

The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost

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Chapter 5

"Nature and Pastoralism"

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Frost has so often written about the rural landscape and wildlife that one can hardly avoid thinking of him as a nature poet. "To the Thawing Wind," "Hyla Brook," "The Oven Bird," "Birches," "A Drumlin Woodchuck" -- one could cite such titles by the score. Frost began as a nature poet; "To a Moth Seen in Winter," "Rose Pogonias," "Going for Water" are representative of his work before 1913, and the interest in nature was to persist throughout his career. Frost's nature poetry is so excellent and so characteristic that it must be given a prominent place in any account of his art. In our attempt to understand this aspect of Frost, the idea of pastoral proves useful. Not that the nature poems are to be considered as pastorals in any strict sense -- obviously the two kinds of poetry differ. In pastorals the subject is a special society, or, more generally, a way of life, and nature is merely the setting within which we see this. The pastoralist does not write about nature; he uses nature as his scene, and it is important only in that it defines the swain's point of view. Nevertheless, Frost's nature poetry is closely related to his pastoralism. One might demonstrate the connection by pointing out how many poems combine both genres. Such pieces as "The Onset," "Unharvested," and "Evening in a Sugar Orchard" present vivid pictures of landscape, but in them the Yankee point of view through which nature is seen is as vital to the meaning as the things portrayed. This is not so in all the nature poems: in a great many others natural objects hold the center of interest, and the regional Arcadia with its Yankee characters is absent or unimportant. The shift in subject is not surprising, for a poet of rural life would find it natural to write about the countryside, but the connection between the two poetic types is more fundamental than this. It consists, I think, in a similarity of thought, and hence, in a similarity of poetic design. The basic structure we have noted in his eclogues appears again as the dominant pattern in the nature poems. Both kinds of poetry seem to grow from a single way of looking at reality - the same perspective which creates pastorals when the poet's eyes are directed to rural life determines his vision of nature.

That Frost's view of nature is unique may not at first be apparent, for the modern reader's attitude toward nature poetry is pretty well determined by the Lake Poets and their English successors. The very act of writing about nature seems to mean a commitment to treat it as poets in England have done since 1800, with the result that most people take Frost's nature poetry as they take

Wordsworth's or Tennyson's. Yet there is a bleakness in his landscape and a sharpness of outline in the imagery quite foreign even to Wordsworth's Cumberland. This cannot be explained by the difference between localities. "The Oven Bird" is an entirely different kind of poem from Wordsworth's "To a Skylark," and the dissimilarity has little to do with the fact that the bird in one poem is American and in the other English. Another sign of his uniqueness is that his nature poems do not evoke the same variety of emotional response. Much of his popularity is traceable to the fact that he has managed to write of nature without exploiting the emotional effects which, however fine they are in Wordsworth and the other Romantics, seem rather shopworn in more recent poets.

Of course no modern nature poet will be able to free himself completely from the Romantic way of treating nature, and in Frost there are many reminiscences of Wordsworth, Keats, and others. But what Frost has derived from tradition is adapted to his own quite different purposes. One may hear the Romantic harmonies in his work, but they reverberate within a world quite changed. When he describes a tree as "Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,/ And thing next most diffuse to cloud," the Romantic vision is immediately dispelled by the facts of a different landscape - "Not all your light tongues talking aloud/ Could be profound." (1) This is not an ironic rejection of the Romantic attitude; Frost simply does not look at nature through the same eyes. Though critics have pointed out his eminently reasonable view of nature, his farmer's sagacity and unwillingness to go beyond brute facts, they have failed to see the essential difference between his nature poetry and that to which the nineteenth century has conditioned us.

This difference can best be seen by pursuing somewhat further the comparison with Wordsworth. In the poetry of his great period, Wordsworth's theme is the spirit immanent in nature and man. The philosophic ideas through which he seeks to justify this concept of spirit are diverse and combined in a variety of ways, the emphasis shifting from one poem to another. I suspect that Wordsworth's philosophy cannot be systematized, but whether or not this is so, it is not necessary here to untangle the various strands of his thought; for however complex the intellectual background of Wordsworth's Nature may be, his essential poetic idea remains constant -- the union of mind and external reality. He expresses this union most often through suggesting a blending of thought and landscape and portraying the subtle affinities between the natural scene and the moral sentiments. This central theme is reflected in the poetic form. Wordsworth's language has an intended imprecision which suggests both things and thoughts. One sees this in the subdued double entendre of his philosophic terms:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.... (2)

The peculiar shift in the meaning of "things" and the way that Newtonian physics and the sublimities of philosophical idealism are blended in terms like "motion," "impels," "rolls" show how far beside the point Empson is in complaining that Wordsworth has muddled his philosophy. (3) The vague suggestiveness of Wordsworth's terms is the medium in which thought and object merge. The same blending is manifested in the kind of vaguely outlined nature imagery Wordsworth and most other Romantics prefer. Their streams, breezes, odors, mists, tangled undergrowth, and twilight have the indistinct quality which allows them to drift into the area of subjective experience. (4) As Wordsworth put it, he prefers the regions "where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and

aspirations are raised." (5)

A reader accustomed to this kind of nature poetry will find much that is familiar in a poem like "The Wood-Pile." Here Frost's approach to nature seems not unlike Wordsworth's in "Resolution and Independence." True, the manner is more casual; Frost is anecdotal where Wordsworth tends to be didactic. But the poet of "The Wood-Pile" strikes a typically Wordsworthian attitude: he regards his rambles through the countryside as the means of a natural and somewhat mysterious instruction of the soul. There is the same high seriousness and air of ethical purpose. In Frost's poem, as in Wordsworth's, it is tacitly assumed that the poet's stroll will lead to a momentous discovery. And here too, the poet sets out without a plan, unaware of what his goal will be, relying on intuition, waiting for a spontaneous revelation to come to him from nature. The opening lines express an attitude reminiscent of Wordsworth's "wise passiveness":

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.
No, I will go farther - and we shall see.'

The true discovery must be fortuitous - he finds the wood-pile by the same happy accident that Wordsworth found the leech gatherer. In both poems, there is a sudden recognition, and the significance of the natural scene wells up as if from the subconscious.

But here Frost's similarity to Wordsworth ends. For what he finds at the center of the forest is not an image of the spirit immanent in man and nature, but a symbol of the strictly human spirit and its ability to rise above the physical sphere. The Woodpile itself is unimportant. It is meaningful only because it leads to a revelation of human nature:

.....I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The firewood will never be used. The man who cut it can carelessly forget its practical value, because humanity transcends the world of physical need. Man lives "in turning to fresh tasks," in the fulfillment of himself through creativity.

The whole meaning of the poem lies in the difference between nature and man. The cedar swamp is an endless tract without meaning or design:

.....The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees

Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.

"Far from home" - the search for meaning is really a search for something human within the infinite spaces which Pascal viewed with such horror. The woodpile shows that nature itself cannot provide this human element or give the poet's experience meaning. The only meaning one can find in nature is that imposed upon it by the human mind. The woodpile is the symbol of man's creativity. Its decay does not represent any bond between man and nature. It has been taken into the sphere of human purposes, so that even though abandoned, it has rotted away "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could" like firewood burning on a hearth.

This contrast between man and nature is the central theme of Frost's nature poetry. Whereas Wordsworth sees in nature a mystical kinship with the human mind, Frost views nature as essentially alien. Instead of exploring the margin where emotions and appearances blend, he looks at nature across an impassable gulf. What he sees on the other side is an image of a hard, impersonal reality. Man's physical needs, the dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death, the limits of his ability to know and to act are shown in stark outline by the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live.

Thus Frost sees in nature a symbol of man's relation to the world. Though he writes about a forest or a wildflower, his real subject is humanity. The remoteness of nature reveals the tragedy of man's isolation and his weakness in the face of vast, impersonal forces. But nature also serves to glorify man by showing the superiority of the human consciousness to brute matter. In this respect, nature becomes a means of portraying the heroic. There is a fundamental ambiguity of feeling in Frost's view of nature. It is to be feared as man's cruel taskmaster, scorned as insensible, brutish, unthinking matter; yet it is to be loved, not because it has any secret sympathy for man - "One had to be versed in country things/ Not to believe the phoebes wept" (6) - but rather because it puts man to the test and thus brings out his true greatness:

When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length. (7)

Such ambiguity indicates the poetic potential of Frost's nature. One sees it in "Birches," where the delicate balance between the desire to withdraw from the world and love of the earth is symbolized in the boy's game of swinging birch trees; in "The Onset" in the contrast between Frost's dismay at the descent of winter and his assurance of spring; in the April day of "Two Tramps in Mud Time," which gives pleasure and yet is pervaded with the lingering threat of winter. Though his concept of nature

does not allow for the sublimity one finds in Wordsworth, it has a richness of its own. It is a paradox, and it points toward the greater paradox in man himself.

Readers who think of Frost as a sketcher of pleasant landscapes should begin with a poem like "The Most of It." Here the poet shows us the gulf separating man from nature in bold outline, and this is probably why the poem has been generally ignored. The picture he presents is certainly not cheerful, much less pretty. It is impressive. It demonstrates how exalted an idea of the human mind and how awesome a view of reality the contrast between man and nature expresses:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
And then in the far distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush - and that was all.

There is pathos in this poem but something close to tragedy too. The man's search for a sign of love from nature may be foolish and sentimental to a degree, yet he is wise enough to realize that what he wants is "counter-love, original response" rather than a mere reflection of his own love. It takes a certain toughness to see this, to hold out for the real thing. And the real thing when it comes is so remote from his desires that he cannot recognize it. The magnificent buck which swims toward him from across the lake is "the most of it" - all that nature can give. That this is so shows the completeness of man's isolation, and in this sense the poem is despairing. On the other hand, we see man's true nature. It merely symbolizes the impersonal force of matter, and his blindness to it is really a measure of his spiritual strength. And as the man in the poem transcends nature through ignorance, the speaker transcends it through knowledge. He recognizes the meaning of the buck; he sees that "that was all" nature could give. He is able to look at the grim reality of nature, to recognize its remoteness and inhumanity, and at the same time to admire its magnificent strength. The vision of the great buck as he "stumbled through the rocks with horny tread, / And forced the underbrush" reveals not only nature, but the superiority of the human mind which can see it for what it is and no

more.

The struggle between the human imagination and the meaningless void man confronts is the subject of poem after poem. Frost develops it in a variety of ways - "Desert Places," "Sand Dunes," and "There Are Roughly Zones" represent different approaches to it. His tone modulates from poem to poem as he moves effortlessly from casual sketches to landscapes of intense agony, but throughout his nature poetry the basic contrast persists. Sometimes it is the subject for witty epigrammatic treatment. "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" for example, describes people along the shore of a beach staring endlessly out to sea. Their intent gaze is subtly identified with man's half-exploratory, half-defensive watch on the universe:

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

At other times the contrast is not made explicit but is merely suggested by certain dark undertones. Even in Frost's most cheerful nature sketches there is always a bittersweet quality. Admittedly he can and does enjoy nature. His flowers, trees, and animals are all described with affection, yet none of the nature poems is free from hints of possible danger; under the placid surface there is always the unseen presence of something hostile. "Spring Pools," for example, begins innocently enough with a description of the pools and flowers which one sees in the woodlands in early spring. Then suddenly the tone becomes grave:

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

There is something sinister about the way the poem turns out. Spring, traditionally the season of birth, innocence, and joy, ushers in darkness, and the optimistic ending of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is grimly inverted.

Treacherous forces are forever breaking through the pleasant surface of the landscape in this manner. Frost on his nature rambles has the air of someone picking his way through no man's land during an uneasy truce. The weather is bracing, his spirits are high; but he must tread lightly for fear of mines, and there is always the chance that he may stumble upon a bullet-pierced helmet or something worse. At the most unexpected times, he gives glimpses of horror. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time" he interrupts his genial chat about the April weather to advise:

Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set

And show on the water its crystal teeth.

These vistas opening upon fearful realities do not in the least negate the beauty Frost also sees in nature; rather, it is they which give his songbirds, wild flowers, brooks, and trees their poignant appeal. The charm of many of the nature lyrics results from the vividness with which sweet, delicate things stand out against the somber background. You cannot have the one without the other: love of natural beauty and horror at the remoteness and indifference of the physical world are not opposites but different aspects of the same view.

The difference between a "pretty" nature poem and a poem of sterner vision is merely one of emphasis. For instance, the lyric, "A Boundless Moment," gives us one of those fresh glimpses of beauty which have made Frost's nature poetry so popular, yet it deals with essentially the same view of reality as "Bereft" which is among the poet's saddest and most terrifying poems. The wistfulness of the former lyric is part of its charm:

He halted in the wind, and - what was that
Far in the maples, pale, but not a ghost?
He stood there bringing March against his thought,
And yet too ready to believe the most.
'Oh, that's the Paradise-in-bloom,' I said;
And truly it was fair enough for flowers
Had we but in us to assume in March
Such white luxuriance of May for ours.
We stood a moment so in a strange world,
Myself as one his own pretense deceives;
And then I said the truth (and we moved on).
A young beech clinging to its last year's leaves.

The "boundless moment" gives a vision of beauty, but this vision is merely an illusion - the flowers the two men thought they saw are only dead leaves clinging to a beech. The reader responds to the gorgeous sight of the "Paradise-in-bloom," in much the same way as the characters in the poem. But nature itself is barren. When the walkers recognize the leaves for what they are, they can only turn again to the routine of life. The incident shows man's tragic limitations. His imagination cannot sustain the ideal vision long - for a "boundless moment" it can mold nature to its desires, then the "Paradise-in-bloom" again becomes the dead tree of reality. But there is more to the poem than this hard lesson. The fading of a vision may be sad, but the truthfulness which will not take it too seriously has something noble about it. The speaker's refusal to accept anything but the truth, even when the truth is disappointing, demonstrates the courage of man's intellect.

Unflinching honesty in the face of facts is a recurrent theme in Frost's nature poetry. For it is in this that he sees the basis of man's power and indeed of his spiritual being. Man can never find a home in nature, nor can he live outside of it. (8) But he can assert the reality of his spirit and thus can exist independently of the physical world in the act of looking squarely at the facts of nature.

Thus, while "A Boundless Moment" describes a trivial incident and gives us a pleasant picture with only the slightest hint of sorrow, it is very much like "Bereft," where a scene symbolic of intense sorrow serves to express the same view of man's relation to nature:

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
Holding open a restive door,
Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
Summer was past and day was past.
Somber clouds in the west were massed.
Out in the porch's sagging floor,
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.

The speaker of this poem has just suffered some terrible bereavement, and his utter loneliness is embodied in the bleakness of the landscape. There is something ominous in the darkening sky and a blind hostility in the dead leaves which swirl about his legs. He is overwhelmed by the sense of complete isolation. He has "no one left but God," and it does not seem that he will find any comfort there, for God, as he mentions him, is merely the last resort of the desperate. Yet for all its gloom, "Bereft" is not a poem of despair. The very fact that the speaker can recognize in the landscape the full extent of his loneliness shows the mind's capacity for courage.

In both his nature poems and his pastorals the poet portrays average human experience by projecting it into a world remote and distinct. Nature, as Frost conceives it, is really a kind of wild-life Arcadia, and in writing of scenery and animals he uses it in much the same way as he uses the mythic rural New England in his pastorals. Like his rural New England, nature evokes paradoxical attitudes: on the one hand it is a realm of ideals where the essential realities are found in their pristine forms; on the other it is an inferior plane where life is crude, insensate, mechanical. Most important, however, nature is separate, independent, off by itself away from man, just as the country north of Boston is separate from the urban environment of modern America.

And because Frost's basic method is the same, the structure of the nature poems is also similar. As we have already noted, he is able to focus broad areas of experience within his sketches and anecdotes of Yankee life because the very remoteness of the rural scene suggests parallels. The same is true of his nature poetry. By insisting upon the remoteness of nature he directs attention to the patterns in nature which correspond to those in human experience. In "Nothing Gold Can Stay" this analogical method is obvious:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

The first five lines are mainly descriptive, and it may seem that the poem merely expresses regret for the transience of natural beauty. Then, in the sixth line, the image is suddenly placed in a new context. The loss of beauty in the leaf is likened to the loss of innocence in Eden. One feels a mixture of sadness and inevitability in the change from gold to green. The subject is not just the passing of a beautiful sight, but the corruption which seems to be a necessary part of maturing. The fall of man reveals this in human nature taken as a whole, and through the next image - "So dawn goes down to day" - we see the same process in the cosmos. Since the period from dawn to sunset is the established symbol of the individual life span, one can hardly avoid the suggestion that each man suffers a similar loss as he develops from childhood to maturity. However, this need not be insisted upon; what is important is Frost's method of comparing a process in the human sphere with a process in nature. The analogies do not weaken his description - quite the opposite. The leaves seem preternaturally bright, because they hold so much meaning for man. We do not look away from the leaves to Eden, to dawn, to the life of the average man. We see all in a single line of vision. This is the perspective of pastoral, and when we turn from imagery to the emotional tone of the poem, we find a characteristically pastoral irony. The tiny leaves, seemingly so trivial, enfold the problem of man's fate!

Frost does not always spell out his parallels in such an explicit way. As a rule the analogies are implied rather than stated. By insisting on the remoteness of nature he can suggest ever-widening circles of correspondences in the human sphere without seeming to depart from pure description. "Range-Finding" is a good illustration of the way this is done:

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
And cut a flower beside a ground bird's nest
Before it stained a single human breast.
The stricken flower bent double and so hung.
And still the bird revisited her young.
A butterfly its fall had dispossessed
A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
Then lightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.
On the bare upland pasture there had spread
O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
And straining cables wet with silver dew.
A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,

But finding nothing, sullenly withdrew.

The upland pasture contains two distinct worlds, the battlefield where the human struggle is played out and the realm of the bird, the butterfly, and the spider. Though man's world is superimposed upon theirs, he cannot ever penetrate it. A flower is bent double by a range-finding bullet, but the creatures of the field go about their life undisturbed. And even should the battle burn out the grass and destroy its inhabitants, man will not truly have broken in upon this other world, for the issues of victory, courage, and suffering can have no meaning in nature.

What the contrast reveals is something far more subtle than mere difference. The world of nature comes to serve as a commentary on the human world, as we see in the way the spider responds to the range-finding bullet. The bullet has been fired with the sinister intent of groping out a human target, but for him it is only a false alarm and he "sullenly" withdraws. Granted that human concerns are nothing to him, yet his nonchalance at a moment when men are about to be slaughtered by the thousands is startling. But in a sense he is right. It matters little to him what shook his web, so long as it was not a fly. If he is ignorant of what the bullet portends for him, perhaps it is for the best, for though the tanks are about to grind over him there is no way to escape. In terms of his own world, the spider is perfectly wise. The slightest vibration sends him scurrying up his cables - how much more subtle than the brute force of the bullet, which only approximates its target! One admires the delicate response of the spider because, in his closed world, he is perfectly efficient, and so too are the ground bird as she hovers tenderly over her young and the butterfly delicately poised on the broken flower .

This view of nature has the same fundamental irony one finds in Frost's pastoral scenes. It suggests that the natural world is better than man's. It is pure, simple, innocent. Man's cruel purposes cannot invade it. At the same time, however, we are not allowed to forget that it is far below the human sphere. The spider, the ground bird, and the butterfly are ignorant of the bullet's momentous meaning. They live mechanically and are incapable of the intense suffering of the human struggle.

But Frost does more here than give us a picture of nature. The poem is about the beginning of a battle. The irony the comparison with nature reveals serves as a means of evaluating this battle, and by extension all warfare. Human acts are decisive. While nature goes on blindly in an unchanging pattern and with a power undiminished, the range-finder will eventually feel out his target, and men will die. For man death is an absolute, and this makes the events of his life meaningful. The passing bullet is not just an accident. It symbolizes the very issue of survival. Man's consciousness of death shows how wide the human range of experience is compared with nature's narrow confines. He thinks, he feels, he suffers, while nature only exists. Granted, the battle represents folly and cruelty, but it also represents man's intense awareness of life. This awareness is only possible on the human plane, where consciousness gives the individual a life separate from that of the species and thus makes real death possible. Nature, which cannot die, though the particular spider and bird may be killed, does not really live either. And by the same token, only the human act has ethical meaning. The spider is a mere predator; the bird's care for her young is just instinct. Only man is capable of the bullet's malice. Only in the human battle are cruelty and heroism possible.

I have discussed the nature poems in which suffering is the subject because in them we see most clearly how the contrast between man and nature enables Frost to deal with major issues of human life. But the contrast reveals beauty as well as horror, love as well as loneliness. Frost's affection for

nature, like his fear of it, is based on a sense of analogy. "Two Look at Two" is a perfect example. A young couple out for an evening walk have climbed part way up a wooded hillside, when darkness comes and they can go no further. They feel a wistful disappointment. It would be nice to go on, to penetrate deeper into nature, but it is too dark and the "failing path" would be treacherous:

They stood facing this,
Spending what onward impulse they still had
In one last look the way they must not go ...

'This is all,' they sighed,
'Goodnight to woods.' But not so; there was more.

A doe and after her "an antlered buck of lusty nostril" appear on the other side of the wall to stare at them in blank puzzlement and then pass on unscared. To the deer they appear as mysterious as the deer seem to them:

Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.

'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood,

A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

It is the very distance between humanity and nature that makes the recognition so poignant. The man and woman cannot enter nature or identify themselves with it. Symbolically, they must stop at a wall - beyond this the path is too dangerous. They do not dare "To stretch a proffering hand - and a spell-breaking." The deer would merely run away. They can only reach nature in thought through the recognition of analogy. The words " 'This must be all.' It was all" echo the grim conclusion of "The Most of It" - "and that was all." There the great buck represented the remoteness of nature; in this poem the deer are a sign of something parallel in nature and man. But there is still the impassable gulf - the horror at man's isolation and the delight in finding resemblances are aspects of a single view.

Wherever Frost treats nature sympathetically, one finds this process of discovering analogies. Whether he writes about a songbird or a seascape there is always a glimpse of something ironically parallel to human experience. The sweet pathos of "The Oven Bird" comes from the tone of human regret in his song. He sings sadly of summer, remembering spring, just as man looks upon his everyday life with the discontent of one who judges reality by the dream of Eden:

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

In "Devotion" the shore holds the sea in a lover's embrace:

The heart can think of no devotion
Greater than being shore to ocean -

Holding the curve of one position,
Counting an endless repetition.

"Hyla Brook," "Unharvested," "Canis Major," "The Last Mowing," and "Tree at My Window" represent variations of the same basic pattern. And comparing these more cheerful pieces with such poems as "Design" and "Desert Places," one sees that the analogical design can, by a slight shift of emphasis, reveal the horror rather than the beauty in nature.

A final aspect of the nature poetry and one of the most important is Frost's strong tendency to personification. The device is common enough in poems about nature, and most readers are likely to take an unfavorable view of it. It suggests a sentimental pantheism or oversimple allegorizing. Frost's personifications, however, are different from those to which the Romantics have accustomed us. Their personifications generally take the form of brief metaphor, while his are nearly always extended analogies. Keats' ode, "To Autumn," illustrates the point well, for while the season is likened to a woman, the poet does not develop the comparison, but rather suggests through a series of brilliant descriptive images her mysterious presence in the autumn scene. The human and the natural are not compared but blended. Obviously Frost's mode of personification is more explicit and consciously rendered. He does not merely liken things in nature to man, he explores the resemblance, usually at some length. Analogy is the lens through which he examines nature, and personification, which is simply the analogy between man and a natural object, is therefore a primary means of seeing. Frost's preference for personification is indicative of his whole manner of conceiving nature, for such a mode of sustained comparison is only possible within the framework of a world view in which the natural and the human are conceived as distinct and separate yet parallel planes.

This contrast makes the human qualities of Frost's animals stand out with startling boldness. The effect is a quaintness and extravagance which seem more akin to the medieval beast fable than to Romantic nature poetry. Often his personifications approach the absurd, as in "The Runaway," where the folksy and almost lugubrious tone illustrates how easily the device may get out of hand. Frost seems to be aware of the danger, however, for generally his treatment of animals is humorous. Consider the fine irony of the epigram entitled "Waspish":

On glossy wires artistically bent,
He draws himself up to his full extent.
His natty wings with self-assurance perk.
His stinging quarters menacingly work.
Poor egotist, he has no way of knowing
But he's as good as anybody going.

While such humor may be a necessary safeguard against absurdity, Frost's technique of personification serves serious purposes, and it would be an error to mistake his animal poems for mere light verse. "Departmental" for example, may be taken as a comic poem, but its humor is actually a means of portraying such serious matters as the blinding effects of custom and the indifference of the group to the individual. The poem is a perfect illustration of his pastoral method. Here human society is viewed through the analogy of an ant hive, and we are made to see the absurdity of man's allegiance to an impersonal social order by watching the ants as they discover the

death of one of their workers:

Ants are a curious race;
One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead
Isn't given a moment's arrest -
Seems not even impressed.
But he no doubt reports to any
With whom he crosses antennae,
And they no doubt report
To the higher up at court.
Then word goes forth in Formic:
'Death's come to Jerry McCormic.'

The poem then describes with savage irony the governmental red tape of the instructions for Jerry's burial, the mortician-ant's cold professionalism, and the general indifference of the public. By picturing the ant colony as a miniature society, Frost reveals the resemblance between the stultifying effects of departmentalism among men and the blindly mechanical operations of insect life. The whimsical effects of the comparison are of the very essence, for the poem is funny just because it explores the resemblance between ants and men so thoroughly. And such thoroughness is only possible for a poet who sees man and nature separated by a boundary which is both definite and inalterable.

Footnotes:

1. "Tree at My Window."
2. "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.'"
3. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1947). pp. 151-4. The view I favor is pretty close to that of F. R. Leavis in "Wordsworth." *Revaluation* (New York, 1947). pp. 154-85.
4. See W. K. Wimsatt. "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1954). pp. 103-16.
5. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Late Years*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford University Press, 1939), I, 134-5.
6. "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things."
7. "To Earthward."
8. As the poet once remarked to me, "You know, there is nothing after this."