grapes" is a pragmatic view of the world and in places contains some prophetic lines, but it falls short of Frost's better poems because of intrusions like:

But I with something of the baby grip  
 Acquired ancestrally in just such trees  
 When wilder mothers than our wildest now  
 Hung babies out on branches by the hands  
 To dry or wash or tan, I don't know which,  
 (You'll have to ask an evolutionist)--

(p. 241)

The humor distracts the reader and becomes an ignoble pun which destroys the force of the poem. The blending of philosophies is necessary for growth into the second stage of life; it is too bad the theme is not treated seriously throughout the poem.

<sup>20</sup>Henry David Thoreau, "Walden," The American Tradition in Literature, eds. Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and George Perkins (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1956), p. 731.

Earlier in this paper, we looked at the effect mutability had on some other poets (Keats, Byron, and Blake) as compared to its impact on Frost. But Frost was not always the pragmatic he appears in his poetry. During a very turbulent period in his early adult life, when Elinor White had broken off her engagement to him, he ran away from home and considered committing suicide. Before his relationship with Elinor was restored, he read Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven." Frost was very pleased with the discovery of the poem<sup>21</sup> and it seems to have influenced his view of mutability. In this same period, Frost wrote "Reluctance." Lawrence Thompson suggests<sup>22</sup> the poem was probably written just prior to Frost's reading of "Hound of Heaven," but the theme is so closely allied the reading could have prompted the writing. Here are the opening stanzas of both poems:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
 Up vistaed hopes, I sped;  
 And shot, precipitated,  
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.<sup>23</sup>

"Hound of Heaven"

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, Early Years, pp. 199-200.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>23</sup>Francis Thompson, "Hound of Heaven," Complete Poems of Francis Thompson (New York: Random House, 1919), pp. 88.

Out through the fields and the woods  
 And over the walls I have wended;  
 I have climbed the hills of view  
 And looked at the world, and descended;  
 I have come by the highway home,  
 And lo, it is ended.

"Reluctance" (p. 43)

Both speakers are searching for truth yet they are fleeing as Lord Byron's Childe Harold flees in Canto III of Childe Harold. Only when the flight is over, is there relief.

The narrator in "Hound of Heaven" seeks beyond man and nature for fulfillment. The following passage alludes to the inability of nature to provide relief for a tormented soul:

Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;  
 Let her, if she would owe me  
 Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me  
 The breast o' her tenderness:  
 Never did any milk of hers once bless  
 My thirsting mouth. ("Hound of Heaven")

The persona seeks relief from people, nature, fantasies; but, in the finality, it is only God who helps the tortured soul. The same feeling of pursuit and frustration is reflected in "Reluctance," but Frost refuses to make any final commitment when he says, "The heart is still aching to seek, / But the feet question 'Whither?'" Reinforcing the theme of "Wild Grapes," we are told:

Ah, when to the heart of man  
 Was it ever less than a treason  
 To go with the drift of things,  
 To yield with a grace to reason,  
 And bow and accept the end  
 To a love or a season?

(p. 43)

Lawrance Thompson says<sup>24</sup> Frost battled skepticism early in his mature years and his bold grappling led him to an affirmation of faith in the metaphysical. In a paper published in the Amherst Graduates Quarterly in 1931, Frost expressed his feeling about beliefs. He says, "Now I think--I happen to think--that those three beliefs that I speak of, the self-belief, the love-belief, and the art-belief, are all closely related to the God-belief. That the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future."<sup>25</sup> In the tradition of the Frost paradox, he never overstates his God-belief in his poetry. Earlier, "For Once, Then, Something" was discussed; Frost almost captures something in concrete but it slips away. In a later poem, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," he writes:

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

The same mutability is present; we cannot capture the essence of existence. In Fire and Ice, Thompson says, "He [Frost] has never grown tired of his own cautious search for truth, yet he has never been tempted to believe that absolute truth could be defined satisfactorily even by the most profound philosophical system."<sup>26</sup> Frost pursues God and truth, but he never arrives at a final answer like the narrator of

<sup>24</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup>Frost, "Education by Poetry," p. 46.

<sup>26</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 28.

"Hound of Heaven," whom God addresses:

"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."<sup>27</sup>

Like the pastor in "The Black Cottage," who said, "I could devote and dedicate forever / To the truths we keep coming back and back to" (p. 77), the narrator in "Reluctance" will not yield entirely to reason.

For Frost, there is no finality in truth, but as we have already noted in "Home Burial," "Death of a Hired Man," "Provide, Provide," "Servant to Servants," and "The Housekeeper," there are "finalities besides the grave" (p. 162). Jesse Bel in A Masque of Mercy (614) says, "The saddest thing in life is that the best thing in it should be courage." It is the saddest thing for the hill wife because her lack of courage is the fatal flaw causing tragedy in "The Hill Wife." The poem is structured like a dramatic tragedy. The first act sets the tone as you are made aware of the trauma the couple share on the approach of winter and the release when it is spring and the birds return:

The truth being we are as much  
Too glad for the one thing  
As we are too sad for the other here--  
(p. 160)

<sup>27</sup>Thompson, "Hound of Heaven," p. 95.

The tension builds in the second phase as the fear of the unknown is explored:

They learned to rattle the lock and key  
 To give whatever might chance to be  
 Warning and time to be off in flight:  
 (p. 160)

The third and fourth poems reveal the neurosis of the wife's mind. She imagines a tramp is watching her from the woods, and at night she has nightmares of what the tree beside her window might do if it gets the window-latch open. The stage is set for the final act, "The Impulse":

Sudden and swift and light as that  
 The ties gave,  
 And he learned of finalities  
 Besides the grave.  
 (p. 162)

Frost has captured the image of a psychologically crippled woman and the changes taking place in her life. The poem does not reveal what happened to the hill wife, but we know the husband will have to face life without her or life with her released from reality. The easier road will be the one without her. Holding on to our dreams like the little girl in "Wild Grapes," we like to imagine playful boys bending birches, but like the little girl, we can only hold on with our heart. Our mind must face the reality of everyday life. If we do not, those dear to us will learn of "finalities besides the grave." Frost demands a blending of the physical and the metaphysical. While he agrees with Amy ("Home Burial") that the crowd is not compassionate, he knows the withdrawal from reality will only bring greater pain. Abishag, Len's wife, Mrs. Toffile would all agree with the little girl in "Wild Grapes" when she said you must let go with mind but hold on with heart. When

the heart's demand is great, you must go with heart--go with caution because too many steps away from the reality of the mind and the finality will be the end.

By his eighty-fifth birthday, Robert Frost had become the grand old man of American verse. Many pictured him as the pastoral poet who captured the scenery and people of New England. When Lionel Trilling,<sup>28</sup> as guest speaker at the party honoring Frost on his birthday, called his poetry "terrifying," it caused a shudder across the breadth of this nation. The "swinger of birches" who worked at his image of the country farmer was revealed. His poetry is life. Often a compassionate plea for restraint and concern, isolation, loneliness, and frustration infiltrate it. The reader is made aware of the "terrifying" and inconsistent aspects of living, but there is also the feeling that life is worthwhile. The final line from "The Lesson for Today" expresses his sentiment, "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." Frost saw the harshness of the world, but he never lost faith in it.

<sup>28</sup>Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," rpt, James M. Cox, ed. A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 156-157.

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