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# The South Carolina Review

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# The South Carolina Review

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**JOHN CROWE RANSOM**

1888-1974

A Southern magazine cannot fail to take notice of his passing. Ransom was literary critic, editor, poet, teacher, Southern gentleman. A fellow poet once called him "the best Southern poet since Poe." Allen Tate said that after the death of Stevens and Frost he was "the dean of American poetry." Yet Ransom once said that if he could have another career, he would have chosen to be the editor of a small agrarian newspaper. Thus his own view of himself, as Tate and T. D. Young remind us, was characteristically modest—that he was "deliberately minor." In this judgment, John Crowe Ransom made one of his rare critical misjudgments. It is to his importance that we wish to pay tribute.

R. J. C.



## FROST IN THE CAROLINAS <sup>1</sup>

Recorded and Edited by RICHARD J. CALHOUN

Frost: I'm here again. It makes the fifteenth time, maybe. Did you say that? I wanted to coincide in figures.

I sometimes speak from the last thing that happened to me. I got asked today if I think up poems. Do I think them up? How do I get the right one? Well, it is the hardest thing in the world to tell. But I don't think up poems. I pick up a lot of things I thought of to make a poem; that is a lot of scattered thoughts through the days that are handy for the poem — that's about all. That's where the thinking comes in.

One definition of a poem might be: it's a run of luck. It would be a good figure for it. Another one. There used to be an event in the track meet, I think, called the hop, skip, and a jump. And the jump was the thing you hoped to do best in it, I think. You get going, you know, and get up your momentum. And that last jump ought to be the finish off to it. But now that's a little different from it in some ways because that last thing is never foreseen. If you thought of it before you wrote it, why it wouldn't be any good if you didn't come to it, you know, and get surprised a little at your own luck. It's a run of luck, and each step in it has that "what a good boy am I" feeling, you know, that I'm still going, still going. And then you almost bow yourself out with the success of the last sentence.

Then they ask me if I'm concerned about other writers. Well, I'm rather distressed by other writers in manuscript. I like them in print. I like them to have got as far as print. I'll tell you why, because I've been through my own agonies about it, and it's not from scorn of them; it's from too much sympathy—their pains, their aspiration and all that. The strain of their aspiration—it's too much for me. I see a little of it, but I shun it and shed it mostly. But what I am interested in is that other part of it that I speak of—the scattered thoughts of your daily life. You see, I tell them I'm like—(I'm always using metaphors) I'm like the automobile workers up in Detroit. I don't work by the day, by the hour, by the day, by the week. I work by the year. I'm not a day laborer at writing. I live with no particular obligation to write the poems; I'm much more interested in having thoughts and things scattered around

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<sup>1</sup> An unpublished talk given by Robert Frost at the University of North Carolina, Spring, 1957. Printed with the permission of the Estate of Robert Frost, Alfred C. Edwards, Trustee.

and feeling opulent. Rich and ready with a whole lot of stuff around me that could come to something. If I don't feel like that, to use another figure, if I were pressed for them—the steps, you know, the little things that made the poem, if I didn't have them—I feel as if my brain pan had scraped—all the stuff scraped out of it. And that would be distress, or else like a spider that comes down in a building like this, starts for the floor, you know, on his own thread, and he gets it all out of his stomach before he gets to the floor. So I like to think I got plenty. Just same as I like to think my country has plenty. You know, bombs to burn. That feeling of opulence.

Now, I like to have it out with young people about what I mean by thoughts—you know, having ideas. The one thing it isn't is just opinions. I think myself that it comes down to just having metaphors—comparisons. I kind of think you never can say you've been thinking at all unless you got up a little comparison like these I've just been making. For instance, now I might say, "Some one said 'You ever going to have a book of prose?'" Yes, I'm going to have one and I'm going to use the analogy for the name of it, *Might Be*. Everything in it might be, just might be. Then I'll have another book later which I'll call *Come Right Down To It*. See then there won't be any might be in it; there'll be some absolutes in it, some things that have got to be so. Those two books I'll never write, but you see those are nice metaphors. The might be's kicking 'round in all sorts of use. I'll be a very good name for a lot of things I say—and a lot of things I think, that I toss off and leave scattered 'round. I once made another metaphor for it all. In my farm there are scattered stones in the pasture—great pasture, extensive pasture. The stones are scattered in such a way that I can cross it in any direction without stepping on dirt. People say, "what do you want them that way for?" Well, I was the giant that scattered them there so I could go in any direction I wanted to, you see, and have something waiting for me. Well now, just so with thoughts I scattered 'round. Something comes over me; some sense of direction—I suppose that's really what it is, a kind of sense of direction that makes the poem. But I can go almost anywhere and still have these ideas waiting for me. I was the giant that scattered them, scattered my own footpaths and so on. I've lived on such things as that and I suspect we all do. We get out of our tight places by some little figure of speech. We say, "Oh, that's just the same as saying," you see. You say that. When you say that you know you're dangerous in an argument. We say, "Oh, you might as well say, if you're going to say that." See you're going to use some analogy that leads up to something. You might as well. Somebody says, "You aren't much of a New Dealer, are you?" Well, I'm a

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Democrat. But to defend myself the other day, I made a good figure; but it's wasted on all of you 'cause you haven't got any Scotch in you. I'm half Scotch. I say, "No, I'm not New Deal, I'm Auld Diel." You don't know what that means, do you? That's spelled d-i-e-l. That's just a way out of the talk you know, doesn't matter too much. But all the time I'd rather be Auld Diel than New Deal. You don't get it, I don't think. But some that you make are very useful.

Now, I'm going to have to talk about our materialism somewhere. I'm going to have to talk about that. I had to talk about that in Brazil. Everybody else was talking about it so I had to talk about it. All of them—they were from all of the countries there—from Europe, too. But not very northern, rather southern. But all of them were spreading their hands out to God, to heaven, and deploring our American materialism. And I had to speak. I wasn't going to defend us, you know. I wouldn't be caught defending myself. So I just, when I had to speak I just said, "Yeah, we're anxious about it, too." I said, "You know how I can tell?" Here's the figure that comes in again. "In every house I visit there's some scales in the bathroom." Let them think that over. That's our worry about our materialism. And I—when I have to speak about it again, I'm going to not call it "ism"—not going to call it materialism. I'm going to call it "Man's Adventure into Materiality." And our western, our whole motion westward and northwestward—see that's what it's been—well, from the far end of the Mediterranean Sea—that's where it began with a few little letters like little bacteria, you know, little wiggles: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. And we had those and we started west by north and we're the ultimate of that. And it's been an adventure by science and the confidence in science that the spirit can save itself and live in material things. And you know where we have got the idea? Well, the Lord God Himself materialized, didn't he? He ventured into material existence; he substantiated; he took on flesh. And we've just taken on, by science and the confidence in the spirit, that it can't be lost in science. That's been us. That's what I'm going to talk about. And the motion has been west by north into materiality. See, all metaphors and all things.

(All my life is that when I'm—it's the—my clarifications. You see, one of the things about poetry is, it's a sort of—I've said that, another little figure—that it's a momentary—a poem is a little figure that's a momentary stay against confusion. Says something that'll do for now; you know, you got to have another one. You got to keep having them.) In another figure I use—so many it's athletic, so many farming—farming and athletics to me always. But another one is that we tread these meta-

phors. Everyone fails us, but we have to keep making them, treading them to keep our heads above, you know. And each man does it for himself.

But now, I talked sometime, somewhere, on how you can tell when you're thinking. Well, you can tell that way, that you probably aren't thinking, you're opinionating and you've got—you say—we use the expression, "he's a thoughtful person." Well, now that isn't what I mean at all. I'm somewhat thoughtful, but not very. That is, a thoughtful person is someone who looks ahead and sees for other people and himself and all, you know, just what's apt to—what the emergency's like to be, you know. And put out the—coming away from Clifford Lyon's house to put out the light—it's thoughtful for me to put out the lights in my bedroom 'cause they're not needed, and you know, so on. I get credit for being thoughtful. But that isn't it. It's this sort of thing that always got in it—two things maybe—something that happened to you; they may be two thoughts of somebody else. But learning thoughts in college is not necessarily learning to have thoughts. You've got to take measures—got to do something about it. It's grand to learn great thoughts, great thoughts, thoughts lasting to the end, other people's. But it's not the same thing as learning to have thoughts. And to have thoughts means just what I say—bringing two things together. They may be episodes, events; they may be ideas in a book. I quoted then. I brought in the end of a great sonnet. "Great thoughts, great thoughts, thoughts lasting to the end." Not mine, somebody else's. Just comes in and those things—you can see the amount of staying there is in a line like that—just to know it. It's got a lot of that in it. But it's never as staying as something you think yourself, you know, two things that come together. Take another just to show you from the athletic field. And I'm not putting on airs about athletics, but a great deal of anyone's thinking comes from hop, skip, and jump and such things as the tennis court. Mine does, and baseball—"Put one over on him." What did that come from, you know? So many figures from the field. But one very fine one that I thought of for me. A young minister stopped by my bedside after I'd been operated on in the hospital some years ago. A young friend of mine, quite a devoted friend, and he said to me that, "I've just come down from the birth of my son in the hospital." And he said it very gravely and then he said, "One wonders if it's a good thing to bring anyone into a world like this." Think of a minister saying that. Nice fellow, too. And I said, "Look."—This is my figure about it—"Nobody comes into this world to find out whether it's a good world or not; he comes into it to see whether he's any good at it." And then I said, "It's just the same as coming onto a tennis court.

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You don't come onto the court to criticize the court; you come on to get criticized yourself. To see whether you're any good at tennis and whether you're sensitive to the height of the net—and all that sort of thing." You see, I'd forgotten that, that happened so many years ago. And he brought that baby to see me. He's a grown boy in college this year, this September, and reminded me of how I'd taunted him with not knowing—"You don't come into the world to find out whether it's a good world or not." Some criticism of the court—of course, if the grass is all worn out where you serve or something like that—but it's the same for the other fellow—you know, and all that. I'll leave that. But you see what I figured, what I think it is to think.

Let me tell one more. I'm always running into young people. A little grandchild of mine graduated from college last year—a little girl. And she said to me very gently—she's a very gentle thing—I don't know whether she isn't so gentle—I was wondering if she had any ambition, she's so gentle. But she said to me in that wistful way, "Don't you think our aim in life ought to be to do good?" And so just to bother her, I said, "Well, I knew two young writers. One of them set out to do good, and the other set out simply to do well." And I named them to her and she saw at once which side I was on—on the one who had done well. And the other one that had done good, you know, a very nice person and was a good citizen and had done a lot of good. And they were neck and neck when they were young, these two, side by side. And the one that did well was sort of a haughty person and a little aloof, but she's done more to the world than the one that set out to do good. And I thought I'd settled my granddaughter. And she said to me—she thought a minute or two—she started thinking, you see. And she said, "Well, wouldn't it be better, nice, to do good well." And I let it stay at that. She had it. Glad to have it that way.

And now I'm going to read to you [Photographer takes a picture]. And you're going to have a shot at me, and you're not going to keep shooting. The Indians used to think that every time you had your picture taken you'd lost some strength, you know. And then let's just introduce one little newish sort of poem at the end of this. I have a great pleasure, the greatest kind of pleasure, in the neatness of a quatrain. See when one of these little thoughts just shapes into a quatrain and many of them in my head—few of mine, and many of other people's—and that it makes prominent the little quip or thought, wisecrack, call it—anything—makes it stand right up, you know. I love it when the rhymes come just right and all that, you know. I have a great weakness for that and had from the very beginning. Whenever I see a chance to

make them come kind of clever, you know, I enjoy it. That's not as important as this idea part of it. You can write free verse, for all of me, if it has this other part I talk about first. If it has idea, real thought in it, good metaphor. Whitman—pages and pages like the great American desert, but every little while something, you know—a great poem of that kind. I wonder what he thought he was doing, you know. He must have known when he really got something like that. I suppose he thought this is a great big mass that I'm writing and there are—there's something; somewhere in it there's a jewel or two. That's what I call matrix. See there's another figure. Matrix—the kind of rubbish that you find jewels in. The name for that other stuff with us is grout. Did you ever hear that word—grout—just bad, ordinary stone that's no good for anything? But it has something in it—often jewels.

All right now we're going to leave . . . Oh, no, I was going to say a little one just for the fun, to show you how I—what a weakness I have for little rhymes. This one is called "The Peril of Spring." I just put—I just thought of that—what to call it. I hadn't named it before. "Peril of Spring." And I'm going to just dwell on the rhyme this one, not the other, for just the fun of it. See how it came out.

*easy  
met*

It is right in there  
Betwixt and between  
the orchard bare  
And the orchard green,  
When the flowers delight  
In a popcorn burst  
Of perfect white,  
That we fear the worst.  
But there's not a clime  
That isn't like.  
To take that time  
For the frost to strike.<sup>2</sup>

And what made me say that is I've lived in so many climes, and there's . . . I used to think that it was only in New England we had that fear at flower-time of frost. But I heard of it in Brazil down near the equator. So whenever things are in bloom, frost seems to want to get them. I just discovered that. But there this other. . . . But again now, just watch the rhyme. Let me say it again. I won't do this except for the fun of it. This is a new one; I made it in my head just a few days ago; so I wrote.

<sup>2</sup> Published in slightly different form as "Peril of Hope" in *In The Clearing*.



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Sometimes I don't write them; they just make as you go. First one I ever wrote, I wrote out walking. 'Twas about what's called the Terrible Night—La Noche Triste—when Cortez was nearly destroyed by the Aztecs and what a long, long thing I wrote. Made all—walked miles and made it long. First one I wrote. That's when I was in high school, fifteen ["Peril of Spring" read again]. All those little rhymes. Fun, isn't it? Don't you think so?

I'm going on to old ones. I think I'll read first from my longer ones, "The Death of the Hired Man." No, I don't know, I'll wait a little until I have said a few short ones to you. I didn't say that one. Take one about a Morgan horse [Reads "The Runaway"]. That's another analogy if you stop and look at it. I used that on some boys once who thought that the world was going to pot, you know, and I told them it was only weather. They thought I didn't know; I was too old to know—just same as the horse. Then I say—let's see. This is "The Road Not Taken" [Reads].

Then another little one. I've got some that are laid out for me here. This is not so short. This one is called "A Tuft of Flowers." And you can see me doing—I'm not going to talk about that much—just say that one word, you can see me reasoning out something about this terrible word that's going 'round now called "togetherness." I loathe the word. I loathe a word made like that. It's made out of German, I think, isn't it? But the problem always—where you are, you, you know, where are you important, when you're with people or when you're away from them. And another analogy is the Sunday School picnic, you know, the Sunday School picnic, we had the three-legged race. Can you run better tied to somebody else, or can you run better alone? Each one of those runners could run better alone, but when they have one leg tied to each other, you know, each's leg tied together, they run worse and it's funny, so bad it's funny. That's why they have it. That's the danger of the idea of togetherness: some things you do better together, some you don't. A long time ago, when I was young as you are, I wrote this on the subject [Reads "A Tuft of Flowers"]. You see I say it one way, and then I say it the other. It's both ways and always both ways. Another kind of analogy, you see, you know the best line in that? Want me to tell you? Best line in it is where he didn't do it "for us to draw one thought of ours to him/He did it from sheer morning gladness at the brim." That's what the whole business is about. That's the way the poem is supposed to be written. They're not written for Phi Beta Kappa occasions. They're written for the, some would say, the *nyet* of it.

Read from  
new sheet  
on Frost  
as before but  
read 1st & 2nd





at me for saying that. I was about to weep. This is a very short one [Reads "It Is Almost the Year Two Thousand"]. Then, that same sort of thing. This one's called—no, wait a second. Here's something all together different, again. Two little ones I'm going to read you. I think they're right here together. No. Here's an old one. "In the Long Night," this is called. I don't know what made me write this. "In the Long Night"—see, symbolic [Reads the poem]. Nobody ever heard that before. It's the first time I ever read it. Then, this one is called "Why Wait for Science?" I guess I know this one [Reads the poem]. Another one is like that. This one says a theory, if you hold it hard enough the long enough, gets rated as a creed. You know, *evolution*, such things as that [Reads "Etherealizing"]. What's the time? Tires you out. Let's see. That one's called "Etherealizing."

I've been thinking about young poets lately and a lot of them are having a book out—all under forty. Most—a good many of my friends. I was *thinking how poets really write their best poetry—you can't tell when*. It can be young, and it can be old, and it can be middle, and it can be scattered anywhere. But it's more apt—the statistics show—it's more apt to be young—I'm favored. Those are all under forty years old, these fellows, and the statistics would probably tell them that they're probably writing right now, under forty, as good as they'll ever write. They needn't think they'll mature into something better. They'll mature out of it, if anything. That's the danger of it.

I didn't say to you—let me say this thing in another spirit altogether—"Soldier" [Reads the poem]. That's another kind of poem. There's all sorts of things here. There was a little one I wanted to find. I guess I didn't—I'm not sure. There's a tiny one I see here in two lines. This is the kind of thing I was speaking of at first when I said how much fun it is to say it when two lines rhyme—sometimes—sometimes. It's called—it's to the tune of "Ring Around the Rosey," I guess. It's called "The Secret." Never mind the name of it [Reads the poem]. Spell it with capital letter—capital S—Secret—big secret.

Then, I guess I'll say one or two outside of the book. Oh, yes, I've written one North Carolina poem, haven't I? Mustn't forget that. Let's see, I came down along this way in 1894. That's the first time I appeared around here. And I was all alone and I was looking for a job, I guess. I don't know; I was *kind of aimless youngster and very young*. And I got out at Norfolk—you'll be interested to know—out with the last of my—well, I had a little more money—dollar or so more. And I walked away, and then I came to the Dismal Swamp Canal. And there on a wharf was a boat tied up. I guess 'twas taking on cotton bales or something like

that—small boat. But what money I had yet in my pocket, I offered to the captain to give me a ride. And he gave me a ride down to Elizabeth City, and then he said I could go further if I waited; he was going on down the coast a little further. And I waited and a lot of men came along on board, chartered the boat to go duck hunting—(you can tell what time of year it was)—with me on it. And I was with them a day or so. And in the night while they were celebrating—they celebrated in the night—the ducks they didn't kill. I wandered out alone, down the coast with a fellow in the Coast Guard. This poem is just about that memory. And I got back there a year or so ago from here—I went down with Clifford Lyons; I went down to stay with Huntington Cairns, who has a home down there. And all these memories came flooding back over me [Reads "Kitty Hawk"]. The one I always wind up with—one called "Departmental." "An ant on the table cloth ran into a dormant moth." See, cloth, moth—just like that [Reads "Departmental"].

## ROBERT FROST'S EARLY EDUCATION IN SCIENCE

KATHRYN GIBBS HARRIS

Robert Frost's early education in science and in scientific philosophy helped him form his views, not only about science, but about poetry and his way of life as well. Much of his education in science was a self-education, encouraged by his earliest experiences. But, on the other hand, much was also accomplished in classroom work. According to high school records and his Harvard class work, Robert Frost was easily a much better than average student of scientific subjects. In school he always chose science and the classics before composition or literature courses; he was genuinely interested in science, and in the historical classics, but he openly disliked "English," especially the texts used. By the time he entered high school in Lawrence, Massachusetts, he had developed a strong curiosity about the nature of the universe and the history of man. Yet, it is not so strange that, as a young man, Frost had these preferences. They followed directly from the literature read to him by his mother when he was a child, especially the poetry of nature and the writings of the scientist and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. The scientific curiosity established in the poet's early background stayed with him throughout his life. It perhaps became more obvious in his later poems, but it was there in the man and in the poetry from the beginning.

During his first eleven years, Robert lived in San Francisco with his mother, father, and younger sister Jeannie. His father's illness with consumption and alcoholism must have caused the boy feelings of insecurity, if not terror. His mother wisely leaned on friends and the church which seemed to her the soundest, the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem into which Robert was baptized. Isabelle Moodie Frost, who had emigrated from Sweden to become a schoolteacher, was evidently a person of considerable inner strength and intelligence. As Robert would not or could not stay in school, she undertook the education of her children at home with the Swedenborgian philosophy as her guide.

Swedenborg's teachings were important in two ways for Frost's thinking. First of all, Swedenborg constantly reiterated the distinction between opposites, and at the same time stressed a necessary unity between opposites. There were always "two's" of everything—the divine and the physical, or the spiritual and the material—and always an ultimate harmony between them. For instance, in one passage Swedenborg considers that the opposites heat and light, or the will and the under-

standing, "flow-in into" man: the heat produces love and the light produces wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Second, and perhaps even more influential in Frost's poetry and life, was the insistence in all of Swedenborg's writings that all things are constantly in motion, a belief which became translated into a doctrine of action in the handbooks of the Swedenborgian church.<sup>2</sup>

One thing Swedenborgians were clear about was that there could be no conflict between religion and science. The divine could manifest itself only in the physical world, and knowledge of the physical world was knowledge of God. Thus, one might say that young Robert had a holistic attitude toward science and religion literally from the time of his baptism. Further, there was such a direct and necessary relation between thought and action learned in childhood, that the desire to make those two opposites coherent became very strong in Frost's adult personal ethic. Late in life he replied to a questioner that Swedenborg had indeed been important in his early education:

What's my philosophy? That's hard to say. I was brought up a Swedenborgian. I am not a Swedenborgian now. But there's a good deal of it left in me. I am a mystic. I believe in symbols. I believe in change and in changing symbols.<sup>3</sup>

And Robert's mother, during the San Francisco days, purposely followed the thought with the action. After reading poems to the children on daffodils and waterfowl, she walked with them to Woodward's Gardens near their home where the children could directly observe varied forms of changing life. The gardens had a fine botanical collection as well as a memorable zoo. In "At Woodward's Gardens," first published in 1936, Frost gives an account of a zoo visit in order to make a point about experimental science. There is ambiguity in the poem, but it becomes plain that if the experimenter does not know what he is doing, he is likely to lose his equipment and even his right to expound upon verities to the monkeys. The boy, who stung the knuckles of a monkey with a magnifying glass that focuses the sun's rays, is astonished when the monkey

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Nature of the Intercourse Between the Soul and the Body* (New York: General Convention of the New Jerusalem Church in the United States of America, 1865), p. iii. From the Latin.

<sup>2</sup> Julian K. Smyth and William F. Wunsch, compilers, *The Gist of Swedenborg* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1920), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Rose C. Feld, "Robert Frost Relieves his Mind," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 October 1923, p. 2.

grabs the glass and keeps it. Then, in the poem, the monkeys come forward to the bars for some final thoughts.

Who said it mattered  
 What monkeys did or didn't understand?  
 They might not understand a burning-glass.  
 They might not understand the sun itself.  
 It's knowing what to do with things that counts.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the interest Robert came to have in science must have begun with British and American nature poets read to him in the San Francisco years. Mrs. Frost read aloud from Burns, Herrick, Wordsworth, and, among the Americans, from Poe, Bryant, Emerson, and Thoreau. She read aloud a complete children's novel, *At the Back of the North Wind*, by the Scottish theologian and novelist, George MacDonald. The book's young hero overcame the obstacles of poverty, his father's illness, and even the fear of his own death with great courage and resourcefulness. North Wind, a fantastic character, was a personification of the mutable in nature, especially of the mutability of good and evil. She was a primal force who could either sink a ship or save it, and she taught the child hero to ride at her back and be less afraid. Mrs. Frost was herself a good story teller, who made up fairy tales and recounted the lives of various heroes, including Joan of Arc and Emmanuel Swedenborg.<sup>5</sup>

When Robert was eleven his father died, and he moved to New England with his mother and sister where he was to make his home for the rest of his life. At first the children were bored with the small town life and the cold winter, but snow and ice were new phenomena for a young experimenter, and Robert devised ways of discovering the properties of water in its various states. The dance and disappearance of ice across an old stove delighted the children.<sup>6</sup> This early observation was significant for Frost's theory of his own poetry, since he alludes to it in the introduction to his *Complete Poems* (New York: Holt, 1949) in what I take to be the principal statement of his poetic intention: "The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 293-294. References from the poems are taken from this current edition, designated *The Poetry* below.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold E. Grade, "A Chronicle of Robert Frost's Early Reading, 1874-1899," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 72 (1968), pp. 611-628.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, 1966), p. 55.

must ride on its own melting."<sup>7</sup> It may be easier for many to see what Frost meant by the moving melt of the poem, and of love, in the context of his later intense interest in the philosophers William James and Henri Bergson. The image of the ice's motion, of course, carries itself. The poet's intuitive capacity to explain life and art in seemingly simple physical terms carries the meaning. In this manner, Frost used what he came to know of the laws of nature to build his metaphorical language.

At age twelve Robert suddenly became keenly interested in amateur science and liked to share his experiences with equally enthusiastic friends. His neighbor, Charles Peabody, kept collections of flowers and of live and stuffed animals. Robert spent a considerable time at the Peabody home, and by the end of the summer of 1886 had fully established his love of shared botanizing and of games of the New England out-of-doors such as riding birch trees. At this time he was also passionately in love with Charles's active and attractive sister, Sabra. In his touching first love letters to her we find he has sent Sabra some nuts and some pressed leaves as tokens. It comes out in these brief letters that he would prefer to avoid writing his assigned literary compositions.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it was not until Robert was fourteen that he ever read a complete book on his own. But at the beginning of his sophomore year in high school he began a period of avid reading. He took books from the public library in Lawrence, and he read books from the personal library of an older friend at school, Carl Burrell.

Burrell's library contained books primarily about scientific subjects and by scientific philosophers, and there was also a collection of American humorists. Indeed the sense of "funning" Frost always had was not missing from his response to one discovery in this personal library: "It would be found that Grant Allen wrote a book on the Evolution of the Idea of God. I grinned inside at the time."<sup>9</sup> Frost grinned, but did not share his grin with Burrell, who had probably not had the advantage of hearing the works of Swedenborg read to him in childhood.

One book was especially important to Frost when he discovered it in Burrell's library because he already owned a copy of it himself. This significant book was *Our Place Among Infinities* by Richard Anthony Proctor, a noted English astronomer and writer on many science sub-

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Frost, *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1949), p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Thompson, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, 1964), pp. 17, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Letters*, pp. 529-532.



jects.<sup>10</sup> There are essays in it on Jupiter and Saturn and in the one titled "A Giant Sun" there is a dramatic description of Sirius, a favorite star of Frost's, prominent in his final book of poems. Proctor also wrote an essay about the extravagance of the universe, an idea Frost developed in his own way in his final lecture at Dartmouth College in 1962.<sup>11</sup> Proctor was an early conservationist predicting such eventualities as the general use of solar energy.<sup>12</sup> Frost enjoyed such wild speculations and absorbed Proctor's discussions of star gauging and other technical information. Proctor's other publications included some huge star atlases and some far more difficult treatises. All the more popular essays taken together make him appear to be a one-man general science magazine with a leaning toward physics. At this time Robert took one other astronomy book from the public library, a volume of essays similar to Proctor's, and set up an observatory in his own room to begin a self-directed study of astronomy.

The good feeling of shared intellectual freedom, as well as shared hilarity, between Robert and Carl at this time suggests the impetus that formed the heartily outrageous character Brad McLaughlin. In "The Star-Splitter," Brad wanted a telescope but didn't have the money. Therefore, he burned down his house for the insurance and took a job at the local railway station. The result of Brad's adventure was simply camaraderie and good conversation:

Bradford and I had out the telescope.  
We spread our two legs as we spread its three,  
Pointed our thoughts the way we pointed it,  
And standing at our leisure till the day broke,  
Said some of the best things we ever said.<sup>13</sup>

Robert's friend Carl was also an impressive amateur botanist, his special collection being orchids. Orchids are prominent throughout Frost's poetry. One thinks especially of "The Quest of the Purple-Fringed," first titled "The Quest of the Orchis" in 1901 in *The Independent*. The poem

<sup>10</sup> Richard Anthony Proctor, *Our Place Among Infinities: To which are added essays on astrology and the Jewish Sabbath* (New York: R. Worthington, Publishers, 1880). First edition, London, 1875 (British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books, No. 195:1963, column 614).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Frost, "On Extravagance: A Talk," *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Edward C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson, (New York: Holt, 1972), pp. 447-457.

<sup>12</sup> Proctor, *Infinities*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 176-179.

conveys simply and poignantly all the mystery of discovering a rare wild flower in its season.<sup>14</sup>

During Robert's high school years he was able to arrange for himself more intellectual freedom than many students would wish to have. In his freshman year he secured his mother's permission to master one subject at a time, and chose the following order, taking what he liked best first: geography, arithmetic, history, then grammar and reading. In the second year he evidently followed a regular program, including classics and history, and he did so well that at the end of his junior year, in the spring of 1891, he was able to pass the Harvard entrance examinations in Greek, Latin, Greek history, Roman history, algebra, and geometry. He postponed the examination in English literature. But in literary-related activities Robert excelled. He was a leader in the debate club, and became chief editor of the school newspaper in his senior year. Among editorials Robert wrote for his school paper was one titled "Education, Science, and Literature," in which he recommended the purchase of a telescope for the school to offset the dullness of so many reading assignments. He went on to recommend the reading of a book by Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel, *The Planetary and Stellar World*, with the judgment, "No one, who reads at all . . . can read the introduction . . . and refrain from reading the whole book."

Robert and Elinor Miriam White, his future wife, became co-valedictorians of their class. Her address at graduation was about the value of conversation in daily life. Robert's speech cannot be omitted in any full study of the poet's views because it contains so much that he lived by, and even predicts activities of his later years. He was, as a very young man, already interested in the relationship of the poet to the state. The high school speech stresses the necessary links between apparent dualities in the life of action: "Aggressive life is two-fold: theory, practice; thought, action: and concretely, poetry, statesmanship; philosophy, socialism—infinately . . . . The afterthought of one action is the forethought of the next."<sup>15</sup>

There was also, in this remarkable early speech of Frost's, a foreshadowing of some of the literary devices that later became more important to him. Synecdoche and metaphor combine with reference to scientific law and scientific theory in this passage near the conclusion:

There is a space of time when meteor and rain drop falling side by side may touch the yielding earth with equal force. The lighter

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<sup>14</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 342-343.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 130.



outspeeding weight may seem in a space to strike with greater force. But who at last can tell which has the greater influence on the world, the one that bore, as scientists have said, plant life, or that which makes it live.<sup>16</sup>

All four elements of earth, air, water, and fire come to the aid of the orator. Indeed, problems in velocity, gravity, and the origin and continuation of life were whirling in Robert's mind as he concluded. The intention of the speech seemed to be to impress the citizens of Lawrence with a deep perception of the value of the human personality. He would not have people tell him, in their sad wisdom, that a young man should put limits on his hopes for accomplishment. He would choose the active, or "aggressive," life.

Robert went to college in the fall, but not to Harvard as planned. A Dartmouth graduate, a young chemistry and physics teacher at Lawrence High, arranged a scholarship to Dartmouth for him. The teacher had noticed Robert when he came to the laboratory after school to do experiments of his own devising, and was evidently impressed. But at Dartmouth neither the horseplay of the students nor the formal classes were satisfying to Robert. He took long walks in the woods, cherishing his discovery of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*. And in the Dartmouth library he discovered a New York periodical with a name he liked, *The Independent*. At Thanksgiving he visited Carl Burrell, and then he returned to campus to pack his things and leave without a word to anyone. The summer of his life, it seemed to him, was indeed over.<sup>17</sup> He began the bleak years of his teaching and farming, doing some journalism on occasion.

Not enough credit is generally extended to Susan Hayes Ward, the literary editor of *The Independent* for her assistance in the beginning of Frost's career. She kept his hopes alive during the long years before recognition by publishing one of his poems from time to time, and by encouraging him in botanizing, as well as in writing. She showed Frost's poem "My Butterfly," to the American-Canadian poet Bliss Carman, who liked it very much. Carman's word must have been helpful in convincing Susan Ward and her brother, William Hayes Ward, the editor, to publish this first Frost poem to appear in a national journal. "My Butterfly" was surely aimed at Elinor who was still away at school,

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Early Years*. Events of this period, including Thompson's account of Frost's attempted suicide, are given in chapters 13-16, pp. 134-189.

despite the entomological disguise. Robert remembered painfully their vows exchanged on the banks of the Merrimack river.

The gray grass is scarce dappled with the snow;  
 Its two banks have not shut upon the river;  
 But it is long ago—  
 It seems forever—  
 Since first I saw thee glance.<sup>18</sup>

But Elinor did come back to him, after completing her college course in three years, and they were married in December, 1895. In the following summer Robert's spirits seemed to pick up somewhat, and he went botanizing and hiking around the New Hampshire hills. He wrote to Susan Ward about his walks and his readings in botany.

Remember me to Miss Hetta please. Tell her that I am botanizing will I nill I. You make the laws and an enthusiast here is found to enforce them. I am overwhelmed with books on the subject. Mrs. W. S. Dana/How to Know the Wild Flowers/and I don't know who all!

Be sure to write.

R. L. Frost<sup>19</sup>

Sometime in the midst of early marriage, job hunting, and botanizing, Frost had evidently been doing some more reading in scientific philosophy. He determined to go, after all, to Harvard, and there was one reason for his decision, to study with William James, who was a professor there. He began to prepare to pass Harvard entrance examinations a second time. What Frost had read of James, including *The Will to Believe*, must have motivated him strongly, for he passed everything and was admitted without condition.<sup>20</sup> The examined subjects were significant: Greek, Latin, ancient history, English, French, and the physical sciences, including astronomy and physics. He entered Harvard in the fall of 1897, but William James was on leave of absence. Later, he was to remark that the teacher who influenced him the most was not there.<sup>21</sup>

As a matter of fact there was an extraordinary similarity in the early educations of Robert Frost and William James. James's father was a Swedenborgian in philosophy and an exponent of Darwinism. He knew

<sup>18</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Letters*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Grade, *Chronicle*, p. 625.

<sup>21</sup> Frost, "Education by Presence," *Poetry and Prose*, pp. 300-304. An interview first published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 24, 1925, by Janet Mabie.

many people in the group around Emerson. William and his brother Henry engaged in debates at home on advanced topics and studied and read whatever they liked. Like Frost, William James hated the routine of schools and colleges, and he championed the idea of free intelligent choice. Probably James's major contribution was his well-known work in psychology, but he also brought the best thinking of the New England transcendental poets into philosophical language. The psychology text was very widely used in universities, and was the one Frost studied at Harvard and used later in teaching.

In James's psychology, especially, Frost was able to find an ample and sophisticated exposition of the nature of thought, or the mind, to correspond with what he himself had already guessed.<sup>22</sup> Certainly Frost had also read the popular and controversial *Varieties of Religious Experience* which James published in 1902. The book presented an approach to religion which made it possible philosophically and psychologically to integrate religious experience with rapidly unfolding scientific knowledge, and it prompted constructive thinking along these lines for western theology. Yet it was James's description of the difficulty of the creative process in the mind that so fascinated Frost:

As a snowflake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so instead of catching the feeling . . . we find we have caught some substantive thing. The attempt at analysis is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks.<sup>23</sup>

At Harvard, Frost worked very hard on psychology, although he did not wholly approve Santayana's interpretation of James, and very much enjoyed lectures on historical geology. He again disliked an English text,

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<sup>22</sup> Harry Gates Townsend, *Philosophical Ideas in the United States* (New York: The American Book Company, 1934), Chapter IX, "Psychological Empiricism and Spiritual Pluralism," pp. 131-156.

<sup>23</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, authorized edition, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1892), Vol. I, p. 244. This edition contains the two volumes bound together. Thompson states (*Early Years*, pp. 239 and 372) Frost used a one volume text that he used at Harvard for the course he taught in psychology, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, but does not give the edition. He states that the text used was "written and published by William James only a few years earlier," so that he must have meant the original authorized version, and the title he gives is probably erroneous. Arnold Grade lists it as *Psychology*, but also with no date. As there were several abridgements of the work later, I think Frost must have used James's original text at Harvard, whatever edition he assigned to his students later. Perhaps the two volumes had been then bound together as in the Holt and Company edition used here.

a rhetoric this time, because it contained nothing new. He did well and completed courses, but toward the end of his second year ill health that looked like tuberculosis, and inadequate finances, forced him to withdraw. This time he received a complimentary letter from the Dean granting a "detur" in the unfinished work.

At this time Robert went to live with Elinor in relative happiness on a little farm near Derry, New Hampshire. Carl Burrell came to help out for a while, and besides doing necessary farm work, Robert spent much time finding and transplanting wild flowers, and supervising the education of his children. During a trip from Derry to visit New York publishers, Robert did not neglect to take his two young children to visit the zoo and the aquarium. The aquarium was closed, as his daughter Lesley wrote in her childhood journal, but she remembered some details about the zoo: "I remember a few animals: the elephant, the badgers, (the badgers were fighting all the time over peanuts that the people threw to them,) the giraffe, the tiger, the hippopotamus, thats about all I guess."<sup>24</sup>

As Lesley's journals show, most of the children's study of nature, however, was conducted on the farm. Lesley's own knowledge of flowers, stars, and natural processes outdistances her spelling standardization, yet the amplitude of content in her writing is astonishing. At age seven, she wrote,

. . . the trees are just louded with blosoms, the bees come and take the honey and while they are getting it the pollin from the stamins get on his wings and work into the pistal and it goes down through the pistal into the seedpod and if it is too cold for the bees we won't have any fruit the seedpod won't grow bigger without the pollin and won't grow into a cherry without pollin.

May 14, 1906<sup>25</sup>

Robert Frost was giving his children the sort of early education he himself had received, and his method did not omit reading aloud from adult literature. Lesley particularly remembered being read to from William James. She also recalled that the children were taught "all the constellations."<sup>26</sup> She was read to until she was fifteen, but began writing at age

<sup>24</sup> Lesley Frost Ballentine, *New Hampshire's Child: The Derry Journals of Lesley Frost*, with notes and index by Lawrence Thompson and Arnold Grade, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1969), Book VI 1908-1909, journal page 38.

<sup>25</sup> Ballentine, Book III 1905-1907, journal page 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ballentine, "Introduction" (no pagination).

four. Her journals show very well that her father's intention was to stretch the imagination as prelude to more strictly intellectual discussions.

Papa and I make beleave we can see people on mars, and children and houses and everything ells on the earth. We say these things when we go after the cow at night, we say we will know more than the astronomers do with tellicopes . . . and when we go in we are interested in taulking about mars and teliscops and things.

August 2, 1907<sup>27</sup>

Even as a child of eight, Lesley could see how the laws of nature were being taught to her. Learning moved from wild fantasy to the wisdom of facts and thought. During the Derry years, until 1911, Frost had been teaching at a private high school, Pinkerton Academy, but when he had an opportunity to teach psychology along with other courses, at Plymouth Normal School, a public high school, he sold the Derry farm. He was at last able to use texts written by William James. In a course for seniors he used *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, and in a psychology course James's work on psychology, either the original edition or an abridgement of it.

While at Derry, Frost had sent directly to William Hayes Ward a poem that was published in *The Independent* in 1906. It was a poem Robert had started in high school, a metaphor for mature responsibility entitled "The Trial by Existence." This poem shows that Frost remembered a scene read to him from Macdonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. Diamond, the young hero of the book, dreams of a visit to heaven by way of a staircase leading down into the garden which is transformed by dream logic into a staircase going up to heaven. There he meets a group of little boy angels. Each one is busy at his task, digging for stars. Whenever a child angel finds just the right star for himself he digs it up and jumps down through the sky hole, choosing a particular existence for himself. The child will have no memory of where he was before he came to life, and the other boy angels will not see him again.<sup>28</sup> It is all the digging that keeps the stars shining, and the little angels are happy simply because they like their work. If this book was indeed the source of the grim doctrine of "The Trial by Existence," what can be said of Frost's attitude in the poem? Usually, Frost hides the grimness better.

<sup>27</sup> Ballentine, Book IV 1906-1907, journal pages 82, 83.

<sup>28</sup> George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind* (New York: Lippincott, 1909), Chapter XXV, "Diamond's Dream," pp. 209-220.

And none are taken but who will,  
 Having first heard the life read out  
 That opens earthward, good and ill,  
 Beyond the shadow of a doubt. . . .

. . . . .  
 But always God speaks at the end:  
 "One thought in agony of strife  
 The bravest would have by for friend,  
 The memory that he chose the life.  
 But the pure fate to which you go  
 Admits no memory of choice,  
 Or the woe were not earthly woe  
 To which you give the assenting voice."<sup>29</sup>

This voice of God, which foreshadows the God in "A Masque of Reason" (1945) and "A Masque of Mercy" (1947), might properly be taken ironically, as it is in the later plays. I do not mean that there is any lack of seriousness in Frost's acceptance of responsible conduct for his life, but I do think diction such as "woe were not earthly woe," and "beyond the shadow of a doubt," cannot ring entirely true for the reading audience, and Robert Frost knew his audiences. Perhaps it did ring true for William Hayes Ward.

When Frost visited the Wards in 1911, excited about the first English translation of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, Ward was shocked at his enthusiasm. Because Bergson was an atheist his book was not worth reading, Ward declared. Thompson tells us that this encounter precipitated the composition of "In White," the first draft of "Design." I would say that the poem, and probably much else in Frost, was influenced also by Emily Dickinson's poetry, which he greatly admired. He had bought a copy of Dickinson's first volume in 1892. That is, the preliminary title, the close meticulous observation of objects in nature, and the use of rhetoric, are all Dickinsonian. But even more than Bergson and Dickinson, of course, Frost's own background in the study of nature, especially physics and astronomy, came to his aid in this, one of his finest short lyrics. Indeed, if it had not been for the rhetoric of the second stanza, it might have been called one of the finest of Imagist poems. Consider the following imagistic lines.

<sup>29</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 19-21.



I found a dimpled spider, fat and white  
 On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—

. . . . .  
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,  
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.<sup>30</sup>

These lines, together with those that show the poet's intuition, express metaphorically a sense of the mystery of natural law. Randall Jarrell was the first to notice the astronomical tone of the poem, and to suggest that there is much more science in Frost's poetry than meets the eye.

I have given this statement of "what the poem says"—it says much more—an exaggeratedly physical, scientific form because both a metaphorically and literally astronomical view of things is so common, and so unremarked-on in Frost.<sup>31</sup>

Several others have remarked on the subject in response to Jarrell, but very few have even mentioned the possibility that Frost's allusions in the poems to stars or flowers (or to the Doppler effect, geodes, velocity, relativity or mathematics) could have any basis in his own knowledge of science.<sup>32</sup> Generally, this predominant aspect of the poetry is still unremarked-on.

Henri Bergson was a French scientific philosopher whom William James liked when he read his work in the original French. The English translator of *Creative Evolution* acknowledged help from James and

<sup>30</sup> *The Poetry*, p. 302.

<sup>31</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf, 1953), "To the Laodiceans," pp. 37-69.

<sup>32</sup> Of those who have mentioned Frost's relation to science the most prominent are: Reginald Lansing Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), pp. 181-194. Cook mentions Frost's ability to discuss "with brilliance Niels Bohr's atom or uranium and nuclear fission." He writes that Frost "possessed a general knowledge of theoretical science." Then he makes general statements about the relation of poetry to science. Although there are no footnotes, Jarrell's views peek through in the brief section relating Frost to science. In a later essay, "Robert Frost's Constellated Sky," *Western Humanities Review* (Summer, 1968), pp. 189-198, Cook does not mention science at all, but uses the astronomical metaphor to say that one does not see the constellation of Frost's poems clearly unless they are seen as a whole. Elizabeth Isaacs, *An Introduction to Robert Frost* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962). Isaacs states that Frost's poetry reflects "the truths of pure religion as well as those of pure science" (p. 159), and also notes that his interest in the science of his time has made him seem to be "a seer." Wade Van Dore (As quoted below, note 38). Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets from the Puritans to*

stated that James would have written the introduction to the first authorized American edition if he had lived. What Bergson did, for Frost, was to make the connection between nature and the esthetic tendency in man completely coherent. And, of course, what he did in relation to James's psychology was to show that the same motion that characterizes mind characterizes all organisms. It is this motion which endures and permits, eventually, the evolution of consciousness. The artist's *intuition* is therefore natural. As Bergson's precise meaning of intuition is basic to an understanding of modern esthetics, and to Frost's esthetics, I should relate it fully in Bergson's own words.

But it is to the very inwardness of life that *intuition* leads us—by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and enlarging it indefinitely.

That an effort of this kind is not impossible is proved by the existence in man of an aesthetic faculty along with normal perception. Our eye perceives the features of the living being, merely as assembled, not as mutually organized. The intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together and gives them significance, escapes it. This intention is just what the artist tries to regain.<sup>33</sup>

In "Design," which surely has as its background a perceived universal system of quantum mechanics and randomness, as Jarrell noticed, the poet's intention is to intuit the very intention of the universe. He does

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*the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), Chapter X, "The Strategic Retreat: Robert Frost," pp. 293-327. This speculative essay on the poet's reaction to the immensity of the universe and the difficulties of scientific knowledge is largely a re-writing of Waggoner's essay on Frost in his earlier book, *The Heel of Elohim: Science and Values in Modern American Poetry* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950). The earlier essay mentions oxidation in "The Wood-Pile" and a few other metaphors from science, but the second essay omits these. In my view, Frost's strategy was more often to advance than to retreat, as indicated by his choice of the "aggressive" life. However, the Derry years were an exception while he was writing and waiting for recognition, and much of the poetry began with the experiences of that time.

<sup>33</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Modern Library, 1944), in the authorized translation by Arthur Mitchell, pp. 176, 177. The translator's note reads: "In the writing of this English translation of Professor Bergson's most important work, I was helped by the friendly interest of Professor William James. . . . It was his intention, had he lived to see the completion of this translation, himself to introduce it to English readers in a prefatory note."



this by observing the miniature interrelated movements of flower, spider, and dead moth. The artist, therefore, tries to regain the elusive intention, and finds that the best way to carry his feeling to the reader is by a combination of observation and rhetorical, highly ambiguous questions. Frost asks why this usually blue flower was white, how the spider knew to get there on the flower, and how the moth arrived at night to the flower and spider, and he finds something ominous about these phenomena. They are, all together, "a witches' brew to start the morning right." The most striking fact is that they are all white—but why? "What but design of darkness to appall?—/If design govern in a thing so small."

At the beginning of Bergson's career he translated the long philosophical poem by the Roman philosopher Lucretius. He wrote an involved foreword and summary for classroom use which was published together with *De Rerum Natura* in its archaic Latin original. Certainly Lucretius had an influence on Bergson's thought, for the theme of motion and mutability of forms was used in the long poem in order to still the fears of men.<sup>34</sup> Bergson admired this stoic attempt to comfort mankind. Lucretius felt that religions promising immortality were wrong: as there was no life following a present form man had nothing whatever to fear from death. Frost, too, was influenced by Lucretius for in at least two poems he mentions him by name. Although Grade does not mention *De Rerum Natura* among books Frost read in high school or college, it seems likely that he did read it, probably in the Latin. One might further speculate that one reason Frost would not have his philosophy systematic is that in historical classifications Lucretius is often labeled a "materialist." It seems strange that a man who expressed so much compassion for mankind should not also contain the spiritual. Frost calls him "Lucretius the Epicurean," which is a more exact designation as Lucretius accepted much of the teaching of Epicurus. Yet, again, the popular meaning of epicurean has little to do with the stoic philosophy of Epicurus, and Frost may have intended some wit in his designation. Frost's "Lucretius versus the Lake Poets" is a minor jest aimed at an academic lecture in which it was evidently claimed that in one of Landor's poems "nature" meant "pretty scenery." Frost thought that the height of the ridiculous, and must have thoroughly enjoyed his grinning inside at the academy nonsense. In "Too Anxious for Rivers," he gives a more serious and moving tribute to the ancient Roman poet.

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<sup>34</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Philosophy of Poetry: The Genius of Lucretius* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), edited, translated and partly recast by Wade Baskin.

Time was we were molten, time was we were vapor.  
 What set us on fire and what set us revolving,  
 Lucretius the Epicurean might tell us  
 'Twas something we knew all about to begin with  
 And needn't have fared into space like his master  
 To find 'twas the effort, the essay of love.<sup>35</sup>

With William James's interest in Bergson, and with Bergson's deep interest in Lucretius, it is not surprising that when Frost went to London in 1912, he carried some interest in Bergsonian philosophy along. He was going into a center of artists and international intelligentsia of all sorts where Bergson was a philosopher most popularly read and discussed in circles that counted.

Frost had been in London long enough to be settled in the country outside, and to have met many literary lights and geniuses, including Yeats, when he came to town in 1913 to attend to business, and to talk with Thomas Edward Hulme. In an important unpublished post card recently discovered and put in print by Elaine Barry, we now have the evidence that Frost sought out Hulme through F. S. Flint.<sup>36</sup> The significance of this is first of all that Hulme was a scholar, translator, interpreter, and "follower" of Bergson. In fact, Bergson helped him get back into Cambridge after some wild departures when Bergson was following the star of his own self-education on the continent. The meeting between Frost, Flint, and Hulme did take place, as we know from published letters. Frost was so grateful and liked Hulme so much that he even consented to come to the next salon Hulme was giving on a Tuesday evening. Frost wrote to a friend back home that he liked Hulme for his defense of British coarseness, and for some of the hilarious racy stories he told, but the friend was to understand that Hulme was not a profligate any more than Frost was, nor was Frost losing his innocence: "Hulme is not immoral in thought or action. Plain-speaking is part of the conservatism he affects and preaches."<sup>37</sup>

What Frost wanted to discuss with Hulme, as far as we know, was his "sound of sense" theory, as Barry has observed. Barry's interpretation as far as it goes is the best that we have on Frost's ideas about writing. Yet, again, the scholar has omitted the contribution of science and scientific philosophy. By the sound of sense Frost meant to convey all of what

<sup>35</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 379, 380.

<sup>36</sup> Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Letters*, pp. 114-118.

Bergson meant by *intuition*, all of what James meant by *motion*, and what was left in him of Swedenborg's constant in-flow of the spiritual into the physical, plus his own understanding from the science he knew of the "vibrant atom-whirling, star-seething quantum or micro-mechanics world," as Frost's friend Wade Van Dore has described it.<sup>38</sup> Frost's theory was that the way the words were arranged in a sentence would present the intuited "sense," and that the "sense" which must be controlled somehow could be caught and held and transmitted by the diction of his own sentences crossing the traditional metrical forms. The most familiar forms would serve the best: blank verse, sonnet, ballad, and a few variations. This is why he did not use free verse. He felt the meaning of free verse would just flow away, and could not lodge the poems in the mind in the way he wished. Meter, then, could be used as a sort of net to hold slippery things fast.

James had written of what happens in ordinary communication that "we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its *function*, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated."<sup>39</sup> But, if the ice moves fairly skipping across the old wood stove, and is suddenly gone as the hilarity of the children becomes wisdom—that is a sense of things worth saving. How can one catch the poignancy of life or make anything stay? For Frost the answer was in the poem, but as he said, you have to know the difficulty of it. Frost wrote to Sidney Cox that Edward Thomas planned to write a whole book about what his idea of the sentence would mean for literary criticism, "the sentence sound opposing the sense of the words as in irony . . . till I establish the distinction between the grammatical sentence and the vital sentence."<sup>40</sup> What was this but the Bergsonian *élan vital*, Frost's own "sound of sense" streaming above, yet in friction as in irony, against the sense of the traditional grammar: yet another hold.

T. E. Hulme, like Frost's friend and fellow botanizer Edward Thomas, died young in World War II. Thomas had severe emotional problems which Frost helped him to relieve by encouraging him to write poetry. For Thomas it was difficult to make the decision to go to war;

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<sup>38</sup> Wade Van Dore, "In Robert Frost's Rubbers," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, XI, 2 (1973), pp. 122-126. Mr. Van Dore, a man Frost liked for his genuine love of nature, early agreed with my supposition that Frost had a strong interest in modern science, and intends to publish his own thoughts on the subject.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Principles*, p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *Early Years*, p. 453.

but for Hulme the choice was made, for he was an outspoken militarist. As Herbert Read described him, "Hulme's temperament was not one that could submit readily to an academic mould, and his university career was never completed in an orderly sense of the word."<sup>41</sup> In an essay on Bergson's work, Hulme uses the terms "tunnel" and "direction" importantly, I think, in relation to poems Frost had yet to publish. Frost had been interested in evolution from high school days, or before, as I have demonstrated. If he read this passage from Hulme in manuscript, as I imagine he may have done, he could not have missed again an excitement in the use of metaphorical language in scientific philosophy.

One can get a picture of the course of evolution in this way: it is as if a current of consciousness flowed down into a tunnel, and making efforts to advance on every side, digs galleries, most of which are stopped by a rock which is too hard, but which in one direction at least has broken through the rock and back into life again once more.

This direction is the line of evolution resulting in man.<sup>42</sup>

After Frost's return to the United States with his first two volumes published and selling well both abroad and at home, *Poetry* published a new poem, "Snow," as its prize poem of the year 1916. In it the character Meserve says:

There is a sort of tunnel in the frost—  
 More like a tunnel than a hole—way down  
 At the far end of it you see a stir  
 And quiver like the frayed edge of the drift  
 Blown in the wind. I like that—I like that.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read, foreword by Jacob Epstein, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924). In the introduction, also by Read, we have the information that during Hulme's lifetime five of his poems were published by Ezra Pound as addendum to Pound's own *Ripostes*, and titled "Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme." Two books he translated were printed: Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* to which he wrote a critical introduction. Read's selections are from Hulme's manuscripts and notebooks and include essays on humanism, philosophy of modern art, Romanticism and Classicism, Bergson's theory of art, a theory of *intensive manifolds*, and Bergson's philosophy. There is a collection of notes called "Cinders," and the appendices contain notes on Sorel, a plan for a book, and the "Complete Poetical Works."

<sup>42</sup> T. E. Hulme, pp. 210, 211.

<sup>43</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 149, 150.

And, much later on, Frost published what is agreed by many to be his finest longer poem, "Directive." (*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Winter, 1946). The poem achieves sustained compassion and natural grace.

Your destination and your destiny's  
 A brook that was the water of the house,  
 Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,  
 Too lofty and original to rage.  
 (We know the valley streams that when aroused  
 Will leave their tatters hung on barb and thorn.)<sup>44</sup>

Frost's direction, his tunnel through the frost, came from his study of nature, through the means modern science used, through reading the scientific philosophers, and of course from his own constant meditation toward the development of the self that was the instrument for the poetry.

The first time that Frost's use of natural law as metaphor was noted in print was in an anonymous review in the *London Times Literary Supplement* (July 2, 1914, p. 316) in which attention was called to the final line of "The Wood-Pile." The metaphor is a statement of the second law of thermodynamics: "With the slow smokeless burning of decay." That review—and Frost liked it—was brought to him by another botanizing friend, John W. Haines.<sup>45</sup> Frost knew what he was doing in the line, or knew what he had done, for later he commented on it to F. Cudworth Flint:

There is something in the German notion of *Ding an Sich*. I remember a queer mixture of wonder and satisfaction when the phrase came out in "The Wood-Pile" about "the slow smokeless burning of decay"; that's right, you know; that's what it really is. It's better than a lesson. Isn't that the weakness of personifying things in nature? We are really disregarding the Thing Itself and making it masquerade in false clothing."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *The Poetry*, pp. 378, 379.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, *Letters*, p. 128. Thompson notes that on each of two visits back to England, Frost visited Haines. As this particular letter indicates, Frost liked his casual, or natural, manner, and asked him "over here to sprawl—not call." He cherished the memory of their botanizing in England "by the light of a match in your English winter twilight and for the evenings by your books of all the poets," as he wrote later from the States. (*Letters*, p. 205). Haines was a barrister, as well as an amateur botanist and poet.

<sup>46</sup> F. Cudworth Flint, "A Few Touches of Frost," *The Southern Review*, II, 4, New Series (October, 1966) pp. 830-838. The quotation is on page 845.

If we are correct in saying that Frost intended to achieve naturalness at all levels, that is, to live as much as possible in harmony with the laws of nature, then we can understand his poetry to be in the mainstream of American literature in that sense. If both science and poetry are moving to comprehend nature, when they come close to their source the raging ceases. Frost dealt well with the opposites, or the seeming opposites, in his poetry and in his life. In a sense, his manner of presentation of the poems was metaphorical for what he wanted to express, a naturalness, a simplicity.

It is appropriate that Frost was a man interested in scientific discoveries and the implications of them because in our time the knowledge explosion has arrived through science. The scientific emphasis in Frost's poetry became most obvious in the final volume, *In the Clearing* (New York: Holt, 1962). The book's introductory poem re-states Frost's approach to knowledge of the material world: "We may take the view/ That its derring-do/ Thought of in the large/ Is one mighty charge/ On our human part/Of the soul's ethereal/Into the material." And so, the Swedenborgian doctrine had re-appeared, but this time with the large difference that it is a view that one "may take." Frost's knowledge of science began because of this Swedenborgian idea, and his own explorations and experiments led to the modifications in philosophy revealed in the poems. Nature became poetry through science, to a degree, in the case of this poet.

In his early education, Frost's direction as a poet could never have been found had he not enjoyed intellectual freedom, the freedom to choose his subjects of study and to integrate them in his own way, along with the freedom to share his intellectual explorations with friends. The ability to self-direct and to self-reinforce evidently also resulted from the manner of education he experienced and championed. He had a constant good sense of humor that he termed "funning," but the fun usually also had its serious side. I once heard the poet remark with a chuckle that *Scientific American* was his favorite literary journal. That remark was no mere wit aimed at the academic literary groups for Frost did indeed get literature out of such sources. He had always chosen his reading materials, and his friends, too, in a sense, because of the unique way in which they helped him to reach the sources of his own poetry, so to speak. In other words, from a pattern established in childhood, Frost was able to make intelligent choices toward his own self-realization. F. Cudworth Flint has noted Frost's remark about his favorite journal, and commented on the seriousness of it: "One of the periodicals



he read oftenest and with most enjoyment was the *Scientific American*. Indeed it was never safe to assume that one knew the limits of Frost's knowledge and experience."<sup>47</sup> In fact, much of the effect of the mystical in the poems arrived through the poet's knowledge of science.

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<sup>47</sup> Flint, p. 833.

## WORDS IN THE RUSH OF EVERYTHING TO WASTE: A POETIC THEME IN FROST

DAVID ALAN SANDERS

I could give all to Time except—except  
What I myself have held.

Though the function of poetry is a central concern in Frost's verse, it is not the obvious theme we find in contemporaries such as Stevens or Yeats or Marianne Moore.<sup>1</sup> Many of his poems which refer most openly to poetry—"A Considerable Speck," "In a Poem," "The Rose Family" come readily to mind—seem more in jest than earnest. In having their "undeviable say" through "playfully objected rhyme," they reflect the play of one determined to avoid solemnity. And though they may have the "inner seriousness" that Frost demanded of "outer humor,"<sup>2</sup> their lightness prevails. In the greater intensity of many nature lyrics, however, such poetic virtuosity assumes a different aspect. When part of a larger effort to save what we value from the temporal current that threatens to bear everything away, it becomes a tactic for imaginative survival. But however freely we might grant Frost's poetry this role, it remains a question how fully the lyrics acknowledge it themselves. Even putting his intent aside, is this strategy part of their poetic statement?

The prominence in so many of them of "holding" and "staying" gestures—and of these and related words—itself suggests the resistance they summon against a nature that must destroy all it makes, including ourselves. What "The Master Speed" makes clear is the imaginative source of that effort.

No speed of wind or water rushing by  
But you have speed far greater. You can climb  
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,  
And back through history up the stream of time.  
And you were given this swiftness, not for haste,  
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,  
But in the rush of everything to waste,  
That you may have the power of standing still—  
Off any still or moving thing you say. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> The epigraph is from "I Could Give All to Time." All quotations from Frost's verse are taken from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to Robinson's *King Jasper*, rpt. in *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward C. Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 351.

The words, "any . . . thing you say," suggest the importance of language in such imaginative assertion, implicitly portraying speech as a decisive act that, by calling imagination into play, gives lasting form to a world in motion.

Few lyrics spell out this relation of mind to nature so clearly. Many, however, dramatize the imagination's paradoxical involvement in the routine destructions it cannot accept, as it is compelled to witness the death it perceives within all change. The language of poetry reflects these contradictory allegiances, setting its powers of concentration against the attritions of time it records. This conflict is admittedly intrinsic to all poetry, but it is especially strong in Frost, often asking to be noticed—though nearly always unexpectedly. At times his language alludes directly to its own operation. "A Hillside Thaw"—as I shall later show—provides an extreme case when a final ambiguity retroactively makes the poem's diction its own thematic focus by inviting us to look again at figures of speech we have taken for granted. More often, however, the issue arises obliquely, as when a striking image or figure points to the vividness and compression which it marshals against dissolution, or when rhythm and sound lend an iconicity to this language within its narrative commitment to a world that fades.

In "Spring Pools," for example, the words which describe and dramatize nature's advance attempt also to halt it by making an artifact of what cannot last. Following nature's direction, the plosive consonants, assonance, and triple stress of "pént-úp búds" dramatize the expected burst of summer foliage. We hear hints of this violence, however, as soon as we are told that the pools will "soon be gone,/And yét nóut óut by any brook or river,/But up by roots." More striking are the spondees that move forward without pause "To blot out and drink up and sweep away" this exquisite beauty. Yet, opposed to this destruction are the very words that identify its victims, as the image and cadence of "These flowery waters and these watery flowers" arrest the process and preserve the perfection whose loss they decry.

The first stanza builds toward a similar tension, first weaving a tone of apprehension through the scene it describes. The first four lines announce impending loss clearly enough, which we see more easily if we remove two of the qualifications that intensify the warning:

These pools that . . . still reflect  
 The total sky . . . ,  
 And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,  
 Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone.

In the second stanza, as we reach the flowers and pools reflecting each other in the March wind, the repeated simile, so arranged, slows the movement toward disappearance to impress that mirror-image upon both ear and eye.

In "Nothing Gold Can Stay" beauty appears to yield more directly to time. The first four lines establish a world of pristine perfection, as verbs of being and grammatical subordination confirm a process suspended. But such poetic equations decline into reality as active verbs hurry change on its way and adverbs urge the logic of time:

Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Nature and imagination achieve, however, a subtler dialectic than this sequence implies. In the midst of perfection, such qualifications as "first" green and "early" leaf alert us to change even before the first couplets each close on a clearer warning. On the other hand, "Her hardest hue to hold" warns of loss while obliquely suggesting the holding it names in the effort its alliterating consonants require. The assonance of "only so an hour" similarly works against time by stretching the three-stress line which, as anyone reciting the poem discovers, repeatedly ends too soon. In fact, the extension of the voice by long vowels against the pressure of the meter enacts the mortal drama throughout the poem at the level of prosody.

"Nothing Gold" wistfully laments the inevitability of time, connecting our perception of its smallest changes to the grief that lies at their mythic source. In "Spring Pools" this grief erupts in an impassioned protest against the "inhumanity" of a nature that takes life without concern or regret. "Let them think twice before they use their powers," the speaker says, indirectly, to the unhearing trees—a useless counter-threat by one threatened. Equally hopeless as a plea, it leaves the consolations only of imagination, whose effort to re-collect what time dissipates leads beyond the waters and flowers so nearly gone to "snow that melted only yesterday."

Such consolations may seem unneeded in "Hyla Brook," which follows a stream into midsummer dryness with stout affirmation. Here, however, the conclusion calls direct attention to what the poem itself has made of fact:

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

Rejecting a whole tradition of poetic brooks, the speaker announces a poetry that requires no sentimental fictions to make love possible and that needs take this stream only where nature takes it. "By June our brook's run out of song and speed," he says, supplying this lost force in words which do not spare our sensibilities as they run time's course toward silence and heat. After vanishing from sight, the brook deceptively "flourishes" as "weak foliage," with

Its bed . . . left a faded paper sheet  
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—  
 A brook to none but who remember long.

Interrupting this forward narrative, however, is a portrait of what the brook has been. Fitting between its "groping underground" and its re-emergence as jewelweed "blown upon and bent," this parenthetical aside brings to life

. . . all the Hyla breed  
 That shouted in the mist a month ago,  
 A ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow. . . .

Though the speaker moves ahead to the brook's seasonal death disclaiming all regret, such an interruption, fully as long as the narrative to that point, raises questions about his loyalty to fact. The sheer intensity and compression of images, as well as the brook's recovered wholeness, become an *implicit ground of value* against which its decline is measured. As if powers of memory and metaphor had challenged nature's transformation of the brook, the lusty shouting of peepers in the wetness of May suddenly drowns the loss of song and speed, and the ghost of chilled whiteness haunts "the faded paper sheet/Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat." For its beauty and vividness, this moment is, I think, the most compelling in the poem. In the perceptual fusing of layers in time and the blending of human and natural qualities, the speaker seems rapt, suddenly more seized by the past than in possession of it. He cannot give his imagination fully to a course which requires that the brook, to reach fullness again, pass through annihilation.

An earlier lyric, "In Hardwood Groves," discovers the same emotional impediment to acceptance of the annual cycle, for within reassur-

ance of nature's renewal lurks knowledge of what it exacts from individual forms. "Before the leaves can mount again," the speaker warns,

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.

The incremental repetition and the alliteration leading to "decay" suggest the weight of emotion projected into this annual death. And though we see the earth push again toward spring, from our view underground, rebirth is callous and cruel. The close—"However it is in some other world/I know that this is the way in ours"—recalls "Hyla Brook," but with a difference, for this voice cannot accommodate the way things are. Its grudging admission of necessity contains more of the dark resistance of "Spring Pools," which asks the leaves—turned victims here—to "think twice." While acknowledging fact, the mere surmise of "some other world," though not a reasoned or even clear alternative, speaks for a part of the mind that simply cannot rest in a world of death and seeks, if fitfully and without resolution, for another. It is one of the rudiments of poetry.

"Hyla Brook" offers a more balanced response to this dilemma. Its rejection of more Romantic brooks "in song" reminds us that this one, too, is all poetry. In fact, its lively portrait of decline suggests that loving things "for what they are" may require considerable imaginative effort. But even this amelioration of nature does not suffice. In a world where leaves "must go down into the dark decayed," and where that "other world" lies no further than the past, no moment will suffice alone. Even the remembered beauty and strength of the brook in May become ghosts of winter; and the remains of the brook "blown upon and bent/ Even against the way its waters went" seem also to lean against an invisible current, as if they knew where it led.

The difference language makes in coping with time is the point of a surprising turn in one of Frost's best-known lyrics of change. "The Oven Bird" is familiar to most readers of Frost for its poignant rendering of loss and for the skill with which its metrical and other sound effects capture the bird's vocal violence.<sup>3</sup> But even more than for its strident call-notes, the bird earns its place as crier of mutability by persisting long after other birds have quieted for the season. An *gentle reminder*

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Reuben A. Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 28-31.



of sweeter songs that earlier filled the woods, his voice, like the wave that catches on a rock in "West-Running Brook," is "a throwing back,/ As if regret were in it and were sacred." Like that water running "counter to itself," it is the oven bird's "backward motion toward the source,/ Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in." And like other wild creatures in Frost, this one mediates between nature's unconsciousness and human awareness, speaking of natural changes with greater intimacy and hence authority than man. But as a voice distinct and alone, decrying summer's decimation of spring, the bird reflects a human situation and a human regret.

Finally, however, its difference counts more. One may feel that a poet's emotion shows through the bird's rougher honesty in the delicate rendering of blossom showers. Their voices grow more clearly distinct as the "petal-fall," foreshadowing darker things, precipitates parallel announcements by speaker and bird:

Then comes that other fall we name the fall.  
He says the highway dust is over all.

The poet's word-play, though simple enough, moves between past and future, figure and fact, naming and denoting. To speak of one "fall" (from branches, and of whiteness) as anticipating another is already to imagine the settling of autumn leaves and of snow—and perhaps, too, the mythic prototype of all such change. The bird's "statement" about the dust, however eloquent, speaks only of the present and of fact. Tellingly, the poet leaves this wise creature speechless at all that it has seen and "said," for by framing his question in "all but words" it arrives at a barrier that only language can cross. While maintaining his ventriloquism, the poet thus makes this transparent fiction into a genuine issue.

The poem's final line confirms the difference between involvement in natural process and knowing what it means. The question of "what to make of a diminished thing," while it allows the bird a quite human bewilderment at such vanishings, alludes also to the answer that only man can supply, who alone knows the death to which nature leads. More important, the play on "make" permits the poet slyly to congratulate himself on his art,<sup>4</sup> perhaps with the irony of Schiller, who joked of making "little songs" of his "great pains." And finally, what keeps the oven bird from being "like other birds" is less what it knows than what

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<sup>4</sup> Like Brower, Marie Borroff—in "Robert Frost's New Testament: Language and the Poem," *Modern Philology*, 69 (August 1971), 49—also points out this word-play, but emphasizes the likeness between bird and poet.

the poet makes of his voice—and makes from it. In devising a paradoxical bird that “knows in singing not to sing,” the poet reminds us in *his* distinctive voice that the real song here is his own and that it celebrates itself.

Few readers, I suspect, would consider “A Hillside Thaw” in this context or this company. Against the earnestness of the lyrics I have examined, its playful invention is likely to seem trifling. But if we grasp the underlying seriousness at issue, its metaphoric play finally becomes not only the poem’s subject, but a figure for the whole poetic strategy by which it engages both its reader and the problem of time. As we read, two elements declare themselves. One is the tone of easy intimacy with nature. As in “Hyla Brook,” the speaker is full of country knowledge, which allows him a commanding and somewhat condescending attitude toward us. About to strip a deceptive familiarity from the hillside “on the day the sun lets go/Ten million silver lizards out of snow,” he will show us *something we don’t know*. Even more striking than this familiar pose is the figurative language. The two in fact are somewhat at odds. We are surprised, for example, that one promising nature’s secrets should offer the elaborate conceit of lizards generated by sunlight, who race downhill to be stopped only by a moon whose magic Medusa-like preserves their form in stone. What, we might wonder, does country knowledge have to do with such fanciful stuff?

Tentatively, at least, we trust the tone and allow the extravagant figure merely to enliven a reality of fact. Though we are given lizards, “snow” suggests an eye kept steadily upon this hillside. Nor are these next lines so far from fact as they might seem:

It looks as if some magic of the sun  
Lifted the rug that bred them on the floor  
And the light breaking on them made them run.

We recognize the lifted rug as the cover of snow that spawns the lizard rivulets by melting to reveal the earth beneath. Besides, if all this still seems a bit strained for a naturalist, the following lines explain:

As often as I’ve seen it done before  
I can’t pretend to tell the way it’s done.

Less in command than he appeared, the speaker has seized upon the analogy of the sun’s magic to voice his own wonder at the event which annually turns the hillside into something hardly natural, or recognizable, for all he thought he knew the country. Rather than strip the veil of familiarity from nature, then, the speaker’s figure here conveys the unfamiliarity that to his eyes the spring thaw throws over it.

The thoroughness of nature's metamorphosis is expressed by the speaker's bafflement as he tries to lay hold of the lizards running by. The sudden release of snow-held water creates a scene at once beautiful, dazzling, confusing—in all overwhelming. Significantly, the speaker grasps nothing. He can hardly comprehend the beauty, speed, and power that nature lets loose without warning. This is the aspect of the country he cannot "know"—that eludes easy familiarity and exacts a degree of wonder.

But, however comical, the helplessness here too much resembles that of other Frost speakers for us not to suspect something serious at work. Once again, the imagination confronts natural change, for which the "speed of wind and water rushing by" is certainly Frost's central figure; and, the speaker's imagined attempt to catch the lizards resembles more serious efforts in other poems to hold things in a world of continual transformations. As he imagines getting himself soaked in his efforts, the flow clearly includes him. We must of course not press too hard on the poetic figure. But the parallel to the central metaphor of "West-Running Brook" is intriguing. There, the husband talking to his wife calls existence "The stream of everything that runs away":

It flows beside us in this water brook,  
But it flows over us . . .  
It flows between us, over us, and *with* us.  
And it is . . .  
. . . substance lapsing unsubstantial.

That the speaker of "A Hillside Thaw" becomes so immersed in his effort to stop the flow suggests that the struggle with nature's speed and power, comprising the longest episode in the poem, in some way seizes his imagination, as if it were his own assertion against a power that holds him in its grasp.

The speaker's tone forces us to treat such speculation tentatively, however suggestive it might seem, for he accepts with graceful humor the helplessness of which he makes so much, still admiring nature's power as he stands wet-elbowed, wet-kneed, and empty-handed. Yet, as magical as its capacity to generate life, how much more so is its power to arrest it:

. . . The sun's a wizard  
By all I tell; but so's the moon a witch.  
From the high west she makes a gentle cast  
And suddenly, without a jerk or twitch,  
She has her spell on every single lizard.

The contrast to the speaker's own exertions is clear, and the poem's conclusion reaffirms his sense of an unnatural, even occult power at work:

It was the moon's: she held them until day,  
One lizard at the end of every ray.  
The thought of my attempting such a stay!

The final line ends the poem as it began—with a triplet and an exclamation—reaffirms the speaker's wonder, and even expresses bemusement at the notion of his stopping the "wet-stampede." In stanza one he has hypothesized failure: "I have no doubt I'd end by holding none." But now, reviewing the moon's work in detail, even the "thought" of "such a stay" seems presumptuous.

Yet by calling his efforts so much to our notice, the closing remark allows another perspective, which alters the poem dramatically. As the speaker measures his own power against nature's, he is no longer telling a story but reflecting on its point. As a result, his narrative voice suddenly becomes an adopted one, more artificial than the one we now hear, which in turn reveals his telling of the story as something created and distinguishable from the events themselves. Because this brief moment of self-conscious reflection puts us outside the preceding account, we leave the poem discovering it anew—as the performance, the artifice, it is. It is thus a fitting surprise that the line which opens this perspective breaks other new ground as well. For, if we take the seventeen lines of stanza one as setting stanza length, then this one—number thirty-five—becomes, formally, an "extra" in the poem.

We hear the speaker's bemused self-deprecation change to self-congratulation as we realize the miraculous "stay" he admires to be his own. Ostensibly nature's work, it takes place—in stricter terms of accounting—only in a special world of words made to suggest the natural world, but not the same. Looking back, we can see how the speaker's choice of terms retroactively confirms this final revelation. Having called the swarming rivulets nothing but "lizards," he has never really acknowledged their source in melting snow. At night they are turned not to ice, but to "rock": nor does the moon cause that change in any world outside the poet's imagination (for which its silver light is itself a traditional figure). Consistently, the poet's "magic" and "witchcraft" have usurped the work of nature's heat and frost. The speaker may even seem to flaunt his control over us as poet. By first playing the naturalist-guide concerned with knowing the country, he persuades us to credit his fiction as mere exaggeration of the truth that lies in nature; yet, he puts just enough

stress on "The thought of my attempting such a stay" to reveal the moonlight holding each lizard spellbound not as nature's magic, but his own.

The point, however, is not to fool the reader, but to share with him something at least as exciting as nature's power and beauty—namely, the dazzling capacities of metaphor. The speaker violates his first contract with us to establish a new one which takes us "inside." He is willing to break his own spell because he wants us to witness his real power—the power of his language, which captures those racing rivulets as he could never do by lunging after them. He asks us to understand the "stay" he accomplishes as imaginative by inviting us to see that his poetic language creates as well as celebrates the natural miracle. As such, the hillside thaw is re-frozen in still another sense, for the poem makes the exciting event into an artifact, though one which, like any poem or any work of art, can miraculously turn back into an event. The poem's elaborate conceit does capture the suddenness of the natural thaw, the sparkling profusion of streams, and their equally sudden crystallization back to ice in the same flowing contours. Yet it goes far enough into artifice that, if we catch the speaker's suggestion, we can see it as an elaborated structure of words. The poem itself, superseding the action of the thaw, thus becomes a dramatic event—a surprising encounter of the reader with the speaker himself. In this encounter the poet asks us to recognize his own discovery of what his poem accomplishes. No longer powerless and awestruck, he shares his delight in the control he exerts.

Once we recognize the doubleness of the final line, the poem abounds with verbal ambiguities that confirm the poet's artfulness. Repeatedly, he avoids mention of the literal truth he alludes to in fanciful explanations, pointedly flirting with fact as he extends the artifice of his figurative world. His saying in line eight, for example, that "the light breaking on them made them run" reminds us that the sun melts snow while it maintains the fiction of lizards flushed from hiding. In line twenty-four, "The moon was waiting for her chill effect" more pointedly hints at the dropping temperature while pretending to be only a figure for the moon's spell. Similarly, the allusion to bare branches in these lines—

The spell that so could hold them as they were  
Was wrought through trees without a breath of storm  
To make a leaf, if there had been one, stir.

—reminds us of the season while suggesting a non-physical, even unnatural source of the holding power.

The height of word play coincides with the speaker's fullest revelation of his artifice. In lines four and five, he alludes to the entire fiction of the poem itself:

As often as I've seen it done before  
I can't pretend to tell the way it's done.

Once we have been taken into the poet's confidence, the speaker's naive bafflement at nature's secrets becomes a mask for calculating choices of what to reveal. Where we understood "tell" colloquially to mean "perceive" or "understand," it suddenly means more literally "say" or "explain." Thus, where he seemed to mean, "As often as I've seen it, I still don't understand it," we now hear, "As well as I know it, I won't pretend to 'say' how it really happens." Of course he also means, using a third reading of "tell," "I won't pretend to 'count' the way it's done," reminding us that, in this poetic world, no natural laws need apply. Again, in stanza two, when the speaker says, "The sun's a wizard/ *By all I tell*" (*my italics*), we find, beneath the bewildered observer of nature, a poet exercising, enjoying, and acknowledging his prerogatives. The same words which pay tribute to the elusiveness of fact thus assert a freedom from it and his freedom with it.

By turning our attention from the water's flow to the language that stops it, "A Hillside Thaw" extends implications in other poems. We may feel the power of words to resist time in the multiple reflection of water, sky, and flowers in "Spring Pools," or in "Hyla Brook's" conversion of sound and spray into the sleigh-bells and snow of memory. But any statement which such intensely figurative moments make about the language remains itself implicit and oblique. These verbal feats attract our notice to their ability to arrest change or reverse time, but they do not ask for it outright.

Much the same thing happens in "The Wood-Pile," where the lines—

It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.

—form an imaginative bridge between men otherwise unknown to each other, separated by time and space, perhaps by death. It is one of the poem's most compelling moments, and, when the language so fully recreates those earlier actions, we feel that this verbal ordering of experience succeeds, or replaces, that earlier design by eye and axe which it celebrates. When the wood is discovered to be so much eroded by time, we are ready for the poem to make such a substitution—and to make that substitution its theme—especially as the speaker seeks reas-



surance of human continuity in the face of such waste. But the substitution is never made in "The Wood-Pile," as it is, for example, in Wordsworth's "Michael." There the words that reveal the tragic waste embodied in the ruined sheep-fold consciously preserve that history. But further and more important, they comfort the poet by preserving him

for the sake  
Of youthful Poets, who among these hills  
Will be my second self when I am gone.

Gray's "Elegy" entrusts similar hopes to language when the speaker's personal fear of unfulfillment turns his verse meditation into his own epitaph. But "The Wood-Pile" refuses to become—as its elegiac tone and situation have us half-expecting—such a structure *in memoriam*. The speaker goes only to the brink of that substitution; to make it, we must go outside the poem. This is not the poem's failure, but its choice. It speaks for those of us who build with axe, not word, whose words are breath, not artifact.

"The Oven Bird," of all the poems we have looked at, hints most broadly at this substitution, alluding to its own function as a poem by referring to what the bird can "make of a diminished thing" in "all but words." But even that poem's reference to itself as a verbal artifact stops short of "A Hillside Thaw," whose poetic action goes beyond exposing imagination at work upon reality to become a metaphoric representation of the very process. Its specific figure for the poetic faculty is the magical action of the moon—hardly surprising, given its traditional figurative opposition to the clear and reasonable light of day.

Frost's use of this familiar figure helps us to ask just how the poem adjusts the competing claims of imagination and nature for defining the reality in which we must live. In arresting what nature sets loose in headlong descent, the moon's magic seems almost equal in power to the sun's wizardry, and more painstaking in its ordering: "One lizard at the end of every ray." But just as Coleridge postulated (*Biographia literaria*, Chapter XIII) the poetic, or secondary, imagination as an echo of the primary (which is our most basic perception of the world as it seems "given"), the moon's power here betrays a derivative quality. It can freeze what the sun sets flowing, but, far less than what Coleridge had in mind, the moon's witchcraft does not dissolve or recreate; more like his mechanical Fancy, it simply records the "lifelike posture of the swarm." While Frost's moon-figure for imagination allows the fine surprise at the poem's close, it thus also becomes a limitation. Though it allows the

words their magic, that magic has lost some power. And while this poem makes a bolder, more direct claim for imaginative power than that which we have seen elsewhere, it falls short in complexity and subtlety of what other lyrics claim implicitly.

In one respect, however, the limitations here are characteristic, for imagination in Frost must repeatedly fight to survive against the more obvious claims of the matter-of-fact. Here the very nighttime quality of the moonlight suggests the imagination's ability to create a world "apart," but not a world in which one can live fully. That world can be entered, and in it one can find experience held, precious, above or aside from the flow of things to waste. But just as the moon's spell holds the lizards only "until day," so that world must also be left. This recognition confirms our basic sense of what goes on when we read—all too sensible creatures that we are—for we cannot fully substantiate that poetic world of magic and metamorphosis. Instead, it continues to dissolve into the real world, *exhibiting the world of nature through its own figures, which never become quite solid and opaque.* The world of words can be *both* a world of its own and an image of the natural world; but it cannot be simply a world of its own. As the moon's witchcraft succeeds but cannot supersede the sun's magic, the poet's account of the thaw cannot supplant the world of nature to which it provides a temporary alternative. As the children's rhyme insists, words, for all their exclusive magic, are not sticks and stones.

It may be that the limitations which "A Hillside Thaw" implicitly acknowledges for poetry are a good assessment of its own. When we compare it to "Spring Pools," which refuses to accept loss, or "Hyla Brook," which belies its own accommodation of it, it is hard to feel that "A Hillside Thaw" explores quite fully the issue it touches. Though it goes far beyond a mere game with words, it stops short of a struggle with time. Though the speaker tries to hold what flows by him and over him, and though it is something powerful and beautiful, it is nothing he himself has held. In his inability to grasp that water without words he does not risk losing part of himself. And because he feels no desperation, the dilemma that poetry cannot fully resolve is never quite faced. If the poetic world that suspends time here is more autonomous, it is also less durable, than those brief moments where memory clings to a beauty past, or imagination refuses to yield the intensity of a world possessed even as it dissolves before one's reasoning eyes. The poetic world of "A Hillside Thaw" is less durable because it is less tenacious and ultimately more sane, too aware, despite all its claims for verbal magic, of what it cannot do to undertake the impossible—too successful in creating a

thoroughly hypothetical world to attempt to save a real one. Even that vaguely conceived alternative of "In Hardwood Groves"—merely of "some other world" where things might be different—is a more insistent imaginative assertion, for it proceeds out of a need that cannot be compromised.

## ROBERT FROST, THE POET AS CRITIC: AN ANALYSIS AND A CHECKLIST

DONALD J. GREENER

The centennial celebration of the birth of Robert Frost brings to mind once again the poet's long struggle to find suitable publication. His development from the high school poetry of "La Noche Triste" and "A Dream of Julius Caesar," through the disappointment of nearly twenty years of rejection slips, and finally to the publication of *A Boy's Will* in 1913 has been admirably documented by Lawrance Thompson in the first volume of the official Frost biography. Reading again of those formative years between 1890 and 1913, one marvels at Frost's tenacity, at his sheer determination to make his mark as a poet. Those unfamiliar with the details of his early life might better understand the severity of his search for publication if they remember that Frost was nearly forty years old when *A Boy's Will* first appeared in London. At great cost to himself and particularly to the stability of his family, Frost held on until he was recognized as a leader of the poetic renaissance which swept American and British literature from 1912 to 1925.

And yet through it all—through all of the misunderstandings with relatives, the strains on his immediate family, and the hardships of New England farm life—Frost rarely doubted his genius with poetry. Three letters, dated nearly twenty years apart, seem especially pertinent here. The first (March 28, 1894), written to William Hayes Ward, editor of *The Independent*, reflects Frost's joy upon learning that one of his poems ("My Butterfly") had finally been accepted for publication: "The memory of your note will be a fresh pleasure to me when I awaken for a good many mornings to come; which may as well confirm you in the belief that I am still young. I am . . . . Specifically speaking, the few rules I know in this art are my own afterthoughts, or else directly formulated from the masterpieces I reread."<sup>1</sup> The second letter (July 4, 1913), written to former student John T. Bartlett three months after the publication of *A Boy's Will*, suggests that by 1913 Frost was totally confident about the "few rules" which he knew "in this art":

To be perfectly frank with you I am one of the most notable craftsmen of my time. That will transpire presently. I am possibly the only

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 19. Further references will be designated by SL and the appropriate page number.

person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification. You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it. Any one else who goes that way must go after them. And that's where most are going. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. (SL, p. 79)

One month later (August 6, 1913) he again wrote to Bartlett:

I dont know whether I am a craftsman or not in your sense of the word. Some day I will take time to explain to you in what sense of the word I am one of the few artists writing. I am one of the few who have a theory of their own upon which all their work down to the least accent is done. I expect to do something to the present state of literature in America. (SL, p. 88)

The point is that during the two decades of neglect between the acceptance of "My Butterfly" by *The Independent* and the appearance of *A Boy's Will*, Frost formulated a critical theory which was to set new standards for blank verse and for the merger of speaking tones with the iambic foot. He was just as confident of his theories about poetry as he was of his ability to write it, and his ideas became so solidified in his mind that he later made the mistake of judging the work of other poets by how closely it adhered to his own principles.

Yet Frost never gained the reputation of a theoretician. Unlike most twentieth-century poets of major stature, he was read and applauded by both the general public and the professional critic. The general reader who had at least heard of the influence of T. S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's pronouncements on poetry knew Frost only from frequently anthologized favorites such as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Birches," and "The Death of the Hired Man." Although perhaps the foundation of Frost's widespread popularity, this kind of reader rarely spoke of Frost's "influence." Strangely, the same situation often applied to the professional critic. Aware of Frost's opinions on pet topics like "sentence sounds" and artistic form, the critics nevertheless tended to overlook his contributions to poetic technique because his ideas were not as radical or as innovative as those of Eliot and Pound. Yet surely part of the problem stemmed from Frost himself. He was acutely sensitive to criticism,

so much so that friendships could be forever broken by one mildly negative remark in an otherwise laudatory review or essay. For whatever reason—perhaps because of those long years of neglect—Frost never trusted the judgments of others unless the critic was completely on his side, and he literally considered editors and analysts to be enemies. For example, he once wrote to Sidney Cox (March 13, 1915) soon after his return to the United States, clearly referring to professional literary men like Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *The Atlantic*, who had rejected his poetry before he became famous: "A number of my old editorial enemies actually asked me for poems" (SL, p. 156). This attitude stayed with Frost until his death in 1963—nearly fifty years—and it may have been a key factor in his refusal to write formal literary criticism.

The result of these and other factors is that even in Frost's centennial year, despite his confidence that he would "do something" to American literature, despite his awareness that he was "one of the few" with a theory of his own, and despite nearly five decades of critical and popular acclaim, the poet's theoretical statements remain known only to specialists. Those readers who try to piece together his poetic principles are usually forced to turn to the few comments which have been published since his death because Frost never bothered to collect his essays and opinions on poetic theory. The usual sources are the slim volume of selected prose, the selected interviews, and the four volumes of letters.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, a major problem in the definition of Frost's theory of poetry is the location of the fugitive sources. The reader who would know the poet's principles, or who would define what Frost meant when he called himself "one of the most notable craftsmen of my time," must have a touch of the detective, a willingness to track down the scattered material, gleaning what he can from obscure journals like *Biblia* and the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*. The checklist at the end of this essay is designed to ease this problem.

Three primary sources of literary opinion remain to be tapped: his lectures, his written comments about other writers, and the various

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<sup>2</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); *Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship*, ed. Margaret B. Anderson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963); *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963); *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); *Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost*, ed. Arnold Grade (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972).



memoirs of the poet. Frost's lectures are unquestionably the most important body of commentary yet to be evaluated. Few have been widely circulated; none have been collected. The difficulty of locating the lectures is compounded by the problem of accuracy, for Frost rarely prepared his public talks in advance. Thus there are few if any manuscripts to be analyzed, and the reader is left with the troublesome assignment of trying to determine the accuracy of the stenographic reproductions which were taken at the time. Frost was well aware that his deserved reputation as a public speaker depended largely upon his skill with spontaneous commentary. To quote Lawrance Thompson, "Like Mark Twain, Frost had learned to enthrall by deliberately interrupting himself with well-timed silences, and whenever he paused, the expectant hush of the entire audience was extraordinary."<sup>3</sup> Robert Francis confirms this opinion: "Similarly when Frost spoke from the platform, one felt that it was the audience's wordless response on which Frost depended for his next word. To leave so much to the participation of the audience and to the spur of the moment meant for both audience and speaker constant drama and surprise."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Frost did not like to publish his lectures, for he knew that the printed words could not express his intent which he often communicated by tones of voice and planned silences. On one famous occasion, he even went so far as to destroy the stenographic transcripts of the six lectures which he gave at Harvard University in 1936, thus renegeing on his contract which called for the publication of all lectures sponsored under the auspices of the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship.

Perhaps less vital, but valuable nonetheless, are Frost's written comments about other poets and friends of the arts which are scattered here and there in letters and reports of various meetings and celebrations. Frost was outspoken in his private opinions about his contemporaries, many of whom he often misconstrued as rivals, and his statements about their poetry can provide oblique references to his own critical theory. Finally, the reader who would know Frost's artistic principles should consult the memoirs of the poet which have been written by his friends and admirers. Most of these memoirs preserve the gist of his off-the-cuff pronouncements on writing, but again the serious problem of reliability must be considered, as well as the distinction between paraphrase and verbatim report of the poet's words.

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 445.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Francis, *Frost: A Time to Talk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), p. 3.

Even if all of this fugitive material were well known, very few serious readers would argue that Frost was a great critic. When placed beside the prose of Wallace Stevens or T. S. Eliot, Frost's theoretical statements seem curiously personal, less academic, more spontaneous. This is not to suggest that his criticism is negligible, but only to remark that Frost showed little interest in either fathering a movement in modern American poetry or educating an audience. Yet, as I have indicated, his letters confirm that he was absolutely confident of his ability to revitalize an American poetry which had fallen dormant between 1890 and 1910. This confidence of the then unknown writer is illustrated by his evaluation of Robert Bridges, then the Poet Laureate of England. With the assurance of an established critic, Frost wrote to Sidney Cox (January 19, 1914):

He rides two hobbies tandem, his theory that syllables in English have fixed quantity that cannot be disregarded in reading verse, and his theory that with forty or fifty or sixty characters he can capture and hold for all time the sounds of speech. One theory is as bad as the other and I think owing to much the same fallacy. The living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence. It is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation. . . . It is the most volatile and at the same time important part of poetry. It goes and the language becomes a dead language, the poetry dead poetry. With it go the accents the stresses the delays that are not the property of vowels and syllables but that are shifted at will with the sense. (SL, p. 107)

Frost goes on to argue that the accent of sense overrides most considerations of length in the pronunciation of vowels. Suggesting that Bridges' theory would make English as dead as Latin, he argues that the vitality of a language depends upon the variations accorded each syllable as it is pronounced in different contexts: "Words exist in the mouth not in books."

As the following quotations show, this assurance remained with Frost throughout his long career as a publishing poet. Comment after comment hits home, clarifying both his understanding of his own art and his criticism of poetry in general.

What counts is the amount of the original intention that isnt turned back in execution. (SL, p. 61)

My object is true form—is was and always will be—form true to any chance bit of true life. (SL, p. 361)

I thank the Lord for crudity which is rawness, which is raw material, which is the part of life not yet worked up into form. . . . (SL, p. 465)

Poetry is the renewal of words forever and ever. (SL, p. 462)

You wish the world better than it is, more poetical. You are that kind of poet. I would rate as the other kind. I wouldn't give a cent to see the world . . . made better. . . . I don't want the world made safer for poetry or easier. (SL, p. 369)

Dialogue would be unendurable if all words had to be said outright for complete construction. (SL, p. 371)

But for all of the confidently stated theories, for all of the memorable definitions, for all of the astute understanding of his art, Frost rarely stretched himself to the point at which self-assurance, quotable quotes, and insight unify in order to form pronouncements on poetry which could set standards and mold reactions. In short, he was not a practicing critic. Only the individual reader can decide for himself if the poet's refusal to formalize his ideas is regrettable, but the fact remains that Frost, unlike Stevens, Pound, and Eliot, was not an arbiter of taste. For better or for worse, he stood on his poetry—what he had to say about it was, in his opinion, incidental. The poet who could write that he expected to “do” something to American literature could also define rather modest goals in his famous essay on Edwin Arlington Robinson: “The utmost of ambition is to lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of. . . .”<sup>5</sup> That he achieved his ambition and “lodged” more than a few poems seems today undebatable. Yet it seems just as certain that many future readers will underestimate Frost's achievement as a poet because he does not fulfill their expectations as a critic. They will point to the adage that the influential critics of literature have often been writers, forgetting that the reverse is not always true.

As Elaine Barry notes, a distinction must be made between Frost the critical theorist and Frost the practical critic.<sup>6</sup> As a theorist, he was innovative, sophisticated, well-read, and creative. Disappointed with the contemporary poetry which he knew as a young man, particularly with the musicality of Swinburne and Lanier, he soon went against the grain by writing in his own voice and in his own style. One announced goal was to drop “to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept

<sup>5</sup> Robert Frost, “Introduction” to *King Jasper*, in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 5.

above" (SL, pp. 83-84). But as a practical critic, Frost was limited, arbitrary, informal, and often infuriatingly opinionated. Jealous of influential contemporary poets, of "rivals" like Eliot and Pound, he too often dismissed the achievement of other artists when they did not write the way he did or when they earned public acclaim. Here is his comment on Sandburg:

We've been having a dose of Carl Sandburg. He's another person I find it hard to do justice to. He was possibly hours in town and he spent one of those washing his white hair and toughening his expression for his public performance. His mandolin pleased some people, his poetry a very few and his infantile talk none. . . . He is probably the most artificial and studied ruffian the world has had. (SL, p. 277)

His statement on Pound is also revealing: "The harm he does lies in this: he made up his mind in the short time I was friends with him (we quarreled in six weeks) to add me to his party of American literary refugees in London. Nothing could be more unfair, nothing better calculated to make me an exile for life" (SL, pp. 147-148). Similarly, Frost's description of Stevens' poetry as "bric-a-brac"<sup>7</sup> and his assessment of Edgar Lee Masters as "my hated rival" (SL, p. 202) suggest his shortcomings as a practical critic. In general, he refused to write much about the other major poets of his age. Elaine Barry correctly points to perhaps the "most puzzling limitation of all"—his neglect of the later Yeats.<sup>8</sup> Yet this failure to evaluate Yeats may be not so much a lapse as further evidence of his inability to comment seriously on other major contemporary poets. His instinct was to either dismiss his "rivals" with short remarks or ignore them completely. He reserved his most generous and discriminating evaluations for decidedly minor poets, writers like Louis Untermeyer, Mark Van Doren, or Edward Thomas who would pose no threat to his own reputation. The single startling exception is the "Introduction" to Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper* which he contributed at the request of Robinson's publisher.

Given these serious shortcomings as a practical critic, it seems certain that Frost's reputation as a poet-critic must rest finally upon his theories. Elaine Barry's statement that Frost "left us a body of critical theory that is probably larger than that of any other American poet" may

<sup>7</sup> *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Second Series, (New York: Compass Books, 1966), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Barry, p. 41.

be challenged, but the fact remains that his stature as a theoretician deserves re-evaluation.<sup>9</sup> Clearly this discussion is not the place for a complete analysis of his poetic principles, but the primary divisions should be identified and illustrated.

Some readers may complain that the following list is arbitrary, but in general I find five basic subjects in Frost's theory of poetry, five areas of interest which encompass and define most of his concerns: drama, sound, organic development, form, and metaphor. Perhaps the best source for a definition of Frost's belief in the need for the dramatic element in poetry is his preface to the very short play *A Way Out* (1929). Calling for a "dramatic necessity," he writes, "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing."<sup>10</sup> He means that the dramatic necessity need not take the form of an actual play, but that even in a "least" lyric the poet should specify a speaker in a scene.

His insistence that sound is the primary element in poetry was indicated earlier in the excerpts from his letter about Robert Bridges. In "The Figure a Poem Makes" (1939), he expands his ideas as simply and as clearly as he can: "the object in writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Variation of syntax, consonants, and vowels is only superficial—the poet must include the speaking tones. Declaring that the English language has but two meters, "strict iambic and loose iambic," he insists that the best way to vary the sound is to unify the rhythm of the iambic beat with the freer rhythm of natural speech: "The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless." Frost devised the term "sentence sound" to describe his technique of using voice tones within the form of the iambic line, and he filled many of the letters written between 1912 and 1920 with definitions of the term. For example, in a letter to John Bartlett (February 22, 1914), he wrote, "I give you a new definition of a sentence: A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung" (SL, p. 110).

Two years later, he again wrote to Bartlett (May 30, 1916): "There are tones of voice that mean more than words. Sentences may be so shaped as definitely to indicate these tones. Only when we are making sentences so shaped are we really writing. . . . A sentence *must* convey a meaning by tone of voice and it must be the particular meaning

<sup>9</sup> Barry, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 17.



the writer intended. The reader must have no choice in the matter" (SL, p. 204).

"The Figure a Poem Makes" is also significant for its discussion of Frost's faith in organic development. Most artists accept this ideal of creativity, as opposed to the more mechanical methods suggested by Poe, but Frost was outspoken in his belief that the form and theme of a poem are not predetermined in the first line. Arguing that the "logic" of the creative act can be seen only in retrospect, he suggests that poetry "must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader."<sup>12</sup> Frost was so insistent upon the need for definite form in poetry that he carried on a lifelong verbal battle with free-verse poets. We all recall his witticism that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. In general, however, the call for form was more than an opportunity for wit, for he believed that the creation of form was the only way to stay the chaos of daily life. Thus Frost's reliance upon traditional poetic forms was not so much an indication of conservative, "anti-modern" poetics as it was an illustration of his determination to meet life's confusions. In his letter to *The Amherst Student* (March 25, 1935), he discusses in abstract terms the need for form. Noting that all ages of the world are bad, and that the 1930's perhaps seem worse because of the presence of a depression and the prospect of another world war, he tells the students: "When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations" (SL, p. 418). Frost is just as insistent about the need for definite form in poetry. One of his clearest statements comes from the little-known lecture "The Poet's Next of Kin in a College" (1938): "When one looks back over his own poetry, his only criticism is whether he had form or not. Did he worry it out or pour it out? . . . You can go back over a poem and touch it up—but never unless you are in the same form again."<sup>13</sup>

The final major division in the poet's critical theory is his discussion of metaphor. Most readers recall the definition from the oft-reprinted essay "The Constant Symbol" (1946): "There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another. . . . Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing."<sup>14</sup> His fullest discussion of

<sup>12</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Frost, "The Poet's Next of Kin in a College," *Biblia* (February 1938), no pages.

<sup>14</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 24.



metaphor is found in "Education by Poetry" (1931), the essay which I consider to be the highpoint of his critical statement. Although unfortunately little known, Frost's argument here is that education by poetry means education by metaphor. Only when a reader is at home with metaphorical expression can he save himself from being fooled by analogy, parable, or figurative language. Indeed, the enthusiasm which accompanies most creative effort must be taken through what Frost calls "the prism of the intellect" if it is to be distinguished from superficial enthusiasm like "sunset raving." He continues, "I would be willing to throw away everything else but that: enthusiasm tamed by metaphor. . . . I do not think anybody ever knows the discreet use of metaphor, his own and other people's, the discreet handling of metaphor, unless he has been properly educated in poetry."<sup>15</sup>

This pivotal essay has a great deal more to say than what has been outlined here. Frost includes, for example, discussions of how metaphor breaks down if it is stretched too far. My purpose has been to call attention to the major areas of Frost's critical theory and to provide illustrations from the pertinent prose and letters which make up the heart of his criticism. His contributions to the theory of poetry deserve wider recognition. Perhaps the first step is to separate his practical criticism from the critical theory, for the former is unquestionably the less valuable. Once that task is complete, we will be better able to evaluate the success of his determination to "do something" to the present state of American literature. The following checklist will help the reader locate some of the fugitive sources.

#### SELECTED CHECKLIST OF SOURCES FOR ROBERT FROST'S CRITICAL THEORY

##### I. Letters:

*Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship*, ed. Margaret B. Anderson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

*The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

*Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

*Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost*, ed. Arnold Grade (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972).

##### II. Interviews:

While there are undoubtedly numerous uncollected interviews with Robert Frost, a comprehensive sampling can be found in one book which includes interviews from 1915 through 1962.

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<sup>15</sup> *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 36.

*Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

### III. Essays:

The following fifteen essays and speeches can be found in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966):

"Preface" to *Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs of New Hampshire* (New York: Dial Press, 1924).

"The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 May 1925, p. 8.

"Preface" to *A Way Out: A One Act Play* (New York: Harbor Press, 1929).

"Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly*, 20 (February 1931), pp. 75-85.

"Introduction" to Edwin Arlington Robinson, *King Jasper* (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

"Letter to *The Amherst Student*," 25 March 1935.

"Remarks Accepting the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters," *National Institute of Arts and Letters News Bulletin*, 5 (1939), pp. 1, 12.

"The Figure a Poem Makes," *Collected Poems of Robert Frost, 1939* (New York: Holt, 1939).

"The Constant Symbol," *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Modern Library, 1946). This essay was also published in *The Atlantic Monthly* for October 1946.

"A Romantic Chasm," Preface to *A Masque of Reason, Containing A Masque of Reason, A Masque of Mercy (Two New England Biblicals) Together with Steeple Bush and Other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948).

"The Hear-Say Ballad," Preface to *Helen Hartness Flanders and Marguerite Olney, Ballads Migrant in New England* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1953).

"The Prerequisites," also known as "A Poet, Too, Must Learn the Magic Way of Poetry," Preface to *Aforesaid* (New York: Holt, 1954); also published in *New York Times Book Review*, 21 March 1954, p. 1.

"Perfect Day—A Day of Prowess," *Sports Illustrated*, (July 1956).

"Maturity No Object," Preface to *New Poetry of England and America*, ed. Donald Hall, et al. (New York: Meridian Press, 1957).

"On Emerson," *Daedalus*, 88 (Fall 1959), pp. 712-718.

Some of the following essays were first lectures which have been printed from stenographic reports.

"A Monument to After-Thought Unveiled," (Frost's high school valedictory address, 1892), reprinted in Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 130-131.

"Introduction" to *The Arts Anthology: Dartmouth Verse, 1925*, (Portland, Maine: Mosher, 1925).

"Poet—One of the Truest," in *Percy MacKaye: A Symposium on His Fiftieth Birthday* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1928).

- "Remarks" on the Dedication of the Wilfred Davison Memorial Library (Bread-loaf, Vermont, 1930).
- "Robert Frost: Reading of His Poems," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*, second series, 7 (1936), pp. 67-70.
- "Introduction" to Sarah N. Cleghorn, *Threescore* (New York: Smith and Hass, 1936).
- "What Became of New England?" (Commencement Address, Oberlin College, June 8, 1937), *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, (May 1938).
- "Poetry and Poetry," *Biblia*, (February 1938), no pages.
- "The Poet's Next of Kin in a College," *Biblia*, (February 1938), no pages.
- "The Doctrine of Excursions: A Preface," *Bread Loaf Anthology* (Middlebury: Middlebury College Press, 1939).
- "A Sermon," (New York: The Spiral Press, 1947).
- "Poetry and School," *Atlantic Monthly*, 188 (June 1951), pp. 30-31.
- "Thoreau's 'Walden': A Discussion between Robert Frost and Reginald Cook," *The Listener*, 26 (August 1954), pp. 319-320.
- "The Commencement Address," *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, 47 (July 1955), pp. 14-16.
- "A Talk for Students," (New York: The Fund for the Republic, 1956).
- "Introduction," Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* (New York: New York University Press, 1957).
- "Freshman Days," (with Edward Connery Lathem), *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, 51 (March 1959), pp. 16-22.
- "Remarks on the Occasion of the Tagore Centenary," *Poetry*, 99 (November 1961), pp. 106-119.
- "Between Poetry and Verse," *Atlantic Monthly*, 209 (January 1962), pp. 51-54.
- "Playful Talk," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*, second series, 12 (1962), pp. 180-189.
- "Robert Frost on 'Extravagance,'" *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, 55 (March 1963), pp. 21-24.

#### IV. Lectures:

- "Lecture to the Browne and Nichols School," (May 10, 1915), in Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 142-144.
- "The Unmade Word, or Fetching and Far-Fetching," (March 13, 1918, at the Browne and Nichols School), in Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 144-148.

The following four entries are sources for Frost's comments at the Norton Lectures given at Harvard University in March 1936.

- Lawrence C. Dame, "1,000 Hear Robert Frost, Poet, Give Views on Life in Harvard Lecture," *Boston Herald*, 19 March 1936, p. 29.
- John Holmes, "Robert Frost as He Talks to Multitudes," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 21 March 1936, Book Section, p. 1; revised and reprinted as "Harvard: Robert Frost and the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures on Poetry,"

- Recognition of Robert Frost*, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Holt, 1937), pp. 114-119.
- Eric W. Carlson, "Robert Frost on 'Vocal Imagination, the Merger of Form and Content,'" *American Literature*, 33 (January 1962), pp. 519-522.
- Daniel Smythe, *Robert Frost Speaks* (New York: Twayne, 1964), pp. 27-33.
- "A Tribute to Wordsworth," (Cornell University, April 20, 1950), *Cornell Library Journal*, 11 (Spring 1970), pp. 76-99.

## V. Memoirs:

- Donald Bartlett, "A Friend's View of Robert Frost," *New Hampshire Troubadour*, 16 (November 1946), pp. 22-25.
- , "Two Recollections of Frost," *Southern Review*, new series, 2 (October 1966), pp. 842-846.
- Sylvia Clark, "Robert Frost: The Derry Years," *New Hampshire Troubadour*, 16 (November 1946), pp. 13-16.
- Reginald Cook, "Robert Frost's Asides on His Poetry," *American Literature*, 19 (January 1948), pp. 351-359.
- , "Frost Country," *Vermont Life*, 3 (Summer 1949), pp. 15-17.
- , "Frost on Frost: The Making of Poems," *American Literature*, 28 (March 1956), pp. 62-72.
- , "Notes on Frost the Lecturer," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 42 (April 1956), pp. 127-132.
- Sidney Cox, *Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man,"* (New York: Holt, 1929).
- , "Robert Frost at Plymouth," *New Hampshire Troubadour*, 16 (November 1946), pp. 18-22.
- , *A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* (New York: New York University Press, 1957).
- Richard Eberhart, "Robert Frost: His Personality," *Southern Review*, new series, 2 (October 1966), pp. 762-788.
- Robert Francis, *Frost: A Time to Talk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972).
- Lesley Frost, *New Hampshire's Child: The Derry Journals of Lesley Frost* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969).
- Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost and the Lawrence, Massachusetts "High School Bulletin": The Beginning of a Literary Career* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1966).
- John A. Meixner, "Frost Four Years After," *Southern Review*, new series, 2 (October 1966), pp. 862-877.
- Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).
- Stearns Morse, "Lament for a Maker: Reminiscences of Robert Frost," *Southern Review*, new series, 9 (Winter 1973), pp. 53-68.
- Robert Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Dramatic," *New England Quarterly*, 10 (June 1937), pp. 262-269.
- Daniel Smythe, *Robert Frost Speaks* (New York: Twayne, 1964).
- Wilbert Snow, "The Frost I Knew," *Texas Quarterly*, 11 (Autumn 1968), pp. 9-48.
- Wade Van Dore, "Robert Frost: A Memoir and a Remonstrance," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2 (November 1972), pp. 554-560.

### THREE POEMS BY LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

#### *BACKSTREET INTELLECT*

Say fella,  
 I'm the unemployed.  
 Notice my limp?  
 Thought not. Try to hide it,  
 I, twelve hours caught in a mine-shaft.  
 Threw me blankets (for all the good it did—

I thrashed in  
 Sweat), while they rested  
 Up for rescue.  
 Stash the quarter, Mac. I'm  
 People too. (Right now, some Guv'  
 Ment heavy is most likely tailing me. You,

For all I know.)  
 Science is my first love.  
 Always has been.  
 A theories man. If you  
 Haven't heard, that's not  
 A thing they pay you for. Nor has

Anyone  
 Cold shoulders like  
 Professors. Once  
 Astonished by my rough  
 Sagacity, they fist their pawed  
 Diplomas in my beard, ransack the live

Bountiful  
 Mint of my mind, then  
 Wish me luck  
 To be more fashionable:  
 "Brusque manners and immaculate  
 Thoughts don't mix. You have a fine mind. Get lost."

## THE LEAVES

### I

There are many shapes of leaves.  
 Some are broad and flat. They may be lazy,  
 But I think they dream well.  
 Others are needle-thin and long. Many together.  
 Like whiskers.  
 They smell like insides of old houses.  
 They sting. I guess they enjoy this.  
 And then there are heart-shaped leaves. (Or perhaps,  
 We have leaf-shaped hearts.  
 I wish to be fair.)

### II

When leaves flutter in the wind  
 I think, that is style.  
 The wind can express itself. It makes love to the tree.  
 And the tree comes upon saintliness.  
 When the leaves grow old  
 They change colors, many times. They have lost  
 The glory of being. Now all is becoming.  
 (I admit it *is* a sensation.) So busy  
 Admiring their changes, they fall from the tree  
 And make carpets under my feet.  
 Such loss of dignity.

### III

A tree that has lost its leaves  
 Cannot live with itself.  
 There is no place to hide the miseries of branches. Nothing  
 Can survive so much exposure. Not even the sun.  
 I have bought a young tree. I plant it  
 Near my bedroom.  
 I do not know why (shock  
 Or not enough water) it has lost its leaves.  
 It is a silver-dollar eucalyptus.  
 All over the lawn, there is money underfoot. This morning.  
 I wait for a strong wind to scatter the dollars  
 Of leaves. In fact, I pray for it.  
 I will not stoop to collect these corpses for burning.  
 I pray for the birds. If they come,  
 There will be more leaves.



*IN THE LIGHTWEIGHT PLANE CALLED FEAR*

In the lightweight plane  
Called fear  
My friend  
The pilot has words

To thaw the ice from wings.  
He syllables  
Calm descent  
Through hail and gusts.

He whispers parachutes  
In the ear  
Of the Lord  
Of thunder. Wherever danger

Knocks, he locks the door—  
With a key  
(and a spare)  
For every cloud of fire

Or frost, a lightning rod  
Up his sleeve,  
And a computer  
To translate the combinations

To the safe deposit box  
Of storms;  
His laughter  
A bellows to inflate

The fingers in the glove  
Of engine  
Failure;  
His teeth on edge

A landing gear  
To unclench  
The fist  
Of fog or sleet.

## DEADWEIGHT

I carry deadweight around with me.  
 All I once was, once hoped to be  
 stuffed into a potato-sack  
 slung over my back and weighing me down  
 as if a dead lover's arms  
 clung on to my neck.

• • •

What do you want? I say. It turns on me  
 the blankness of the dead.  
 You are not my bad conscience.  
 I have no regrets. I was  
 the runner for my ancestors.  
 Cities, mountains were dust at my feet.

Faces they dreamed about  
 were water in mine. Distances  
 sang in my eyes. Rhythms  
 and syllables chirped in my ears.  
 You cannot now be fears I then  
 did not run from, work left undone.  
 You are something else.

• • •

I stood on a stone-path that jutted out  
 into the sea, faced the lighthouse across,  
 heard sounds of water against boats,  
 of lances in the wind, of hymns  
 before the offering. I put  
 these whispers in my words, light

rotating and the cries of birds  
 and from dark archways sounds of  
 men singing once the sun was down.  
 What lies at the end of a dreamy,  
 distant look? Love that annihilates.  
 The place where disciples stand and wait.

• • •

I walked there  
up the stairs  
unlocked the gate  
met love that cannot  
be compared

many were there  
among them my  
ancestors who  
stared at me through  
eyes of animals

from clouds  
where I stood  
fell to my knees  
lay face-down on the ground

all that grows strives  
coming together there  
humming stepping out  
out into air . . .

worms feet head wings  
crawling things  
tops of reeds grass  
tops of trees . . .

• • •

Wrapped in fog dense as cotton  
the old stone house in the woods  
the floorboards rotten  
the bedsheets soggy

Never again for me  
the rooms I lived in in the past  
the tall tile stoves

snow on the trees  
sun in the branches  
and beyond forest and park and sand  
the glow of the sun on the sea

never again  
and memory is not enough . . .

Never again  
the steps across the yard  
under the mango tree  
past the well and  
the *chewing calf*

never again  
and memory is not enough

the souls that have  
no body no grave  
cannot come close  
to the chair  
under the mango tree

cannot come close again  
drawn there  
by the word

now they are lost

no home for ghosts

• • •

Something there is that does not pass.  
Steady mast behind mists, sails of cloth  
of light tightly spun, *impeccable glow*.

No matter how strict the routine  
how often a craft pulls out to return  
the glow behind mists does not leave.

Something there is that does not change.

On some trips the deck is full of the dead  
the dead brought back to burn  
steady steady steady the light  
at the prow  
at the stern

Girls in white dresses  
white flowers in their hair

chatter as they dead  
are brought back from the water

chatter as they pile wood  
on the ever diminishing pile

The water came close to the chin  
would have risen  
up to the mouth  
would have weighted down the toes  
had it not been stopped just then

balance O balance  
imponderable ebb and flow  
imponderable glow

There they are  
the girls in white dresses  
chattering  
running to and fro  
between the landing and  
the funeral places

collecting the ashes  
collecting the bones

smoke rises  
keeps rising  
even from stones

• • •

Go, deadweight,  
all I once was, once hoped to be  
go

I accepted you as hope  
when you were bright  
when you were young  
when you were song

accepted what you led me to

the cities  
the ascent  
the love at the end

the faces of yearning  
in my face like a pool

Now you are dead

I have carried your death

now go

do not impede

that much lies ahead  
I was shown beyond the gate  
you guided me to

of course I will be sad  
when music and lovers remind me of you

will incline my head

for even as a new face rises

in looking back  
in listening

what is there but

. . . that land that land  
where the sky is a pale rose,  
at the edge of the sea  
a dark figure stands,  
youth burned by the dark . . .

How well you have taught me  
how well I have learned:

nothing that passes does last

even what will be

is past

—ARTHUR GREGOR



## FOUR POEMS BY D. C. BERRY

*DOT*

I raise my jug  
And dance on melting legs.

Under an igloo sky  
I lie  
With my shadow.

Alone,

I'm a dot  
On the tundra.

*TONGUE*

My loneliness rises up  
In me like a tongue,  
Pretty soon  
Like a whole whale tongue  
And I fall to my knees

Full of speech  
I cannot manage.

I try to tell you this  
But cannot.

Thoughts slip  
Harpoons into the silence  
I can manage  
No more than Ahab could the horizon.

*HANDS*

O fancytail, my hands,  
Tundra swallows,  
Would roost in the hollows  
Of your cheeks until  
Summer fluttered backward  
Into egg-blue April.

But tethered to a wedding band  
They ride my wrists  
Like small white vultures,  
My Ku Klux Klan hands,  
And pick a heart they're sick of.

*HOPPERS*

Rain three days on the tundra  
And nothing in sight  
but  
Rain.

Eyes float off  
Jibbles of rotten cork  
As we blub  
For the sun hung

like a tree frog  
To our tongue.

Should we open our mouths  
And let the whole thing creep  
Out, croak our hide and seek,  
Or like hoppers  
Learn to live with sinkers inside?

## KATE

MARK STEADMAN

Kate left Johnny Curran—they left each other, against God's will—after nine years of marriage, when Jack was seven years old. Johnny loved her to come home to. He really did. But the longer they were married, the more he drank like an Irishman. And the more he drank like an Irishman, the less he came home. There were days—sometimes runs of three and four days—that she didn't see him at all, though the Lighthouse Bar was only four blocks away from the house on Warren Square. In October of 1936 he was away for a week. The Sixth day went over Kate's limit, so she walked out on him.

Kate was phlegmatic in a fashion that could have been taken for patience, but the world had always appeared to her to be a certain way, and sitting around waiting six days for Johnny to come home didn't fit in with her sense of the proper disposition of things. That wasn't the kind of a marriage she had in mind, and she was never one to put up with a way of the world that wasn't to her liking.

So she moved out. Without nagging, and without discussing it with him—Kate was never much of a talker with those she had her deepest feelings for. Just, he came home and she wasn't there. Gone. With Jack and the few pieces of furniture she had brought into the house when they had gotten married. Pinned to the pillow of their bed was a note: "Enough is enough." The last words that ever passed between them.

It was a hard move that she had to make, because the Church was into her very deep, and she knew it was her immortal soul that was at stake. The family—except for her brother Donald—never forgave her for it. Nor did she ask them to. She took her husband's neglect for a long time without complaining about it. But finally, Johnny—the way he behaved—was more than she could bear, whether God expected it of her or not.

Her father died the year after she broke off her marriage, though they were never sure that was the cause of it. She went to the funeral, standing at the back with Jack, then leaving afterwards without trying to speak to any of them. Kate was Mr. Lynch's favorite child, and his greatest disappointment. He never came to see her after she walked out on Johnny. The two or three times they met on the street, he crossed to the other side without speaking. He didn't live to see her marry Gault

Reilley. Which was just as well, or so the family thought. "It would have killed him for sure," said Jane, her ugly sister.

Kate wouldn't try to see any of them after the divorce, the more so since they had all opposed the marriage in the first place. Though she would dress Jack up and send him around to go to mass with them on Sundays.

She got a job with the Central of Georgia Railroad, in the payroll department, which is where she met Gault Reilley. They were married two years after her divorce from Johnny became final. After that, any kind of reconciliation with the family was out of the question. She never visited them, and they never visited her. They wouldn't have been able to talk about the divorce or the marriage, and there wasn't anything else to talk about. So she and Reilley went their own way, though the family was keeping up with them right along. When Susy was born, her sister Jane sent her a sympathy card with a black border on it.

Donald dropped around from time to time—usually for meals and a place to sleep when he was drying out. He brought her some of the news of her mother and Jane, but he didn't see much of her other brothers and sisters himself.

It was a willful family, and they all had a lot of what used to be called character, but Kate had the best backbone of the lot. Her marriage to Johnny was a kind of culmination of the whole tendency of her life up to that point, and the family's opposition to him was probably a great part of her interest in him to begin with—though, after she got started, she loved him mostly for herself. With a kind of blind tenacity that was beyond both explanation and understanding.

Her father wouldn't have him in the house at first and Johnny was scared of the older man—who was also bigger. Later, when it got to be clear that his patriarchal will was going to be thwarted, and he couldn't keep him out any longer, Mr. Lynch would go off into the bedroom upstairs the times Johnny came around, and Mrs. Lynch had to let him into the house to see Kate.

He went to the wedding. The family argued him into that because of the way it would look if he didn't—though Kate wouldn't have anything to do with it—passing her plans for the wedding along to her sister Jane, who carried them back to the family. They got him to the church, but he tied his tie crooked deliberately, and wouldn't speak to say he was giving his daughter away when the time came. He just stepped back and sat down on the pew beside his wife.

The reception cost him two thousand dollars, and was held at the house. He didn't go to it himself, but after all the guests had arrived,

he came down from the second floor bedroom in his shirtsleeves, and got a bottle of Jamison's from the sideboard in the dining room. He opened it with flourishes, standing there in the roomful of guests, and took a long, straight pull out of the bottle. Then he took it back upstairs with him without speaking.

Kate had been raised in a house on Washington Square with fourteen foot ceilings and windows that rose ten feet, starting at the floor. Her father was six feet five inches tall, two of her brothers were six feet four and a half, and Donald was six feet six. Her mother was five feet five, but the girls all got their growing genes from the father's side, though two of them looked like Mrs. Lynch in the face. Kate was the oldest and the biggest at five feet nine and a half inches, and a hundred and fifty-five pounds. Her hair was dark and curly, different from the rest of the family, whose hair was dark and straight. Between her two front teeth was a gap, which she got from her father, and passed on to her children. She wasn't a pretty woman, but she had a vitality about her that was appealing to certain kinds of men.

After they were married, Kate and Johnny lived in a house on Warren Square—two blocks away from the Lynches. They had the first floor rooms, and the use of the yard—another old house with fourteen foot ceilings, and windows up to the cornice at the ten foot mark.

After she left Johnny, she moved into the ground floor of a slightly newer house near the Big Park, on Waldburg Street. It had twelve foot ceilings, and bay windows on the back side with panes of curved glass in them. She lived there for two years until she married Reilley, when they moved into the house on Avalon Street in the Marshoaks project.

It was the first time she had ever had a whole house to herself, which was to the good. But most of the Marshoaks bungalow would have fitted into the living room of the place on Washington Square, and she had to make herself think about it to get used to the diminished proportions. The bedooms were nine by eleven and eight by ten. The living room was ten by seventeen, including the dining alcove at the end. The kitchen was so small that she had to back through the swinging door into the dining alcove to open the door of the refrigerator. And when she did baking, and had to open the door of the oven, she banged her rear end on the cabinet under the sink.

Gault Reilley was a small, pink and gray marshmallow of a man, two inches shorter than Kate, and a total retreat from everything she had known before in the way of dimensions. The house was to a scale that suited him well enough, but it pinched and cramped her at first, and she had to go through a period of adjustment—pulling in on her

gestures, and making sure she didn't make sudden movements—though she liked the coziness even from the first. Whenever she wasn't thinking about it, something got broken. Now and then she would begin to feel like the walls were closing in on her, and that if she tried to run away out the front door, the whole house would stick to her like the carapace of a snail, and she would carry it off on her back.

They had to give up on floor lamps altogether. And Reilley, who was good at fixing things and handy around the house, got living room lamps with wooden bases, which he screwed down to the end tables so Kate wouldn't knock them off.

Eventually she settled in to the coziness and really got to liking it. She and Reilley were happy together, and she learned to move with enough caution to keep the breakage down to a level that they could afford.

There had been a leak under the kitchen floor in front of the sink, and the flooring had rotted out. When Kate washed dishes at the sink, the spongy feeling of the floor made her nervous. Reilley didn't want to go under the house in the crawl space to repair the joists—the crawl space was only eighteen inches high, and very dark and spidery, with a soggy, damp smell to it, placenta-like, as if something fork-tongued and scaly had dropped into life down there. But he got a piece of plywood and covered it with linoleum that almost matched the kitchen floor, then nailed it over the rotten place so she wouldn't feel like she was going through when she stood there. He offered to take a turn at washing the dishes, but Kate wouldn't let him do it. Even though they were both working, she kept the woman things for herself. Reilley looked after the maintenance, which he was very good at, and enjoyed.

Around the house Kate went barefooted, because she was a little sensitive about being so much taller than Reilley, after her father and brothers, and Johnny. But he never seemed to mind. When there were just the two of them, after Susy got married and moved out, he called her his "Big Hunk of Woman." Which always made her shoot him with her gap-toothed smile. When she was standing on the plywood at the sink, she was nearly three inches taller than he was. He liked to watch her through the kitchen door, and would come into the kitchen and hug her when she was doing the dishes, tucking his gray-fringed bald head under her chin. "You Big Hunk of Woman," he would say.

Jack's death came down on Kate very hard—harder than anything that had happened to her since her father died.

They weren't seeing much of him at the time, but he was her first born, and the boy. Reilley liked him too—he got along with big people



—but, of course, it didn't come over him the way it did Kate, because he only got to know Jack well the one year he had been in the house with them in 1947-1948, when he had been at Boniface. But it upset him the way Kate took it. It upset them both.

Kate was the kind to hold it in, but the night, and the day after Jack died she was having to let it out. Her crying was like a man's—whole-framed and shuddery. It took her over so much that she couldn't stand up to do it. All day long she sat around the house that way, sobbing big, pumping sobs that made the floors shake, and tilted the pictures on the walls. Reilley didn't know what to do for her, and he had to sit on the side and watch. Every now and then she would pull herself together long enough to move from the chair to the couch, or from the couch to the bed. But then it would come over her again, and she would collapse in a heap, and the sobbing would start up once more.

Susy came over as soon as she had gotten her husband off to work. But she was pregnant and having morning sickness very bad. Seeing her mother that way upset her and made her sicker than ever. She stayed for about an hour, trying to get Kate to eat something and pull herself together. But she couldn't get through to her mother any more than Reilley could, so she gave up and left—afraid that too much of it might do some kind of damage to the baby.

It might have gone on longer than it did. But late Thursday afternoon Kate saw the spider, and the spider stopped it.

She was afraid of spiders. In fact, there were a lot of things she was afraid of, but spiders were one of the things she was afraid of most. They went up near the head of a list which she had made and hung on the cabinet in the kitchen. Spiders sent her into a tizzy. So did frogs, lizards, snakes, rats, cats, birds, and big cockroaches. (Cockroaches are too common in Savannah to stay upset about as a regular thing, if you live there. Everybody has to put up with them. Most of the city cockroaches are little bitty things, and know how to behave themselves. No trouble. When you turn on the kitchen light, they will run away under the sink, or hide in the woodwork. But their country cousins that sometimes come in from the woods are another story. They are humdingers. Big babies, up to three inches long, with wings. They can't fly very well, but that's just a liability and no comfort at all, since they might just as well buzz right up your nose trying to get away. It would be a lot better if they were ace fliers, and could go just where they wanted to go. Some of God's propositions are just plain half-assed. If you look around you in any kind of thoughtful way, you have to come to that conclusion.

And if you look around you and see one of those flying cockroaches coming at you, you are seeing about the best proof of it there is.)

Kate had uncomfortable feelings about some abstract things too, like high places and going to sleep in the dark. But mostly she was afraid of things that were really there, animals that could move in and out of the spaces around her. Seeing them sent her into a tizzy, and she wasn't the tizzying sort, because of her size.

So she tried to get on top of it by making a list of all the things that scared her—off of a list she found in a *READER'S DIGEST* article, which gave the real medical names. The list in the article was a very long one, and it was comforting for her to see all of the others things that she *wasn't* afraid of.

She put up her list on the cabinet in the kitchen where she could see it every day, and maybe get used to the things she had written on it. It didn't really work, but it made her feel better about them in an abstract way—when none of them were around where she could see them. Maybe it worked a little.

*God Made Fearful Things*

*Ophidiophobia—Snakes*

*Arachnophobia—Spiders*

*Batrachophobia—Frogs*

*Sauriaphobia—Lizards*

*Rodentiaphobia—Rats and Mice*

*Ailurophobia—Cats*

*Aviaphobia—Birds*

*Blattidaephobia—Cockroaches (big)*

*Acrophobia—High Places*

*Claustrophobia—Close Places*

*Achluophobia—Dark Places*

After she hung it up, Reilley put stars beside *Ophidiophobia*, *Arachnophobia*, and *Claustrophobia*. Then he put a star at the bottom of the page, and beside it wrote, "Me Tool"

Seeing the spider—it had gotten into the bath tub and was trying to climb out—brought her back into herself in a strong, familiar way, stopping the sobbing.

She came out of the bathroom and into the living room where Reilley sat slumped in the chair. "There's a spider in the tub," she said. It was the first everyday thing she'd said in over nineteen hours, and

Reilley looked up at her from the chair. He was worn out over it himself, and the familiar sound of her voice was strange to him.

She stood in the doorway looking at him, biting her lower lip, clenching it in her teeth until it turned white, bulging out of the gap in the front.

For a minute he looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said. Since they had gotten the news, it was the first time he had been able to get at her to let her know that he was involved in it too.

She looked at him and nodded. Then she went into the kitchen and began fixing supper.

He went into the bathroom and ran hot water in the tub to kill the spider.

"It's the weather makes them come into the house," he said when he came into the kitchen. "Squeezes them the same as us."

They hadn't finished eating when Donald knocked, then slammed open the front door into the living room. Although it was a basic personality thing mostly, maybe being a fireman also had something to do with the way he always came into the house—like he was coming to put out a fire. Shoving the door in so that it would bounce off the wall on the backswing, shaking the house and making the dust rise out of the rugs. Just being a Lynch had a lot to do with it, of course. Donald was the biggest of Kate's brothers, bigger than the father had been.

Reilley knew Donald needed the whole doorway to be able to get into the house. What he couldn't figure out was the violence of it.

They had talked it over a number of times, he and Kate. "I wonder what he'd do if we ever locked it on him," she said. "Get an ax and chop it down?"

"Chop it down," said Reilley, nodding.

Sometimes they would just sit and think about why he did it.

"Was he like that at home?"

"He moved strong," she would say. "We all did. Of course, we had more room there. It was an old house, and they put them together pretty solid in those days." Then she would add, "Donald was the biggest."

Donald's visits not only made Reilley nervous—they also cost him money. But since Donald was the only one of the family that came around at all, he didn't feel like he ought to say anything. Still, just the way Donald opened the front door set them back five or ten dollars right to begin with. And what he did to Kate's lamps and china and knick-knacks and things once he got inside made Reilley's breathing go smothery and turned him red in the face. Also, Kate tended to forget herself and move around too much when he was there—having family

in the house. Though she would complain and carry on about it very big after Donald had gone, when Reilley added it all up for her.

When they both got excited and started moving together, Reilley didn't like to stay in the living room with them at all, but would go stand in the kitchen door where he would be out of the way.

He didn't like to be that way about it, but inevitably Donald's visits took shape as a column of figures inside Reilley's head. Joyful spending was one thing, and he was blithe enough about shedding his hard-earned cash when he could think of it as bringing back heart's ease and gladness. But his work in the payroll department of the Central disposed him to a very dollary view of waste and destruction, and, since he literally paid for them, Donald's visits had to be figured out in terms of profit and loss. Always considering that he was the only one of Kate's blood relations who would have anything to do with her.

The most expensive visit they ever had from Donald came after the St. Patrick's Day parade in 1949, when he blew in very excited from the green Irish whiskey and the brass band music of the Irish-American Friendly Society. He turned over the dining room table chasing Kate around it, and broke four place settings of her Wedgewood china. Then, before they could get him anchored into Reilley's chair, he stepped on the Attwater-Kent radio, and crushed the right lens of Reilley's reading glasses. It came to eighty-three dollars and thirty-six cents.

This time—the splintery sound of the door coming open, and the way the house shook on the backswing, lit up the double entry sheets inside Reilley's head, and he knew like it was a vision that a new record was going to be set. Nothing broke, because by now everything was either screwed down or broken already. But it jumped the radio off the station it was on, and dropped the top seat of the toilet in the bathroom.

"Kate!" Donald had a high, blurry voice, with a sound in the middle of it like air escaping from a tire. "Have you heard, Kate . . . ?" he said. ". . . Jack's dead."

They knew what he was going to say, but they didn't know what to answer him. Kate kept on eating, but Reilley put down his fork and watched her.

"Yes," she said, not very loud.

"Jack's DEAD . . . KATE?" he said. "Jack got killed last night . . . Where's KATE?" He stumbled into the kitchen, flinging the swinging door open and catching it when it bounced off the refrigerator. He had to crouch to get through the doorway with his fireman's bill cap on.

"Jack's . . . dead, Kate . . .," he said, trailing off, looking down at them sitting at the table. He leaned against the open door and took off

his bill cap slowly, holding it over his left breast and bowing his head slightly. "It is my duty to inform you . . .," he said, looking down at the floor.

"I said . . .," she held onto it, ". . . yes. . . ." She looked at Reilley, then up at Donald.

He was still looking down at the floor. Up to now, he had been working along at getting out his message without paying any attention to them at all, the way they were taking it. Like the main thing was for him to lay down this burden he was carrying around.

He was standing very erect, except for his head being bowed. For a long time he stood that way, then he rocked his head up slowly, pulling it back until he stood at attention, staring into the wall above their heads. "Jack's dead," he said—finishing it off, ". . . Kate. . . ."

His face was a handsome face, but there was a gone-away look in it. Like the face of a half-wit—or the face of a man who has been told he is going to die soon, but not right away. His eyelids were droopy, folding down over eyes so black they seemed to be all pupil—or no pupil at all, just plain, blank holes burned into his head. The skin had a painted-on kind of white color that looked like it had been a long time off in the dark, and would start to turn brown if it stayed out in the air too long. The color of an old woman's breast, with the same blue undertone from the veins just below the skin. Darker blue around the sockets of his eyes.

Across his left eyebrow and the bridge of his nose there was a scar, dead white against the blue-white of his face. The knife that had made it was in Donald's pocket—he kept it for a souvenir. The man it had belonged to was dead—which was something that still came up now and then around the firehouse barracks. Down there a real fair-fight killing was something that tended to have a very long conversational life. The Chief of Police had given the knife to Donald after the trial, when they were through using it for evidence.

"He was a good boy," Donald said, drawing himself up to attention to speak, and looking over their heads at the wall. "A good boy." The words came out one at the time, as if he had memorized them.

"Sit down and have some supper," said Reilley.

Donald looked at Kate, nodding his head down. "How's she . . . taking it?" he said.

"I know about it already," she said. "I'm all right." She looked up at him standing by the refrigerator. "You want something to eat?"

"Sit down," said Reilley.

"You don't have something to drink?" he said, not sitting down.

Kate looked up at him. "We're not holding a wake," she said.

"Yes," he said. He ran his tongue over his lips slowly. "A little of the hair of the hound . . .," he said. "A *drop* of something. . . ." His lips were pale, but clearly defined—thin. ". . . it certainly would," he said.

Kate got up and started to clear away the supper dishes. "I'll do the dishes," said Reilley. She didn't answer him, but took his plate, then started to run the water in the sink.

"You can have *something to eat*," she said, speaking to Donald. "I'm not going to put any more whiskey in you."

Donald was sitting very erect in the straight-backed kitchen chair. He ran his tongue over his lips again. ". . . a brew?" he said.

Kate turned to the sink and cut off the water. "I'll do the dishes," she said. "You two go in the living room."

Reilley looked up at her, then at Donald. Without getting up out of his chair, he reached over and opened the door of the refrigerator, taking out two cans of Millers Beer. "The churchkey's in the drawer," he said, pointing. "Give us a glass," he said to Kate.

She looked at Donald, then opened the cabinet. "One's all he gets," she said, putting the glasses on the table.

Donald tilted the can and the glass together, pouring the beer down the side, so it wouldn't have a head on it. He drank half of the glass of beer, then he put it on the table in front of him and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Reilley was salting his, shaking it out into his left hand, then taking it up in pinches between his right index finger and thumb. The grains made diving trails of bubbles in the glass, foaming the beer on top.

"It ruins the taste," said Donald, looking across the table at him.

Reilley looked up, then back at the glass. "I like to watch it," he said, taking another pinch and dropping it into the glass, fluttering his finger against his thumb. "It doesn't make that much difference in the taste."

"It makes it flat out," said Donald.

Reilley looked up at him. "I never noticed that it made any difference," he said.

They both watched the salt grains making strings of bubbles in the glass.

Donald was sitting at the table with one hand on his glass of beer, the other in his lap. "There wasn't a priest," he said after awhile. "He was dead when we dug him out. There wasn't time for a priest."

Kate stopped moving her hands in the sink. For a minute she stood there without saying anything. "They told me that," she said.



Donald twirled the glass in his hand, rotating it between his thumb and index finger. "Mother says he won't go to heaven," he said. He unfolded his eyelids, glancing up at her, then folded them down again and twirled the glass. "Jane says he's going to hell," he said. He paused. "Mother didn't say that," he said. "Jane was the one said he was going to hell."

Kate didn't say anything. Reilley looked up at her, then back across the table at Donald.

"They said you were hateful to God for what you did," he said. "Leaving Johnny and going in with Reilley." He took a drink of the beer, emptying the glass. "Mother said that too," he said.

Reilley looked across the table at him. Sitting down, they were more of a height. "Horseshit," he said. He said it as respectfully as he could, with the table between them. "They never even saw me."

"You know how they are," said Donald. "Just the two of them there in that big house." He poured the rest of the beer into the glass. "When a priest says 'shit,' they both got to stoop and groan."

"It's nothing to do with you, Reilley," said Kate. "It's me."

"It's the priests," said Donald. "Mother's old and Jane's ugly. Just right for the cocksuckers."

Reilley centered his glass on the placemat. "I wouldn't believe that Jack is going to hell," he said. He didn't look up at Kate. "I just wouldn't believe that."

"God does fearsome things . . .," she said. She had her back to them, looking out the window over the sink.

Donald drank down the rest of the beer. "They've got her by the short hairs too," he said, talking to Reilley. "They know how to work the women all right. They kicked her ass out of the church, but they still got hold of her goddamn soul." He looked up at her, then back at the table. "God didn't put him in Hull Street Tuesday night," he said, holding the empty beer can upended over the glass. "He took himself in there." He put down the beer can and held the glass up to his mouth, holding it high to get the last drops out of the bottom. "It was too tight. When the wall came down, there wasn't any place to go." He held up the can between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, then he squeezed and the can folded in on itself with a snapping sound. He put the can on the table. "There wasn't any place to go," he said again.

He looked at the can on the table. "Maybe *God* sent him in Hull Street," he said. "It wasn't no goddamn priest had anything to do with it."

Reilley shoved his can across to Donald, pulling the bent can over beside his glass.

"This weather's been getting me down," said Donald, pouring out of Reilley's can. "I feel like I've had my mouth full of a cat's tail, and my nose up his ass."

"It gets you down," said Reilley.

"We've been living in sin," said Kate, not looking at them. "I know that."

Reilley looked at Donald, then up at Kate. "Don't the love count for something?" he said.

"No," said Donald. "Let me tell you about that. They don't give a shit about love."

"You're not living in sin," she said. "I told you. *I'm* the one. You weren't married before."

Donald looked at Reilley. "Makes you want to kick ass, don't it?" he said. He snapped the second can and dropped it on the table.

"Don't the love mean something to God?" said Reilley. "I would think he ought to notice something like that." He paused. "How is it *you* can be living in sin, and *I'm* okay?" he asked.

"I know it," she said. "It's just how I feel. I can't do anything about that." She looked down at him sitting at the table. "I'm not talking about *us*," she said. "I love you too. I'm talking about God."

"You're talking about the goddamn priests," said Donald. "God wouldn't have nothing to do with it."

Kate didn't say anything.

Donald looked up at her. "Jack told Father Whelan to kiss his ass once," he said. "I heard him do it."

Kate turned back to the sink and began washing the dishes again.

"All they know how to do is sit around jacking off and scaring the shit out of the women," he said. "I hate the bastards."

Kate didn't turn around. "You two go in the living room," she said. "I'm not going to argue about it."

Reilley and Donald sat down in the living room, and Reilley tried to talk to him, going on with the talk in the kitchen. But Donald started closing up. He was beginning to come down fast, and just sat there folding his drooping eyelids up and down in big, slow blinks. Licking his lips, with both arms stretched out along the arms of the chair, holding on.

The sound of Kate sloshing the water in the sink came in from the kitchen.

Later they got him into the bedroom and onto the bed. Reilley wrestled him out of his clothes as well as he could, having to do it without Kate's help. She would have undressed Donald by herself and

thought nothing of it, but the two of them doing it—being there together—she wouldn't do that. So she went back into the living room to straighten things up before they went to bed.

Donald lay stretched out on top of the spread, filling up the bed. Under his clothes he wore an old fashioned union suit, with sleeves, that buttoned down the front. It looked strange on him, childish. It didn't go with his size. Reilley looked back from the door before he turned out the light. While he was watching, Donald raised his arm and crossed himself, making the moves with a quick, precise motion. He was moving his lips, but Reilley couldn't hear what he was saying.

After the lights were out and they had gotten into the bed together, Kate came over to Reilley and he put his arm around her. She was so solid that he had to prop up his pillow and almost squat on top of it to squeeze her in under his arm, but he liked holding her that way with the lights out in the room. Their bodies stretched out side by side under the covers of the bed, and he could feel her knee and the shank of her leg against his foot.

"Don't let go again," he said. "I couldn't stand it this morning."

"No," she said. "I'm all right now."

He reached out to the table beside the bed and turned on the radio. *The Bells of Saint Mary's* came up slowly as the tubes were getting warm.

"You were leaving me out," he said. She wasn't moving under his arm, and he couldn't see how she looked in the dark. "I thought a lot of Jack," he said.

*The Bells of Saint Mary's* ended and *An Irish Lullaby* came on.

"I wasn't leaving you out," she said. "I was going to pieces."

"I know," he said. "I know you did. I *felt* like you were leaving me out."

For awhile she didn't say anything. "There wasn't a priest," she said.

"It was too quick," he said. "It'll be all right."

"I can't help how I *feel* about it, Reilley," she said.

"I didn't know you still felt that way," he said. "I feel like we're good Catholics."

She didn't say anything. "I can't even open the casket," she said.

He moved away from her a little. "You're not going to open the casket are you?" he said.

"They won't let me do it," she said.

"You wouldn't *want* to do it," he said. "I'm sorry." Then he added. "You wouldn't *want* to do it . . . It's not the church that won't let you open it. . . ."

For a long time she didn't say anything.

"I can't even pray for him," she said.

"You can pray for him," he said. "What do you mean?"

"I can't *pray* for him," she said.

For awhile he didn't say anything.

"I'll pray for him for you," he said.

*An Irish Lullaby* ended, and there was a commercial for Pepsi-Cola. Then *Danny Boy* came on.

"Did you kill the spider?" she said.

"I ran the hot water in the tub," he said.

For awhile they didn't say anything. "You'd better get some sleep," he said. "Tomorrow's going to be another bad day." He reached over and turned off the radio. In the dark they could hear Donald snoring in the other bedroom.

Suddenly Reilley sat up in bed. "He didn't break anything," he said.

"What . . . what . . . ?" Kate didn't sound sleepy.

"Donald didn't break anything," he said.

She laid back down. "Wait 'til tomorrow," she said.

After they had gotten quiet again, a big insect flew against the screen of the bedroom window. Until he went to sleep, Reilley could hear it beating its wings against the screen.

Kate was listening to it too. It sounded as big as a bird. "God made fearful things," she said.

## ON THE GULF

JOYCE CAROL OATES

When she woke, groggily, she might have been anywhere. In a motel room, anywhere. She knew it was a motel room because of the size of the bed—king-sized, enormous. She was alone in the bed. She found it very hard to wake up. She was trying to shout at herself, a tiny shouting angry voice, something about the Gulf of Mexico and those scarlet blossoms she'd seen and the sandpipers, yes, dear God, and pelicans and gulls and robins and a white clear clean glowing glaring sun just like the sand, earth and sky and earth white-glowing, so beautiful you would want to step into it arms outstretched, if only you can get out of bed, you lazy bitch.

Later, she discovered a gas jet on—the left rear burner of the stove. She had rented a motel room with an 'efficiency kitchen.' She had heated some water the evening before, fairly early in the evening, and she'd gone to bed early, exhausted from the long day, to bed early, sanely, at eleven o'clock, and all night the gas had seeped into the room faintly and not aggressively and not lethally. That was why she had slept so late!

She felt relieved, to know she wasn't naturally lazy.

*I'm not a bitch after all*, she thought.

*Aren't you a bitch?* she thought, when she saw the Gulf. *Shouldn't you be punished?* But the palm trees and the wide white beach were harmless. The flowering tree with its nameless scarlet blossoms: enough to sear one's eyes. The wind from the west came in constantly, constantly across the Gulf—high in the trees, the palm trees and the pine trees both, rattling and mysterious, a sound that reminded her of her girlhood: wind blowing through the elms outside her bedroom, constantly, so wildly in bad weather that she had had nightmares. Weren't such noises, heard throughout life, from a language people didn't know?—Finally her father had had part of the elm removed, the diseased part; the city had done it for him, for a minimal fee. He had resisted for some time, until a neighbor got an injunction against him. After that she had nightmares occasionally, but not because of the tree.

*A bad dream is punishment enough*, she told herself sanely. There was a certain luxury to all this—the faces of the other guests, the tanned arms and legs, the expensive bathing suits and beach equipment and

the bare feet in January—yes, a luxury, and luxuriously she thought that the gas jet had been enough for one day.

*You have such a strange sense of humor*, someone told her.

—Walking stiff-legged, like a convalescent.

Walking this way she had the shadow of an old woman: good. If it fell across a man's path he might not notice. Might draw back, shivering in the hot expensive white sun. *Good. There might be bleeding, why not? —a little blood never hurt a woman.* She had laughed hard, to show that she had a sense of humor. It was one thing to make jokes—everyone she knew made jokes, even Judge Hartley—for some reason she was thinking about him—had dreamt of him?—but quite another thing to appreciate the jokes of others, to actually listen, patiently, without interrupting or yawning, and then to laugh at the required time. That was *courtesy; the basis of social life; the basis of civilization.*

What about Judge Hartley?

She hadn't been a fifteen-year-old runaway, detained in the House of Correction, until her mother got there from Cincinnati to insist that the abortion go through—the girl had run away from it, back in Cincinnati. She was a minor. She didn't know her own mind. Judge Hartley, the youngest judge in the county, might have sent a Legal Aid man to the girl, since she didn't want the abortion; but it wasn't his case, he hadn't better get involved, he'd be standing for election a year from this November. . . . He had not gotten involved.

But she wasn't a fifteen-year-old runaway, she had not been fifteen years old for a long time. No, wait. *You have such a strange sense of humor*, someone told her *uneasily*, sitting beside her on the plane. He had been very courteous: had offered her the window-seat. No thank you, really. No. No thank you. Well, all right. Thank you. *I don't want to resist as long as we're fully clothed.* Somehow, he had misunderstood. He was a youngish man to be retired—unless the white-gray-yellowish hair confused her and she had supposed it was blond—his suit was casual, sporty, like the clothes her husband forced himself to wear at the office and at court. She studied his hands, covertly. No, they didn't look old. They looked like hands that might reasonably grab and paw and tear, if you resisted, but here thousands of feet above America, with that constant hum and vibration and sense of *maybe it will crash, we'll all die together!*—why, nothing would happen, not that. He asked her where she was going and she said, without pausing to lie, *Aurora Key.* A heroine in a story or in a television play might have hesitated, thinking that someone was listening, a friend of her husband's, a spy, or that this man—a gentlemanly stranger who appreciated her sense of humor



though he didn't really laugh very much—would somehow telephone back to Cleveland and tell them *Aurora Key*. She forgot to hesitate, and spoke as naturally as if she were lying.

The runaway's name was Barbara. Her own name was something different.

The second day there, she felt stronger. She dressed like everyone else and put on sunglasses and walked out, waiting for a seepage of blood, almost listening for it. What a queer sensation, like a trickling of a stream somewhere in the mountains, in the distance!—which you must hear before you can feel! The sky was clear, exactly like the over-exposed blue sky in the advertisement back home, in the travel agent's at the shopping plaza. She had stepped into the poster and stepped out here, proof of magic . . . except, as she walked, she saw how filmy clouds gray and thick at the core were gathering, converging, now that she could not change her mind and cross out the check and her name and rip it in two, stammering that she'd made a mistake, another mistake. Still, she kept the sunglasses on. They had white plastic frames and made her skin look healthier, by contrast; in a day or two she would be tanned like everyone else, like the pretty grinning girls in the travel posters. She would be transformed into an advertisement for *Aurora Key*. Someone might take her picture, on a whim; and, years later, many years later, someone back home would discover it. *Isn't this. . . ? No. It looks just like. . . No.*

Everyone was out walking, in spite of the gathering clouds. There was a defiance to the human world, down here, a refusal to see the future shaping up. It was just after New Year's; a tremendous effort, to get the old year past!—and the new year, the expanse of an entire year, was too much to consider. It verged upon the absurd, the limits of what a human imagination could bear . . . so the men wore white trousers or shorts, and handsome sports shirts, though they looked a little awkward, pale from winter in the North, now strolling along a beach somewhere and wondering what they were doing. On the beach, they walked with their heads bowed, against the wind. It kept coming. Not many wives there, on the beach, they were strolling through the town . . . yes, now everyone was strolling through the town, relieved to get out of the wind, grateful for the boulevard of shops. There were three arcades she counted, and one palm tree-lined courtyard, boutiques all around it. Women with wind-blown hair studied wigs in the show-windows. The wigs were set firmly on stylized heads, pastel colors, with no more than a hint of eyes, nose or mouth, and stumps for necks. Beneath the wigs, these heads were nicely bald: there would be no problem about the scalp.

A secret from him, from everyone: tiny white flakes from her head, sometimes, when she scratched it. And then beneath her fingernails. She remembered staring at her fingernails once, at the horrible white grit beneath them . . . thinking *Am I like this, after all? Am I so human?* . . . while forty miles away her husband was asking her precise, urgent questions, across the tangled expressways of a city and outlying townships, their entire marriage reduced to a man's voice over a telephone and a woman staring at her fingernails, distracted, not remembering why she had telephoned home or why she had thought anything so important. . . . "I don't want to go through with it after all," she said, then she said, "No, I just called to talk to you . . . or to someone . . . I don't know why I called, I'm sorry." She heard him speaking at the other end. When he paused and it seemed she must reply, she said, "I'll hang up now, I'm sorry," and she did hang up, and she was sorry.

At the very center of Aurora Key was a circular park. Eight streets led to it and then around it, one-way traffic, moving cautiously and awkwardly, because most of the drivers were from out-of-state; it was difficult to drive anywhere in Aurora Key because of so many pedestrians and drivers backing their cars into parking places. Yet few people used their horns: it must have been the holiday look of the place, the great court palms everywhere, the enormous pink-and-scarlet blossoms, the bushes with white and yellow flowers. They had paid for this, they had paid to come here. There was a value here almost spiritual—because they had paid for it; they could believe in it. Up North, in their own cities, nothing was valuable in the public world, one might drive faster, sound his horn more frequently. Here, an oasis of expense and beauty and sun, not to be violated.

No one stayed here for longer than a week or two.

She would not stay longer than that; but she had nowhere else to go. She couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Walking out on the second day she seemed almost to know the entire town—it was very small—and the only thing that interested her in the town was the park, which no one else bothered with. It was difficult to get over there, because of the continuous traffic. A station wagon packed with a family from Ohio nearly ran her down—but she got across, running awkwardly, like an old woman. *Don't hurt me, don't hurt me again*, but she was safe in the park and no one would hurt her.

No one else was here. The park was quite small and, she could see, really served as a kind of traffic device. Around it, ceaselessly, cars moved in a slow counter-clockwise blur, no more than ten miles an hour; Aurora Key was crowded at this time of year. *Where will you go, if you leave*

him? her mother's voice had asked her, calmly. Not her mother: only her mother's voice. Sandra had lost touch with her mother. They telephoned back and forth, Shaker Heights to Chicago, Chicago to Shaker Heights, her mother's throaty sweet-gruff voice and Sandra's sixteen-year-old voice, which she had never dared outgrow, and asked each other various questions, waited for various answers, but Sandra had had no answer to that particular question. At the time, only a week or ten days before, she had not even heard of Aurora Key.

Her parents had often gone to Miami Beach or Bermuda or the Barbados, since for some reason the western coast of Florida had not been popular. Sandra was not sure where she was: the travel agent had showed her a map, running his finger along the coast, a manicured forefinger that moved in rhythm with his enthusiastic voice. He recommended Aurora Key. He said it was lovely. He said it was not crowded, like Miami Beach; and there was a good class of people there, not like Key West—which was all right in its own way, picturesque, of course, but populated with fishermen and unemployed blacks and, he'd heard, with drifting aimless living-off-the-land young people as well, who took drugs and might be dangerous. Sandra had smiled to show she was listening and that she was not disturbed by his intonation, *young people*, as if he were referring to a class of human beings she might know nothing about.

. . . the morning after the day of the operation, she had looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and had to admit that it wasn't a young face, really. But that was encouraging. Her husband had married her for her face, so now he might have no objection to letting her go.

Evidently there had been a storm the day before. There were puddles everywhere in the park, small shallow ponds that had not yet drained away. Sandra noticed birds bathing in them. Robins, were they? Robins. Now she noticed them in the palm trees, and descending from the sky . . . and, in the puddles, shaking and ruffling their feathers. She forgot about the motel room, which she hated, and the gas jet, and someone shouting at her—*Leave, then! Leave!*—and stared at the birds. There were no benches in the park so she couldn't sit down. Probably the Chamber of Commerce in the town did not want to encourage young people to gather in the park . . . so she stood beside one of the enormous trees, watching the birds, and trying to fix her mind onto thoughts that made sense. She was not like the runaway girl, captured by police and brought home again, a minor, to be ordered about by other people; she had acted of her own free will, it had been her decision, ultimately. So she had had the operation. But: it was fascinating, the way the birds bathed themselves, then flew up into the trees, while others descended,

reeling, in a commotion of wings. Sandra was not hiding behind a palm tree, just standing beside it. There was no need to hide. No one in Aurora Key knew her; but it was a good idea to be unobtrusive just the same.

Her mind slipped away from the birds, and away from Aurora Key. She forced herself to remember the map of Florida: the man's forefinger, caressing the seacoast. Miles and miles of clean white sand. The Gulf of Mexico. Privacy. Luxury. . . . The palm trees were very tall. They seemed to her unnaturally tall, for trees. They resembled concrete poles, except for their great, brittle leaves, which made a dry rustling noise. She stared up at them until her neck ached. She did not know if she liked them or feared them. What relationship could anyone have, to trees? . . . to birds? . . . to his own body? It was nature, unknowable. It could not be possessed. Yet there was the compulsion to analyze, to weigh, to compare, to wonder, to judge . . . in the end it came to nothing, it did not matter. The robins continued to bathe, noisily, and the leaves of trees rustled in the wind, forever. These particular trees looked so peculiar to her because they were not multi-branched, like the trees of the North, but columnar, and smooth as human skin, tall, uniform, trees of sleep, of nightmare, which one might grasp at helplessly. . . .

Long before her marriage she had had a vague, unarticulated fear of confusing night-thoughts with day-thoughts. Dreams expanding into daylight. Private thoughts, public utterances. Her husband had consoled her, one night when they came home late from a party, both rather drunk, but cheerfully and amiably drunk: everyone was afraid of that sort of thing, he said, and so what the hell did it matter?

A dread shared by the entire species cannot matter: it is no more than nature, in the mind.

Leaving the park she was almost hit by someone driving a white Mercedes-Benz. A gray-haired old man, or perhaps an old woman. The driver tapped his horn, a series of short light scolding honks. *Look what you nearly made me do, nearly made me run you over!*

In disguise as a young woman who might look like a tourist, in white cotton-and-rayon slacks and a lime-green jersey blouse, in white-rimmed sunglasses, her leather sandals scuffing on the sidewalk, she made her way through the stream of pedestrians, back toward the Seacliff Inn. She took a wrong turn, wandered a few blocks out of her way, noticed that the Gulf was in another direction, and went that way, walking quickly . . . costumed for the role of a young woman like herself, exactly like herself. She had long, thick, rather ostentatious black hair, which her mother had always prized and envied—her mother's hair was ordinary,

in spite of all the rinses and dyes—and she had coiled it around her head in two braids, so that she would not resemble her Northern self. No one was following her, no one was hunting her; she knew that. Deirdre Ferris, the wife of a Cleveland manufacturer, only a few years older than Sandra, had left her husband and flown to a private club in Southern California, but her husband had had her traced . . . detectives, an international detective agency, the real thing, the hilarious deathly melodramatic routine itself! . . . but Sandra was reasonably sure that no one was following her. Unless her husband borrowed money from his father. Unless he was so angry that he wanted her back, in order to shout at her. Unless he had talked to her mother in person, not over the telephone, and had forced her to tell the truth. . . .

Sandra doubted it. Her husband was too proud. He wouldn't want anyone to know that his wife had left him, and if he stayed away from the house—if he took a room in a downtown hotel, near his office—in a short while he might forget she had gone. Then, when her money ran out and she called him, it would be a pleasant surprise; he could forgive her, welcome her back, arrange for a seat on a plane. . . . Sandra had gotten the idea for the braids from one of the Spanish-speaking maids at the motel. But she hadn't the woman's bright, confidential vitality. The braids made her head ache.

No one appeared to notice her, on the street. But she couldn't be sure.

What day was this?

. . . the sky had changed, while she stared at it. She wanted to get back to the room to change her clothes; she was afraid of soiling the white slacks. Why had she worn white. . . ? Walking in the direction of the Gulf she seemed to step in and out of pockets of air, chilly gusty wintry air, not promised by the travel agent, and overhead ridges of dark clouds appeared. Other tourists were hurrying. Women who had come out unwisely dressed—in sleeveless or short-sleeved dresses—were hugging themselves. It was January, after all. Wasn't it January? Winter? But on the broad sidewalks men were ringing bells. They wore vests of red and green, and cardboard hats that spoke of "Holidays for the Handicapped of Aurora Co.," so Sandra wasn't sure if Christmas had come and gone, and when a burly suntanned man blocked her way and rang a bell in her face, she laughed and fished in her purse for some money, yes, just a minute, yes yes, a quarter? . . . not enough? . . . a fifty-cent piece? . . . She gave him a dollar. He thanked her warmly. In exchange she received a crepe-paper flower of some kind, perhaps a rose, to stick through her buttonhole.



"Not alone, are you?" the man asked.

"Why do you say that?" Sandra laughed.

"I saw you yesterday, didn't I? Alone?"

"Not me," Sandra said. "My husband is at the motel."

She laughed and walked away. At the Seacliff Inn her husband would be waiting, perhaps having a drink in the cocktail lounge . . . distracted and oddly, prematurely tired, like the other men down here, removed too abruptly from winter in the North. She would glance in the darkened lounge, locate him, and go to him. . . . He would inquire about the flower. She would laugh. With both hands she would clutch at the heavy aching braids around her head.

The expensive boutiques, the antique and silver jewelry shops, the art galleries . . . the leather shops . . . the small, smart Hallmark Card shop . . . the French restaurant, the Spanish restaurant. . . . All these reminded her of something she had been forgetting: something about money. She had taken several hundred dollars from the checking account, but had left quite a bit in, out of fear; not consideration for Anthony, not even out of caution, but simply out of fear. Money. Everyone required money. After a while, without money, you couldn't even shampoo your hair . . . and an ugly rank animal smell would take over your body. Sandra shied away from thinking of it, because it meant that they would win, in the North; she would be defeated. And the clots of blood, the huge endless sticky bloodclot, would have been for nothing, just nature, just protein-and-water, draining out of one body and into something else, to be flushed away. . . . She found herself staring in a shop window. She was staring through tinsel-and-cotton-batting snowflakes, at dresses with long skirts and sequined tops. What did it cost, what had it always cost, this kind of wealth? Fake-lovely stylized faces, mannequins with high-piled hair that consisted of dozens of tiny, glinting silver ornaments, white plaster faces partly hidden by black velvet masks . . . in all this, Sandra's own floating reflection, the sunglasses showing mute exaggerated astonishment. Her body seemed to fade away, below the neck, lost in an elegant clutter of silver and gold jewelry arranged on a kind of Christmas tree, a skeletal tree-shape. . . and someone's familiar voice sounded near her, in a familiar mock-whining drawl, "Why are you walking so fast?" Sandra glanced around and saw a couple she knew—the man a friend of Anthony's, the woman only a peripheral acquaintance of Sandra's. They were passing behind her, arguing. The man was in his early forties, self-conscious in his new sportclothes and sandals, the woman aggressively stylish in a pink-and-white pants outfit. Sandra felt faint, with dread of their noticing her. Yet she could not turn away. The man was an older



partner in her husband's law firm; her husband was not yet a partner. The man did glance at Sandra, but seemed not to see her. His wife reached out to tug his bare arm. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

She had not been recognized.

It was the last time she would come so close to being captured, she thought. Another last time had been during her stop-over in Dallas, sitting on the edge of a bed in a Holiday Inn near the airport, trying to do something about her fingernails. They were all broken, cracked. It was mysterious but she would not bother about the mystery. Where all the people had been going on the plane with her, the plane from Cleveland, the man with the gray-blond hair and the courteous manner that had not alarmed her, all that was mysterious too but she would not bother about it. Someone had told her once—her mother, perhaps—that you asked questions until the age of thirty, thirty-three, and after that you never asked questions. She might have asked the doctor about the broken fingernails and her dried-out scalp but she had forgotten. On an impulse she took off her shoes and stockings and inspected her toenails, but they were cut so short, she couldn't tell if they might be cracked or not. She felt dizzy, looking at them for the last time. How perfect the body was, with all its near-invisible blemishes and scars and creases, a perfectly-kept secret . . . a complicated substance that could be released and drained away, into nothing. A galaxy. A universe.

She had forgotten the couple's last name. Hurrying back to the Seaciff Inn she forgot about having seen them. She would have forgotten the name of the motel itself, except for the key, which she had in her purse; she took it out to examine it. Seaciff Inn. But it puzzled her—there was no cliff, only the beach. Crossing a vacant, partly-wooded lot to the motel, she paused beside a cactus plant that had grown enormous, and someone said to her: "Are you lost?"

A man was approaching her on the path.

"You're not lost, are you?" he said, smiling. He was very friendly.

"I'm not lost," Sandra said.

He saw the key, the maroon oval disc it was attached to; he said, "We're in the same motel."

"I'm not lost, I was just going there," Sandra said.

The man seemed to be waiting for her. He was not very tall—only an inch or so taller than Sandra, and she was wearing sandals. He might have been thirty-five years old. But when she looked at him again she saw the deep indentations in his face, which meant that he was smiling and thinking at the same time, and it seemed to her he might have been fifty years old. His hair was as black as hers—so thick, so glossy! Perhaps

it was dyed hair. She could not understand why he waited there, a few feet away.

"Are you going back to the motel?" he said finally.

"No," Sandra said. "No, don't wait for me, no, I'm all right."

His smile slackened. He wore a red-and-white striped shirt, the stripes vertical, too bright. His trousers were made of a coarse, oatmeal-colored fabric, with a wide pale leather belt that fitted them perfectly: he wore sandals and white socks. Sandra felt the slow sickening rush of blood into her face. She wanted him to go away, she could not bear to walk with him, or with anyone. But he was waiting for her, politely, bullishly. He could see the craziness in her face.

"Look what you're stepping on," he said.

"What?" she cried.

She looked down—the path was made of tiny white shells, ground fine, scintillating in the dull light, almost glowing, with their own reflected light. From somewhere, the sun had emerged again; a white, chilly illumination spread up from the earth.

"A million little animals," the man laughed.

Sandra tried to laugh.

"They don't mind, though," he said. "They consider it an honor."

"I didn't hear you, exactly," Sandra said. "I've been taking some prescription pills and they make me miss connections, parts of sentences. I have to leave now. I can walk by myself."

"You walk in a strange way, I was watching you," the man said. "Sort of stiffly . . . isn't it? I was watching you, back on the boulevard."

She could hear a foreign accent in his voice, but could not place it.

"Are you following me?" she asked lightly.

"Oh no," he said. "Never."

"Have you been hired to follow me?"

". . . been what?"

"Hired."

"Hired?"

And he stared at her so openly, with so perplexed an expression, that she knew he must be a stranger.

"Don't follow me," Sandra said. She began to cry. "I don't want to go back home. I can't go back home. Just don't follow me . . . let me alone."

"How come you are crying?" the man asked.

"Because I'm not going back home," she said.

In her motel room she took another of the pain-killer pills, a big yellow citrus-flavored pill, because of the trembling and a vague knotty

pain in her loins. So much had been sucked out of her, vacuum-sucked, she knew it would be too difficult to keep the rest of it from being drawn out as well; *this is the last time*, she promised herself, *the last pill*.

She was awakened by a knock on the door.

A timid knock, yet with a certain stubborn force behind it.

She lay motionless, atop the unmade bed, listening, not frightened so much as numb, at peace, as if she were only a dead body and not responsible for opening her door to anyone.

*I don't have to let anyone crawl in with me, in any bed at all*, she thought.

The gas jet had not been left on. So she woke to a regular morning, a regular day, sunny as advertised. She dressed quickly, excitedly. People had been complaining about the weather—a hurricane fifty miles south of Aurora Key, in Naples—wind that tore at your hair—so it was important to get up and dressed, to take advantage of the expensive sunshine.

Wisely, she did not wear white—she had another attractive outfit, blue slacks and a yellow smock-like blouse, which might make people think she was pregnant if the wind got into it and belled it out, so they would let her alone. She did want to be let alone; it was not the way Anthony believed—*you draw away, but you really want me to pursue you; you had this neurotic fear of becoming pregnant, yet you became pregnant*—Her error had been in marrying too intelligent a man. He listened to her, but he retained his own private thoughts. He loved her, so he said, discounting her as she cried or shouted or laughed, but fixing his attention upon a ghostly transparent woman who inhabited her body, giving its true value to that body: Sandra Voorhees, its name was.

She had registered here as Sandra O'Connell, taking the name from a girl she had admired in school, many years ago.

Her eagerness to get out onto the beach gave her hope: it was encouraging, since a few mornings ago she had hardly been able to get up. So she hurried out, blinking into the white sunshine, afraid that some new sensation would take hold of her and slow her down, beginning with her legs and working upward. But momentum helped her. She maneuvered herself along the broad flagstone paths, beneath the towering palm trees—or perhaps they were poles made of concrete, the sunshine was so bright she couldn't be sure—around the beds of gaily-colored flowers and the chemical-blue pool, where children screamed and shouted, and she found herself in a kind of dead-end—a ramp at the rear of the building, where a laundry truck was parked. Black men were heaving immense white bundles and when they happened to notice her, she felt herself

go blank, stammering blank. She walked away. She steeled herself to go through the motel itself, through the main corridor and the foyer, where boys in red uniforms were pushing carts of luggage merrily around, and new arrivals were walking slowly and smiling and a man with a New York accent was saying something about the congestion in the air, the sky was filled with airplanes and nowhere to land, but he was no one Sandra dreaded. The coffee shop made her realize that she had forgotten to eat again. The reason for renting an efficiency room, with its own little kitchen, was to save money; to keep to herself, to be private. But she kept forgetting to buy food. Through a glass partition she saw a pale, annoyed young father lifting a sandwich to his mouth—seated at a table with two squirming children and a woman whose back was to Sandra—and she could almost taste the meat, a hamburger juicy-red on the inside and slightly burnt on the outside, though she must have imagined the man's trembling hands—her trembling, not his. Did people eat because they were hungry, or was it habit?—duty? Protein dutifully turned itself into protein, and got up and walked out onto the beach, in plenty of time to enjoy the sunshine.

Yes, it was sunny. It was a beautiful day. The wind had died down—that disappointed her, for some reason. She seemed to recall a storm somewhere. A plane bound for Atlanta had been forced to fly all the way to Dallas—was that the storm she remembered? No, it must have been another, a more recent storm. Today was a clear, bright, slightly chilly day, though a few people were swimming or wading in the surf. Sandra shuddered, seeing them. Several boys and girls in their late teens or early twenties were strolling along, barefoot in the surf, eating Danish pastry provided by the motel—they wore jeans cut off at the knees, and grey sweatshirts with a university's insignia on them. Complaining about something. Bombing raids, was that the subject again? “. . . Zap, you're annihilated,” one of the boys laughed thickly, snapping his fingers, and he happened to notice Sandra; there was a moment of acute embarrassment. Sandra hobbled by. She hoped they would take pity on her. But no, no pity, a girl's giggle and a boy's muttered words were mixed in with the surf, and she didn't look back at them but thought of how lovely it would be, annihilation, deafness and muteness and immobility given a permanent sanction, almost a divinity.

She shaded her eyes and looked up, at the terraces of the motels that faced the Gulf, and thought, panicked, that she had been walking in the wrong direction. Ten minutes wasted. She was walking toward the more congested area, where the big multi-floored Holiday Inn and Ramada Inn and Travel Lodge were located, and what she wanted was isolation—

She paused, not knowing what to do. An aching sensation in the pit of her stomach should have drawn more of her attention, but the outside world was so lively here, so many children running around, so many warmly-dressed older people strolling through the sand, arms linked together, why some other stretch of the beach, why not this stretch? Why one place and not another? Why one body and not another? She happened to notice a girl she'd seen the other day, on the sidewalk in front of an ice cream parlor, and now the girl was lying in a two-piece bathing suit, deeply and elegantly tanned, frowning into a paperback novel. Except now she was not alone: beside her sat a large-boned, fleshy young man with a rather peevisish expression, a handsome boy, his eyes moving around restlessly. They even moved onto Sandra, then past her; then back onto her, then past her again, rejecting her. She was a few years too old for him, after all. Also too pale, haggard, peaked-looking; he could probably sense the hysteria. He wouldn't like that sort of behavior. Sandra felt a keen rush of sympathy for the girl, who was pretty, yes, but not pretty enough to keep him.

He seemed to inspire her, releasing her from something—what was it, what had it been? The indifferent movement of his gaze, onto her, up and down her slender body, and then away from her—yes, that was a gift, that kind of indifference. She walked along through rough patches of sunlight that moved with her, but in jagged, unrhythmic plunges, occasionally interrupted by other people's shadows, and she could not even remember why she felt so encouraged, so free. By now she had walked a mile or more from her motel. She was leaving the motel area. Along this stretch of beach there were fewer people—a public parking lot, where campers and trailers and Volkswagen buses were parked—and the palm trees and wild cactus looked shaggier, unkempt. A trash can filled with refuse had tipped over; beer cans spilled onto the sand. Dogs were running freely. The waves were thunderous, the air was not hospitable, children ran shouting through the surf and one of them nearly collided with Sandra, not noticing her, and avoiding her at the last moment but still not seeming to notice her, as if his vision simply excluded her, with so much else to see. An immense woman in overalls prowled hunched-over, carrying a child's sand-pail, looking for something in the sand—shells, crabs?—and a fat, soft, pale boy yelled for her to notice what he had found—*Hey Ma! Ma!*—holding a dilapidated starfish between two fingers. Then he dropped it in a patch of seaweed.

Fewer people here. The waves were louder. Spray was blown against her face. Clouds were thickening again but she could walk forever. How good it was, how healthy, to exercise her legs!—to feel her heartbeat

working to keep pace with her! She would show it, her body. She would determine what it would and would not do. She shivered with the cold, but it was good, good to shiver, good to walk so freely out along the beach, now that the coastline was so wild—all pines and scrubby, twisted little trees, no more palms. Her legs were a little weak, the backs of the knees oddly weak, so she sat down suddenly. Wet sand. Quite cold. Everywhere around her sand mixed with tiny white shells. *Look what you're sitting on!* someone had joked. She could not remember the correct reply. She had noticed up ahead a kind of cove, rocky and noisy and wild, and it occurred to her that a person in good health could swim from this side to the other; that was a challenge. But she felt sleepy, perhaps from the pill, or from the ceaseless wind. It seemed to be blowing right into her head. It did no good to duck her head, or to turn aside . . . the wind blew into her head anyway, curling and darting around her.

. . . no one knew where she was.

A two-passenger plane passed overhead, probably from the airport at Naples. Droning engine. Then the waves again, the surf, the wind. She noticed a half-dozen birds—sandpipers?—scurrying along the edge of the beach, their absurd little legs carrying them so quickly, and in perfect rhythm—it struck her, uncomfortably, that the birds knew one another's thoughts, they never hesitated, but moved together as if an invisible film or envelope joined them. How could it be?—not six or eight separate birds, but one thing, one creature, magical and autonomous and unflinching.

The thought alarmed her. She got to her feet. The last time she had tried to swim any distance had been years ago . . . years ago . . . in high school, so many years ago. She was now twenty-nine years old. Swimming, gasping, kicking, arm-over-arm, the sharp smell and taste of the chlorinated water, the amplified shouts and laughter, all that made her feel rocky, too old, too exposed. There had been a connective tissue back there, perhaps, even there—and in her family, certainly—like the sandpipers she hadn't been alone, but she had not known it, and in that way she had been alone, deceived.

She stumbled down through the rocks, toward the cove.

"Are you lost?" someone cried.

She looked around: the man who had spoken to her the other day, the dark-haired man with the accent. He was dressed for the beach today, in sporty plaid shorts and a pull-over shirt of white terry-cloth; jammed onto his head was a white hat that gave him a nautical look. He scrambled down the incline to her. She had an impression of hairy calves and thighs, hairs black and thick and wiry. She stared at him. Her feet were



wet from the surf and she had sunk a fraction of an inch into the wet sand so it was explicable, that he should seem so much taller than he had the day before. He was saying something about the undertow here, riptides, rocks, and his accent was softer—he might have been a southerner. But the noise from the Gulf confused them both.

"There's nobody around here," he said. "Are you lost?"

"I was alone," she said.

"I saw you climb down here, the way you moved, I thought it was an older woman," the man said, talking loudly into the wind, "I thought maybe . . . maybe you'd need help getting back up. Are you from one of the hotels?"

He was very tanned and watchful.

"You know where I'm from," Sandra said.

"What? I can't hear you."

"You know," Sandra said bitterly.

. . . *You dreaded getting pregnant and yet you wanted it; you wanted the abortion too, the experience of it. And so you had it. And then you wanted the experience of regretting it. . . .* But she had screamed for him to shut up. She had screamed, screamed.

"I'll wait up here just to watch you," the man grinned. "I'm not going to let you alone for five minutes. . . . You know what?"

Sandra cupped her ear. "What?"

"I give myself credit for saving a girl's life, a few months ago," he said. He leaned toward Sandra. His hair stuck out in thick, dark tufts, around the bottom of the hat; his eyes were a pale gray-green, bulging mildly, as if he had something to tell her she must not refuse. She stared at him, not knowing what they were talking about. "Hitch-hiking on the road through the Everglades, a girl from Florida State, a college girl, and I stopped to give her a ride . . . and the next day's paper had headlines about some guy cruising around looking for girls, girls alone hitch-hiking and helpless, that he would drag back into a field and mutilate. . . . So I saved her from that, maybe. Have you been reading the papers?"

Sandra could not follow all this. She noticed the man's mouth—unusually dark, grape-colored lips, something bruised and gentle and attractive about them. When he smiled his face creased in several places; he must have been in his mid-thirties, though his manner was paternal, declarative. Sandra told him that she was fine; she was on her way back to the motel now.

"Which direction is the town, do you remember?" he asked shrewdly.

"I can find my way back," Sandra said. "I'm not bleeding now."

He couldn't hear her well, because of the waves. He smiled uncertainly. He said that his camper was parked in some trees by the road—would she like a ride back to Aurora Key?—that was the name of this town, wasn't it? These little resort towns in the keys and along the coast were all so new, he said, new since World War II, some of them only two or three years old—it was hard to keep them straight—but she looked a little shaky, so maybe he should drive her back. "It's only a five-minute walk," Sandra said. But he told her no, no, it was longer than that; she was nearly two miles from town. Sandra hesitated. His easy, amiable drawl and his slightly protruding eyes were too real to have been invented. He told her that he was on his way back to Key West, from Tampa, that he'd been up there on business and was anxious now to get home.

He helped her up the incline. She discovered that she was quite weak.

"You like to walk so far from town, alone?" he asked.

"Things happen when you're alone that never happen any other way," Sandra said.

He said something about hurricane warnings along the west coast of the state, but what the hell?—you had to take chances. Sandra agreed. They walked with difficulty through the sand, toward the groves of trees where his camper was parked. Farther down the beach, a man was jogging; a few boys were running in the surf. The sun had disappeared but the entire sky, the layers of cloud, were now glowing a pale lemon-white. He asked her again if she was alone and what she was doing, and she considered telling him about her mother . . . a story she had never told anyone, not even her husband: how, at the age of forty-eight, her mother had discovered a small hard lump in one of her breasts, had imagined it was cancer and that she hadn't long to live . . . and in a rush of joy had made plans to . . . had made plans . . . had hoped to . . . had wanted at last to . . . How fiercely happy that woman had been, imagining herself doomed, and free! . . . but finally she turned herself in, she had the biopsy, was declared fortunate, *one of the fortunate* . . . and so she had been returned to her life again, to exactly her old life, unchanged. Gradually she forgot it all. Even the operation. All that remained was the sad disfigured left-hand side of her body, which Sandra had actually seen, once. . . . All the rest of it was forgotten, especially the fierce joy of those days of freedom. Believing herself doomed she had known what freedom was. Then she had forgotten it. Sandra remembered, however.

Or would she forget, too? Was that nature, such forgetfulness?

"I've always wanted to go to Key West," Sandra said. This was a lie, but she spoke with such enthusiasm that it sounded like the truth. She repeated the words: they were transformed into the truth. "It's the farthest tip of the continent, I mean the nation, isn't it, and I've always wanted to—it would be very kind of you— How far is it to Key West? It isn't very far, is it?"

"That depends upon what you mean by far," the man said.

He promised to wait for her while she checked out.

When she paid the bill her hands were trembling. "How far is it to Key West?" she asked the desk clerk.

A bluish-gray cloud of exhaust rose from the camper, idling out there in the motel parking lot. It was a medium-sized camper, painted white, though flecked with rust on the bumper and fenders; it looked incongruous, alongside the lower, sleeker, more expensive automobiles. When the man in the white hat saw Sandra struggling with her luggage, he jumped out of the cab to help her. "It's very nice of you," she said eagerly. "It's very kind of you. I can pay you, if you want—I mean I—I'd be happy to—"

"Don't talk about that," the man said, with an embarrassed laugh. Then he said, "We'll see about that, there's no hurry."

## REVIEWS

Joseph Blotner. *Faulkner, A Biography*. New York: Random House, 1974. Two volumes, 2115 pp. \$25.00.

Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner, A Biography* is a remarkable study of one of this century's most important and most private authors. Studded with previously unpublished photographs, the 2100 pages of this account are clearly and quietly written. Blotner's nearly unobtrusive prose style serves well to present the sometimes controversial life. The biographer's art lies in re-creating his subject. A prose that calls attention to itself at every turn would only defeat the purpose of good biography.

*Faulkner* is more than biography, however. Blotner includes critical comments about Faulkner's writing, and the sanity in his observations proves again that the more one knows about an author, the closer he can get to the work that man produces. Knowing Faulkner's life as intimately as he does, Blotner can see valuable connections that might escape the ordinary critic. His inclusion of literary remarks is a pleasant change from some modern biographers, whose tactic has been to ignore a man's writing as somehow extraneous to his living. Any writer would invalidate that approach: writers live to write. Separating their literature from their existence is impossible.

In Faulkner's case, such reciprocity was certainly the case. Blotner presents the iconoclastic Faulkner as a troubled man whose writing was a refuge, a continuing joy. His commitment to that work seems to have been his ballast throughout his often frustrating life.

WIRE ME COLLECT WHAT POSSIBILITY OF ANY SUM WHATEVER  
AND WHEN FROM ANY MSS OF MINE YOU HAVE. URGENTLY NEED  
ONE HUNDRED BY SATURDAY.

When Faulkner writes this in 1941 (because his electricity is about to be cut off from unpaid light bills) to his agent Harold Ober, he has already written many of his greatest novels—*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, the financially successful *Sanctuary*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Hamlet*, and other less critically acclaimed books. Yet his life was haunted with the specter of financial chaos. On his erratic and never large writer's income, he was supporting his own family (his wife, her two children by a previous marriage, his daughter), his mother and her house, the widow and child of his youngest brother, and at various times other members of his family. Blotner gives us the evidence of Faulkner's letters to his publishers and agents as he proposes scheme after scheme to find money somewhere for the property tax, income tax, the local grocer's bill (which in 1933 had accumulated to \$1200). Advance royalties are spent long before novels are finished; the sales of short stories are Faulkner's most important items of business. A sale to the *Saturday Evening Post* meant from \$800 to \$1000; the other prestige markets paid only \$200, \$300, or perhaps \$400. As he wrote when *American Mercury* offered his agent \$250 for a story,

"But that won't help me enough . . . I need a thousand. I will just have to knock out something for the Post. I wish to hell I could find some man who would gamble on my future on a note, no contract. Damn these fool laws about

usury anyhow." Although he had mentioned a thousand dollars, what he really needed, he said, was ten thousand. "With that I could pay my debts and insurance for two years and really write. I mean, write. The man who said that the pinch of necessity, butchers and grocers bills and insurance hanging over his head, is good for an artist is a damned fool."

Faulkner fights this impossible financial battle for most of his writing career. Not until he has won the Nobel Prize in 1950 does he begin to earn enough to meet his bills and outdistance them. Tragic as the facts of these twenty years of Faulkner's life are, Blotner does not use the pathos inherent to rail against an unappreciative America. He rather presents the evidence through his reconstruction of the life and the numerous letters Faulkner was writing to agents, friends, and publishers. Because of his controlled method, his refusal to set up obviously charged conditions, Blotner's depiction is convincing.

One has only to consider these "facts" of the writer's existence to wonder that the hounded man wrote anything at all. For instance, when he begins the book which is to become *Absalom, Absalom!* he is rushing to fulfill a contract for royalties already advanced. It is 1934. Faulkner is writing, simultaneously, *The Hamlet* (finally published in 1940), *Requiem for a Nun* (appearing in 1951), and *A Dark House* (the working title for *Absalom*), as well as several short stories. After several false starts, he puts *Absalom* away and writes and publishes the 1935 novel about air shows, *Pylon*. Then in March of 1935 he resumes *Absalom*, and writes on it steadily, desperately, for nearly five months. In mid-August, stymied by financial problems, he goes to New York for one of the visits he dislikes, making connections, meeting possible publishers, drinking (Blotner aptly terms Faulkner's periodic alcoholism "a strategy of evasion"). From then on, finishing *Absalom* is interrupted by

(1) the tragic death of his youngest brother, Dean, as he flies in a week-end air show, November, 1935. Faulkner assumes full responsibility not only for Dean's death ("I bought him the plane, I paid for his lessons . . ."), but also for his young widow and their unborn child; (2) a personally debilitating stint in Hollywood from December 10 to January 31, 1936, when he was let go for drunkenness. Hospitalized briefly after returning home for both "nervous exhaustion" and "unassuaged anguish over Dean's death," Faulkner tries to finish the novel before (3) another contract in Hollywood from February 26 to March 28; then, changing studios, from April 9 to May 30; (4) returning home to severe financial problems, complicated by both his own and his wife's alcoholism; (5) the return to Hollywood in mid-July with his family and two retainers, and the problems of re-locating the entire family in such an expensive area (\$550-a-month rent, in 1936), circumstances only leading to continuing financial pressures.

That Faulkner was able to continue working at all under such unsettling and unsettled personal conditions is surprising. The struggle that his life was shows not only in his relatively frequent bouts with the bottle, but also in his near death a few years later, 1940, when he hemorrhages internally with an undiagnosed perforated ulcer.

Moving as the events of Faulkner's life are in themselves, Blotner presents them as parts—and only parts—of the complete scene. He keeps the reader in touch with Faulkner's position within his family and the community of Oxford, Mississippi.

In 1933, Blotner mentions that Faulkner appeared in a series entitled "Prominent Citizens of Oxford."

Faulkner was twelfth in the series (which would run to sixty), having been preceded by the mayor, the university football coach, two physicians, and Joe Parks, among others. (His uncle would be thirty-fifth in the series.) The caption described Faulkner as EMINENT NOVELIST, POET AND SCENARIO WRITER, LICENSED AIRPLANE PILOT.

It is also heartening to know that Bennett Cerf, his Random House publisher, never lost faith in his ability. Cerf had written to Faulkner in 1935, "I think we'd rather have you on our list than any other fiction writer living in America. I know that those are strong words, Bill, but I mean them."

One of the best qualities of Blotner's biography is that he does include the purely literary matters of *Faulkner's life*. By seeing the work as integral to Faulkner's existence, Blotner makes correlations, adds critical judgments, and generally enhances our understanding of a novel by using his own full biographical knowledge. This approach is particularly valid for the Faulkner account, simply because it is difficult to imagine discussing his life from 1926 to 1962 without some meaningful consideration of the nineteen novels and countless short stories—many still unpublished—which he wrote during those years.

Blotner also provides enough commentary from reviews and essays contemporary with Faulkner's work that the reader understands the general critical temper, a matter of concern to any writer. Faulkner usually said that he cared little what reviewers said, but since his financial solvency depended on public reaction, he could scarcely be so disinterested as he pretended. Blotner's handling of these quotations is efficient: extensive quotation could have slowed this long a study irreparably, as he often summarizes the gist of opinion, and includes full reference in the copious notes—arranged by page and line, rather than by number—in the rear of each of the two volumes.

Although it runs to over 2100 pages, Blotner's *Faulkner* is not cumbersome. The volumes provide an amazing amount of previously inaccessible information. Few of Faulkner's letters were ever published; no other biographical study has been attempted; few other literary figures have included Faulkner significantly in their own memoirs and autobiographies, simply because Faulkner had close contact with comparatively few writers. This study has consequently been forced to provide great amounts of new and important information.

The study opens with much detail about the origins of the Faulkner-Kalkner-Falconer family, in Inverness, Scotland, as well as in Mississippi. That Faulkner thought of himself as an indomitable, even feisty "highlander" explains some of his pride throughout his life, as well as his use of the Scottish spelling for the title of his last novel, *The Reivers*. Blotner justifies including detailed accounts of these ancestors, and rightly, because Faulkner himself made such extensive use of them—or characters drawn from them—in his fiction. He gives much information about Faulkner's early friendships; his early and continuing love for Estelle Oldham, which led to their 1929 marriage just seven weeks after Estelle's divorce; and his generous and loving relationships with his family.

Especially valuable is the information about Faulkner's many separate stints in Hollywood. Legends abound about his hatred of the movie business and his some-



times unorthodox behavior as a screenplay writer. Blotner's account validates some of the stories, but more important, it documents the quantity and quality of Faulkner's production there. Working on so many kinds of assignments, with so many different people—often changing scripts every two or three days—Faulkner had reason to dread the frantic time in Hollywood. His desperate financial needs were his only reason for going West.

Perhaps the frenzy of his Hollywood writing (for he did produce, voluminously) led to his realization in the late 1930's that man's most important tie was to the land, his own land, existing in its own natural fecundity. The themes of "The Bear" and the rest of *Go Down, Moses* and much of the later writing may have stemmed from his personal disorientation in what for him was a consistently unnerving atmosphere.

Blotner also savors the mellow years—after the Nobel Prize, when Faulkner was teaching at the University of Virginia, traveling for the State Department, and finally able to rest easy financially. We can sense the difference in him as he sees his family mature, his books back in print, his life given ostensible notice. He buys more land; peoples it with the inferior mules and horses he always managed to choose; and keeps riding. Blotner emphasizes the three falls from horses, one in 1959 and two in 1962, that led to his general disability and death on July 6, 1962, just two months after *The Reivers* was published.

Blotner has given us an understandable Faulkner. The need in his life for solace, for assurance is imaged vividly through his turn to flying as well as to alcohol. Often he takes the "Waco" up for an hour or two in the midst of a hectic week. Yet when he is writing well, hard at work on a novel he enjoys, he flies only once in three or four months. His drinking is just as sporadic, and just as predictable. When all human resources fail him, when his own imaginative powers are inadequate, Faulkner drinks—hard, purposefully, and necessarily; but drinking is usually—so Blotner shows—a last resort.

That the biographer can show both the frailty and the grandeur of his subject is possible partly because of the coherence which permeates the book, and partly because of his own love for and understanding of Faulkner. As he so gently remarks in his modest one-page preface to the book,

. . . perhaps I can here permit myself to say not just that William Faulkner was a great writer, but that to me he seems America's greatest writer of prose fiction. The narrative will perhaps reveal more clearly how he seemed to me as a man. I cannot hope to look upon his like again.

*Faulkner, A Biography* is an effective whole for, despite its length, it was written and published as a total presentation. Blotner knew where he was going throughout the book and could make editorial changes to keep the pace lively and the details germane in terms of the effect of the whole. The difficulties of maintaining continuity and focus when separate volumes of a three, four, or five volume study are published—and written—separately, a book at a time, are here diminished. Naturally, the work of writing such a study as a single book—with all research materials "on hand" at once—must be fatiguing, to say the least. The results would seem to have been worth the effort.

This biography should prove that impeccable scholarship is not the dry-as-dust occupation that the non-academic world sometimes pretends. It is rather, in *Faulkner*,

the means one compassionate human being uses to prove to the world at large that William Faulkner was not only a great prose stylist, but an equally great man. All the tragedy of Faulkner's frustrating personal life—and the persistent joy he managed to find in moments of it—only deepened his devotion to that elusive craft of writing, his master and his torment. That Blotner can make us feel this passion so clearly, in his own objective and understated presentation, is surely proof that he has mastered his own difficult craft, that of the perceptive and chary biographer.

LINDA WAGNER  
Michigan State University

John Yount. *The Trapper's Last Shot*. New York: Random House, 1973, 236 pp. \$6.95.

John Yount's second novel has been out for a year now, and though it was launched with good omens (selection as a BOMC alternate, a glowing review in *Newsweek*, and jacket blurbs by Vance Bourjaily and Robert Penn Warren), it has not gotten the attention that it deserves. Why this is so is difficult to explain, outside of some kind of logistic fumble on the part of the publishers. It is an excellent book, tightly controlled and strongly plotted, full of a clear-eyed humanity that never goes mushy or sentimental, and with an insight into hardscrabble, red-dirt Southern life that presents characters of dignity and consequence. This book may offer the best rationale ever written for the poor white Southerner's violent treatment of blacks, and a better demonstration of the potential for tragic stature to be found in a lowly and inarticulate man than Arthur Miller achieved in *Death of a Salesman*.

Pretty clearly John Yount has read his Faulkner well, but far enough in the past that he has been able to assimilate it. This is not an apprentice work. Now and then a turgid phrase floats to the surface, but generally the style is lean and sinewy, evoking Hemingway in its restraint. But this is John Yount's book, not the echo of any of the masters who have gone before him, and he has clearly been able to establish his fictional world in its own orbit. It is a world that resonates with the tension of high and serious tragedy.

The story is about two brothers—Dan and Beau Jim Early—who seem to represent the extreme limits of a single generation—though Dan, who is fourteen years older, has been aged before his time by a series of unremitting failures. Both characters, but particularly Dan, offer an opportunity for plenty of flaccid commentary about the nobility of the lowly and the elevating aspects of backbreaking labor—the kind of thing that John Steinbeck can lapse into in his weakest moments. John Yount has passed up that opportunity. The whole book is informed with the idea that the inarticulate and patient and slow people of the earth are worth our time and attention, but Yount evokes a sympathetic feeling for them which doesn't have to depend on a denial of their shortcomings, or the allegation that stupidity and dullness are good things in themselves.

The focus of the book is very sharp, and through its pages Dan plays out his life, moving the best way he can—according to his limitations as a man—so that in the end the reader may be horrified by what he does, but he cannot question the integrity either of Dan Early the man, or John Yount's presentation of him. There is never any attempt to deny the justness of Dan's punishment. The tragedy lies in the fact that the events of the story ever had to take place at all—that a good man had to become an instrument of evil and then die for it. But that things had to be that way seems to be the deepest truth of the book—and the most tragic.

The ending, in spite of the tragic tone, is affirmative, but consistent with the events that have gone before, and growing out of them. Dan's death frees Beau Jim from the patch of red dirt in Cocks County, around which his thoughts have been circling out of a sense of duty—and nostalgia—during six years in the army. It gives him a chance for a new start in a new place. The only kind of start that is worth anything—one bought and paid for in pain.

I hesitate to mention it, because I want to avoid commonplaces here, but the characters come to life because they are a mixture of good and bad, strong points and weak. A mixed viewpoint like that can end up being wishy-washy—a way of avoiding hard issues. That doesn't happen in this novel. Here it becomes a strong central position, and the understanding that is brought to the characters through it is the armature on which the story is constructed—the thing that gives it backbone. John Yount is true to his Southern setting in a way that might be misunderstood outside the South. There is a kind of New Yawk naïveté that sees only two-dimensional bigots and noble blacks in any story that undertakes to explain the race situation. This will be a difficult book for those readers who want to take that *highly simplified* view of things.

Good for John Yount.

MARK STEADMAN  
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Linda Pastan. *A Perfect Circle of Sun*. Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1971, 56 pp. \$2.75.

A recent book by French historian Philippe Ariès contrasts the medieval acceptance of death as man's inevitable destiny with the modern tendency to hide the fact of death by ignoring or secreting it. If Ariès is correct about contemporary man, then there is something gratifyingly unmodern about Linda Pastan's *A Perfect Circle of Sun*. For this stunning first book of poems by a forty-year-old Washington D. C. housewife reflects that rare outlook which Albert Camus has called lucidity, a vision of life whose philosophical basis is succinctly summed up in the observation of one of Camus's characters that death, relentless and irrevocable, is being blown toward all of us alike by the slow wind of the future.

The structure of Ms. Pastan's book—the fourfold divisions representing successive seasons of gestation, birth, fruition, and death—stresses its theme that life is before all else a fierce if muted struggle against death. Within each section, individual poems reinforce this sanguinary yet somehow exhilarating truth. Two poems about trips to a doctor's office suggest that any specific illness is after all only symptomatic of the ultimate terminal disease, life. The speaker in "After X Ray" is inspired by his experience to conceive the time when he will be a skeleton: "The bones are all there waiting their hour,/ patient as hangers, pushed to the back of a closet,/ on which this flesh is hung just for a while./ I feel them come to the surface slowly,/ rise like their image in the developer's tank." In "At the Gynecologist's," the doctor's prying hands, "impersonal as wax," waken a woman from her "dream of health" and alert her to time's threat against her life-producing organs. Suddenly she imagines herself astride a stallion running in the direction of death: "See me here, my naked legs/ caught in these metal stirrups,/ galloping towards death/ with flowers of ether in my hair." "Prognosis" states a related point even more tersely: "The electric clock swallows/ its own ticking, the seconds/ multiply silently, like cells./ We are infected with time,/ show the rash already." "Wood" is about a mother's futile attempt to

protect her young daughter from injury or disease. No science, no magical knocking on wood, can exorcise time. Lovely child will always be transmuted to aged crone by the alchemy of life's subtle explosion: "Beauty ignites its own slow fuse."

Other poems view time not simply as the sickness of man but as a universal malady affecting creation in every bone, joint, organ, muscle, sinew of its collective body. "Early Walk" struggles with the paradox that growth and fruition are intimate parts of the process of dying; nature's furnace is already kindling in the April "woods/ where green has caught like a slow fire/ and starts to spread." A related poem observes that death is inside even those things that seem most fertile and alive: "Summer is only camouflage./ Under the thick disguise of leaves/ wait last winter's old trees;/ the earth is raw clay/ under a cowl of topsoil." For Ms. Pastan, similar foreboding messages are inscribed everywhere in nature. The traveller in "On the Road to the Harbor Tunnel" sees, by the light of the dying sun, "a boneyard of old cars" rusting away "in all/ the positions of love." "There are auguries to read/ in these mechanical/ entrails," he concludes, "before we also learn/ the taste of metal."

Time's devastating assault upon love is the subject of a number of moving poems about the hopelessly transitory aspect of human relationships. In "At Woods Hole," a poem set on a Cape Cod beach, two lovers lie together amidst signs of festering decay—"the edge of the sea unravelling/ from here to Hatteras," and beyond it "the shark's fin on its way to kill/ bisecting the arc of a half-moon/ on its way to the sea." Yet somehow they understand—or pretend to understand—exactly "nothing" from these beautiful hieroglyphs portending the dissolution of their passion. While "waves seem to bring the water in forever/ even as the tide moves surely out," they make futile promises to each other about their unchanging love. Several feminist poems likewise brilliantly underscore love's inconstancy. In "Morning," a modern Dido wistfully berates her Aeneas who—"no tide/ to be the moon's slave"—is preparing to abandon her "tangled among sheets." "Gravity is against us, pulling/ our bodies apart," Dido laments. "September is against us,/ pulling down summer leaf by leaf./ Stay with me a little longer,/ listen to the ticking/ of my overwound heart/ as it runs down to silence." In "Distances," a woman likens the sexual act to being run over by the train carrying her lover away: "Straight and cold as railroad track/ I lie in my old roadbed/ measuring distances—/ waiting for you to pass/ over me once again,/ on your way somewhere else." The female speaker in "Penelope," a sea-shore vacationer becalmed in love's despair, addresses her wayward Ulysses in the same vein: "Only the tide still moves,/ leaving the print of its ribbed bones/ on the abandoned sand/ as you left yours on me."

Change then is the unchanging subject of Ms. Pastan's book. Some few poems—they are among the most effective in the volume—view this subject in an historical or cultural rather than in a metaphysical perspective. "Arcadia" evokes the lost innocence of childhood as we travel westward with Anderson's George Williard, with Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, back "towards Christmas and a house/ wrapped as safely in scenery/ as the corn in its layers of husk." The journey into the edenic past is impossible to complete, however; the quested "house disappears around/ the flung arm of the road—/ solid as a dream at the moment of waking." A kindred poem, "The Last Train," compares the boy who years ago fell asleep in his frontier cabin listening to the "muffled drumming of buffalo," with a later counterpart who "at the edge of the same plain" let "consciousness recede/ on the receding whistle of a train." Now trains are disappearing even as the buffalo vanished earlier, and modern man is left to listen to "the single, abstract tone of the jet plane" and to "follow

sleep"—if he is able—"along disintegrating paths of vapor,/ high above the dream-like shapes of clouds." But it is "Williamsburg," Ms. Pastan's lengthiest poem and probably her best, which most effectively laments industrialized man's loss of his irretrievable and no doubt largely mythic agrarian past. At one point the visitor to the historic city manifests his vain desire "to/ touch something/ authentic." He reaches, as he says, across a "small abyss"—two hundred years, "the space/ from Athens to Sparta or from Jamestown here"—to grasp the hand of a neo-colonial basketmaker in one of the town's restored craft shops: "But a Woolworth pencil falling from his pocket/ spins like a wand,/ and there rises between us a wall of baskets,/ baskets of bolts and screws, of old hubcaps,/ beer cans, and the broken/ filaments of lightbulbs/ gone dark/ before my father's father dreamed America."

These are sleek, honest, gutsy poems, unflinching in vision as they are tough in execution. Unlike the narrow-visioned traveller of "Journey's End" who cautiously tries "to reach death safely,/ luggage intact, each child accounted for,/ . . . home free at last," Ms. Pastan refuses to look askant "from windows grimed with twilight/ where landscapes rush by, terrible and lovely." Rather she chooses to stare unswervingly at life's grotesqueries, the better to appreciate its manifold subtle beauties. In one sense, then, she is sister to the kind of poets she writes about in "Dirge"—poets such as Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Hart Crane, Randall Jarrell, all accidental or intentional suicides—who "hear death years away,/ and full of the intensity of words,/ rush to meet it." Yet her book is in no final way pessimistic or nay-saying. If writing is almost always an affirmative act, Linda Pastan's poetry is especially so precisely because it acknowledges that death is what makes life precious at the same time that it makes it dangerous. In "Skylight," the poem from which Ms. Pastan draws her book's title, the poet-speaker, shrouded by shadows, sits "in a perfect circle of sun/ in a room without windows/ . . . deep under shingles, under tar paper,/ under plaster pale as sunned flesh." As she looks up out of the gloom toward the light, she sees "through one round skylight the real world"—a newborn child gasping for its first breath—"held up to the sun by its heels and moving." Such a transcendent vision of light and life illuminating darkness and death is one which in some measure informs nearly every poem in Ms. Pastan's collection.

RODNEY O. ROGERS  
Clemson University

Fred C. Hobson, Jr. *Serpent in Eden. H. L. Mencken and the South.* Foreword by Gerald W. Johnson. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1974, 242 pp. \$8.95.

Fifty-four years ago, in *Prejudices: Second Series* Mencken included an essay, "The Sahara of the Bozart," whose main thesis was that the South had become "almost as sterile artistically, intellectually, culturally as the Sahara Desert." With typical Menckonian bombast he claimed that there wasn't "a single picture gallery worth going into, or a single orchestra capable of playing the nine symphonies of Beethoven, or a single opera-house, or a single theatre devoted to decent plays . . . not a single Southern prose writer who can actually write. . . . Nor an historian. Nor a sociologist. Nor a philosopher. . . . In all these fields the South is an awe-inspiring blank—a brother to Portugal, Serbia and Esthonia."

Mr. Hobson, who is assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama, says of the aforementioned "notorious" essay that it "did much to shock young



Southern writers into an awareness of this [literary and broadly cultural] poverty and thus played a seminal role in the revival of Southern letters which followed." In the present volume, heavily documented with notes and a bibliography, he tries to plot the nature and effect of this influence. He does a good enough job of generally accepted Ph.D. scholarship, but one wishes that in addition to being "objective" he had been a bit more straightforward in his handling of what appear to be the clear facts about Mencken's essay and his obvious deficiencies as a literary reporter, not to say, a literary critic.

Mr. Gerald Johnson in his introduction to the volume calls Mencken "an intellectual bombardier." It would be more accurate to call him an "intellectual vaudevillian," if one wishes to be kind, or an "intellectual mountebank," if one wants to express one's irritation with the often deplorable tactics of the so-called Sage of Baltimore. Mencken's respect for facts was hardly wholehearted. His chief aim, most of the time, was to "stir up the animals," and he was not too concerned if in doing so he hurt people unnecessarily, or even without foundation. Sometimes, alas, he "played dirty," which is exactly the charge he leveled against Stuart P. Sherman during their debates about Theodore Dreiser's writings. Mr. Johnson, who for long had been an uncritical defender of Mencken, now says that "the South, immediately after World War I, was 10 percent as bad as Mencken said it was." He goes further: ". . . under the crust there had been, all along, a seething intellectual ferment that spurted through the fissures in a hundred jets and made the intellectual life of the South for a decade the most vigorous in the republic." Allen Tate, along with others of the Fugitives, as early as 1925, saw the superficiality and even cheapness of Mencken's literary criticism, calling him a "nostalgic clown."

The irony of the whole situation is that when the South did bring forth Faulkner, Wolfe, Welty, and a score of others of their general quality, Mencken knew them not. As his managing editor on the *American Mercury* I had to plead with him to accept Faulkner's story, "That Evening Sun Go Down" (March, 1931). When I became editor of the magazine and published Wolfe's story, "Boom Town" (May, 1934), Mencken sneered, "So you got him in while I wasn't looking." He saw virtually nothing in Wolfe. I doubt he read *Look Homeward, Angel*. It is to Mr. Hobson's credit that after all his research he realizes how poorly equipped Mencken was as a guide in the realm of literary values.

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Edward P. Vargo. *Rainstorm and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike*. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974, 229 pp. \$9.95.

Most readers of Updike's fiction sense an oblique quality about many of his best stories and novels which hints at some cryptic intention or undisclosed theme. The early reviewers tended to comment on Updike's style and lament that there was little substance behind it, while recent criticism of Updike's continually growing body of novels, short stories, and poems is uncovering more and more significance beneath the stratum of seemingly trivial surfaces that make up many of Updike's plots.

Edward P. Vargo's *Rainstorms and Fire*, the latest in a growing number of book-length critical studies of Updike's work, is concerned only with the novels. Beginning with *The Poorhouse Fair* and ending with *Rabbit Redux*, Vargo argues that Updike's six novels demonstrate that modern man has rejected traditional religious and social rituals as superstition, "yet even in twentieth-century America man



instinctively returns to rituals to answer his fear of death and his need for ecstasy and wholeness." Although Vargo says Updike reveals this concern in "all of his novels," he omits any discussion of the shorter fiction and *Bech: A Book* because "not all of Updike's writing reflect the rhythmic patterns of ritual."

The sub-title of Vargo's study gives the clue to his approach, which is a mixture of the generic and mythic critical methods, an approach used in most of the serious academic criticism of Updike. This mode of criticism is primarily interested in the beliefs and patterns of meaning which Updike expresses rather than in his realistic content or stylistic quality and thus has emphasized the various sources and parallels for Updike's attitudes and literary themes.

For example, in Chapter 4 entitled "The Necessity of Myth in *The Centaur*," Vargo starts his analysis, "The natural place to begin an extended discussion of *The Centaur* as ritual is with the epigraph from Karl Barth: 'Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth.'" The Barthian world view which is outlined by Vargo, replete with theological jargon words like *invisibilia*, *signum* and *sacral*, is then taken as a rubric to show how "the ordinary elements of human life described in novel . . . even the language and metaphors in which the most insignificant and banal activities of this earth are expressed reflect the formal rites of religion." This assumption allows a noisy classroom to transcend being merely chaotic and become a "furious festal noise." The most banal experience equates with the beatific: Peter Caldwell, the central character in the novel, regards the girls' locker room—as well as his girl friend Penny's crotch—as sacred presumably because both are taboo. Further examples of the way the realistic is to be taken as ritualistic are pointed out by a visit to the dentist's office, after which Peter feels "a sense of wholeness" (no pun intended I hope) that comes to him after a tooth is pulled which puts him into a "mood of praise and religious celebration." The event that is selected as best example of an earthly action seen in terms of ritual is a high school basketball game that "unconsciously draws its participants into a mystery" wherein the cheerleaders lead the pregame rites in which the home team's name O-L-I-N-G-E-R is spelled out in a chant that takes the form of an invocation-response, causing at least one of the students, Peter Caldwell, to feel the ecstasy of being "sucked down into another kingdom." In real life, cheering at athletic events rarely produces such profound religious sensations, but given the Barthian theocentric view by which Vargo finds all the actions of the novel framed, anything and everything can be taken to evoke the "sacral atmosphere." The unfortunate aspect of theological approaches to Updike's fiction is that in attempting to elucidate his power as a preacher, such criticism unintentionally gives credence to the caveat made against Updike's pretentiousness. The difficulty here is that often there is no apparent reason that one should see a connection between the basic details of the story and the implied religious ritual. On the contrary, the vast difference between the homely details of the plot and the theological dimensions suggested by Vargo's analysis serves to emphasize that Updike seems to impose a significance on materials which by themselves do not achieve any tropological meaning. It is one thing for a poet like Gerard Manley Hopkins to find in a falcon's flight a paradigm of God's design and quite another for a prose writer to equate a basketball game with religious ritual and expect the reader to take it seriously.

The sometimes precious ingenuity that is used in the exegesis of Updike's novels should not overshadow Mr. Vargo's useful new insights into Updike's literary tech-

niques by showing how his religious concerns have influenced his fiction. Specifically, Vargo shows that Updike's Christian point of view has led him to attempt to project an image of a transcendent world toward which so many of his characters strive. The novels reveal or visualize this higher sphere, according to Vargo, by a highly sophisticated use of ritual in which three sub-elements are identified: pattern, myth, and celebration.

These terms are defined by Vargo in a somewhat special sense: pattern is an aspect of ritual when a performance has a repeatable form or a cyclical movement; it can apply to almost any element — a character, a scene, a gesture, a word, but most significantly to the plot. The second basic element of ritual is myth whose function Vargo says is not to be understood as simply a primitive attempt at a philosophical explanation for the phenomena of nature, but "as a dynamic guide for mankind's present life and activities." Thus, Updike's frequent use of the events of childhood or the past are examples of the use of myth as a structural principle in which a "mythic" past is played off against a neurotic present. The third element of ritual is the intense moment of awareness on the part of a character which Vargo labels as celebration, although he allows that his term is "suspiciously similar to the Joycean epiphany" in that both imply some type of illumination or exaltation; however, the function of celebration as defined by Vargo is "to convey the sense of experienced harmony that derives from the awareness of the intelligible pattern that is inherent in all things."

In lengthy chapters everything that Vargo has said about ritual is applied to an analysis of Updike's major novels. *The Poorhouse Fair* is discussed in terms of sacred time, the mythic past. In *Rabbit Run* the need for pattern and the search for some source of celebration is treated. The way all the elements of ritual merge to produce a greater sense of reality is dealt with in *The Centaur*. *Of the Farm* illustrates the way urban life cuts us off from places that are sources of transcendent communion. *Couples* and *Rabbit Redux* reveal modern man's desperate search for rituals that would "bring wholeness into a desacralized and dehumanized world."

According to Vargo these novels reveal Updike's conviction that it is folly to attempt to replace the god in the sky by setting up fanes to the pleasure principle or dreams of a Utopian society. The deity that presides over Updike's characters has a faculty for wrath, and with rainstorms and fire he makes his will apparent to those who forget him.

Finally, it is in pointing out Updike's theological conservatism that Vargo is most successful. The study does more than make Updike an apologist for traditional Christianity, however; a forceful and well-documented case is made for taking Updike as a writer who is exploring the major moral concerns of our time.

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Hugh F. Rankin. *Francis Marion: The Swamp Fox*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973, 346 pp. \$10.00.

Garet W. Earle. *Manse Jolly*. Anderson, South Carolina: Droke House/Hallux, 1973, 254 pp. \$7.95.

In 1821, Parson Weems published *The Life of General Francis Marion, A Celebrated Partisan Officer in the Revolutionary War, Against the British and Tories in South Carolina and Georgia*. The book was not as successful as the Parson's account

of Washington; but it was just as fanciful and thus becomes justification for this study by Hugh Rankin, Professor of History at Tulane University. Rankin's job, of course, is to clear away the myth and to find the man. This he does carefully, without patronage and without pursuing some scandal to prove that his subject was really human after all—Marion, evidently, had neither wooden teeth nor a string of mistresses. Nonetheless, he was human enough. A farmer of rented lands rather than the prestigious low-country planter that we might like for him to have been, the Swamp Fox escaped capture during the fall of Charleston because he was evacuated with the women and children, the sick and aged. He had broken one of his spindly legs, not in a grand charge, but in escaping an unpleasant Charleston dinner party by jumping from a second floor window. After this undistinguished move, though, Marion took to heroics. He organized (if the word can be applied to the "rag, tag and bobtail" group) a band of guerrillas who saved South Carolina and Georgia from the British. Then, after two and a half years of hit-and-run battle, the Fox went back, more or less anonymously, to his previous occupation.

Rankin slips into some military history that is less than interesting; and though it may be necessary background, one sometimes wonders if the author will chronicle Marion or the entire American Revolution. He is at his best when he leaves the larger scheme of things to concentrate on his main character. His report of the fight for military status between General Sumter and Marion is remarkably clear and objective. And his accounts of Marion's frustrations in a battle where Whig and Tory were not easily identified, a battle in which he could rescue prisoners of the British only to find that they did not want to be rescued, is a notable lesson in revolutionary warfare. Finally, unlike many "scholarly" biographies, Rankin's does not ignore good anecdotes: one of Marion's lieutenants, for example, had a terrible stutter and usually found himself some twenty or thirty yards ahead of his troops before he could finish his command to C-H-A-R-G-E. The book is a respectable and thorough biography that should be interesting even to casual readers.

*Manse Jolly* is the story of a character well-known in up-country South Carolina for his renegade exploits against Yankees during Reconstruction. Jolly came home from the war to learn that five of his brothers had died in battle; he took the news like a man and started the business of restoring his farm and taking care of his family. But carpet-baggers harassed him unmercifully and finally murdered his sixth brother. It was all too much for Manse, and he turned to drinking moonshine whiskey and killing his antagonists. He hid out in a mountain cave near Walhalla, riding down at night to do in at least a hundred of them (preferring to shoot them in the stomach so that they would have time to contemplate their killer as they died). His path crossed that of the Ku Klux Klan and led into an intrigue involving the theft of a large amount of Confederate gold. Finally, in pursuit of an officer in the Federal Army who had run off to Texas with the sister of a good Southern friend, Jolly learned that not all Yankees are bad and then, apparently, drowned in a flash flood.

The book is purported to be "A Novel Based on Fact," but its problem is that there is not enough novel or fact. The up-state region teems with grand tales about Jolly, but Earle misses the best of them. And his attempt to shape the ones he selects into a novel is marred by some clumsy writing, especially in the dialogue, and a very unconvincing and sentimental plot. A good collection of Jolly stories or a genuinely factual biography might have been a better project than the one undertaken here. The subject may be worthy, but Earle's indecisive and unskilled treat-

ment of it is likely to keep the book from finding a place beside such Reconstruction novels as DeForest's *The Conversion of Miss Ravenel* or Tourgee's *Bricks Without Straw*. Its only interest, I think, is for some people in Anderson, S. C., and that because of its gossip, especially the suggestion that several prominent and still-identifiable Anderson families were involved in the theft of the Confederate gold. Probably it was this implication that led the author to take a pseudonym.

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