
In the Clearing: *Continuity and Unity in Frost's Dualism*

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*Frost rejected
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matter.*

One of the most significant revelations into Robert Frost's philosophical dualism of mind or spirit and of matter as the basis of all reality is the insight that emerges when his essay "On Emerson" (delivered in 1958) is read in conjunction with his remarks in "The Future of Man" symposium (1959), and both of these prose works together are perceived as prelude to the poet's climactic case for dualism in his final volume of poetry, *In the Clearing*. "On Emerson" was published in *Daedalus* (Fall of 1959); the "Future of Man" remained in several manuscript forms beyond 1959; and Frost's final collection of poetry was published at age eighty-eight, on his birthday, March 26, 1962, by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Yet it is also noteworthy that the continuity regarding Frost's dualism revealed in these works was advanced almost twenty years earlier in a conversation with some Middlebury College students in the poet's cabin near Bread Loaf, Vermont, in his strong criticism of Emerson's idealistic monism.¹ Indeed, the years 1958-1959 and 1962 mark the climactic culmination of Frost's lifelong criticism of both the spiritual form of monism, which denies the reality of matter, and the materialistic form, which denies the reality of the spirit. On the positive side these years reveal his conscious

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¹ See Peter J. Stanlis, "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," *Frost Centennial Essays*, Vol. III, ed. J. Tharpe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 287-288.

strong endorsement of a dualism that recognizes that both spirit and matter are implicated in the perception of all reality. In "On Emerson" he once more rejected the incredibly optimistic idealism in Emerson's monism. In "The Future of Man" he rebuffed Sir Julian Huxley's monism of matter. Finally, in *In the Clearing*, for the first time he extended his dualism by combining it with the uniquely creative power of the human psyche, through its interactions with matter, beyond religion and the arts into the physical sciences and the historical development of man through civil society. When read in conjunction, these three works reveal the continuity and unity in Frost's dualism during the final decade of his life.

Both spirit and matter implicated in perception of all earthly reality.

It is important to note that "On Emerson" was delivered as a speech to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, on the occasion of Frost's receiving the Emerson-Thoreau Medal in 1958, and that he therefore deliberately sought "to make myself as much an Emersonian as I can." Thus his talk begins as an expression of his great admiration of Emerson as a poet whose unique skill captured the tones of voice in actual colloquial speech, and whose ideas inspired in Frost "troubled thoughts about freedom." But regarding Emerson's moral philosophy, he identified the New England transcendentalist as "a cheerful Monist, for whom evil does not exist, or if it does exist, needn't last forever." The poet noted also that "Emerson quotes Burns as speaking to the Devil as if he could mend his ways." Frost then concluded: "A melancholy dualism is the only soundness."² He also reviewed his own "strange history" regarding his thoughts on good and evil, by way of his mother's changes in religion through Emerson, and he observed: "There is such a thing as getting too transcended. There are limits." These were almost the exact words Frost used to the Middlebury students in his cabin in July 1941.

Frost then stated his explicit dualistic objections to Emerson's idealistic monism: "And probably Emerson was too Platonic about evil. It was a mere *Tò Ûn Ov* [that which is not], a mere non-existence that could be disposed of like the butt of a cigarette." Emerson's line "Unit and Universe are round" provoked Frost to say: "Ideally in thought only is a circle round. In practice, in na-

² Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 860.

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ture, the circle becomes an oval. As a circle it has one center—Good. As an oval it has two centers—Good and Evil. Thence Monism versus Dualism.”³ Frost revered what Emerson called “the higher law of the mind,” but to him that did not mean that matter in nature should be denigrated as Evil, and that moral idealism should be made into an absolute Good. As idealistic monists, Plato and Emerson (and possibly Bishop George Berkeley) made ethical Good as absolute in theory, but to Frost as a dualist, in practice, in the daily life of man in society, good and evil were both present, and often mixed together. To disregard or minimize evil in human nature, to underestimate its power, could result in allowing it to be triumphant. During the 1920s, that was a vital point made by Sidney Cox in observing Frost’s dualism: it was the poet’s perception of man in his metaphor as a swinger of birches, between idealism and realism, that “he is constantly bringing himself down to earth.” For the poet, dualism was the only practical philosophy for man in society.

At Harvard, Irving Babbitt had espoused a dualism akin to Frost’s since the beginning of the century. Babbitt often commented on Emerson and liked some of his thought, including his critique of scientism, but was critical of Emerson’s ethereal and romantic leanings. In his first book, *Literature and the American College* (1908), Babbitt complained about Emerson’s “disquieting vagueness and lack of grip in dealing with particulars.” For Babbitt, man must, if he is to keep his sanity, “maintain the nicest balance between unity and plurality.” Not much later Babbitt’s intellectual ally Paul Elmer More published “Definitions of Dualism,” philosophical reflections on the “two elements of our being”: a unifying power and the multiplicity of impulse.⁴

Toward the end of his essay “On Emerson,” Frost anticipated the main thesis and very language he used in “Kitty Hawk” and in his theme of dualism throughout much of *In the Clearing*:

Emerson was a Unitarian because he was too rational to be superstitious and too little a story teller and lover of stories to like gossip and pretty scandal. Nothing very religious can be done for people lacking in superstition. They usually end up abominable

³ Ibid., 865.

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986; first published in 1908), 84-85, and Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays*, Vol. VIII (New York: Phaeton Press, 1963; first published in 1913), 248.

agnostics. It takes superstition and the prettiest scandal story of all to make a good Trinitarian. It is the first step in the descent of the spirit into the material-human at the risk of the spirit.⁵

According to Frost, only a good Trinitarian could understand and accept the virgin birth of Christ and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Toward the end of his life, although Frost showed an increasing awareness and concern about the conflicts between spirit and matter, he also extended their unity by exploring the harmony between them in religious orthodoxy. In "On Emerson" he defended spirit in supernatural revealed religion against the rationalism that usually ends up producing "abominable agnostics"; and in "The Future of Man" symposium he attacked the self-sufficient rationalism of Sir Julian Huxley, for exalting agnosticism or atheism in defense of absolute matter against any belief in spirit. In such poems as "Skeptic," "Astrometaphysical," "Why Wait for Science," and "Some Science Fiction," he expressed his own skepticism about the absolute claims of scientific metaphysics rooted in a monism of matter.

In the first of three recorded or edited versions of "The Future of Man" symposium (1959), Frost accepted the challenge to prophesy about mankind's future destiny within evolutionary and historical time. His response was in terms of what he perceived as human originality and creative power, of what he called the "energy and daring" shown in establishing law and order in the recorded life of mankind. Within temporal history, the great dynastic issues that confront the dominant world political powers in every era, "like the one between Persia and Greece, Rome and Carthage, Christendom and Islam," and in contemporary times between the United States and Soviet Russia, result in some form of resolution. Beyond history, evolution presents a different kind of question. The great unresolved evolutionary problem for human nature as a biological species is "are we going to be another kind of people?" Frost denied that there would be an evolutionary development "from us to superman," because "our self-consciousness is terminal—there is nothing beyond us." The evolutionary metaphor, "the tree of life . . . has reached its growth." The poet prophesized that the dualism that has characterized the past

⁵ Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 866. Frost did not use "superstition" as a pejorative word.

evolutionary experience of mankind would continue to be permanent and paramount in the life of the human species:

It will go on blossoming and having its seasons—I'd give it another hundred or two hundred million years. Make that anything you please. It'll go on leaving out and blossoming into successions of the doubleness, I foresee, just like the doubleness of the sexes. There'll be two parties always to it, some way. . . . The tree . . . in itself has all the doubleness I see, good and evil, two sexes⁶

To Frost, the dualism of spirit and matter, of the two sexes, and of good and evil, was built right into the evolutionary process. What he called "the challenge . . . between man's originality and his law and order," which determined both historical changes and the course of evolution in man, is rooted in the creative power in the mind or spirit of man as a species, as part of his dualistic nature.

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In the second or originally unpublished version of "The Future of Man" symposium, Frost paid special tribute to science as "the most formidable" power in man's future challenges. But then he added a very significant qualification: "But philosophy has been formidable too." He made it clear that the most formidable element in philosophy was dualism. A third force shaping man's future destiny is government, because it has ultimate control over the practical uses of science in the social order and because rulers determine which philosophical beliefs will be applied in practice. The challenge that science poses is what modern government is going to do with the latest discoveries, inventions, technologies, and advances of scientists. Frost observed that the swift progress in scientific knowledge and theory creates serious problems for governments: "It seems a shame to come on you with our new novelties when you are hardly up around after what Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley did to you last century."⁷ But the formidable power in dualistic philosophy, in the creativity of the human spirit, and even in that which is centered in the procreative instincts, also determines future changes: "People are still pairing for love and money" through "passionate preference." Science is much, Frost conceded, but as he had said on several past occasions, it is only "'one of the humanities.'" Science, he claimed, "is man's greatest enterprise. It is the charge of the ethereal into the

⁶ Frost, "The Future of Man," in *Collected Poems. Prose and Plays*, 868.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 869.

material. It is our substantiation of our meaning. It can't go too far or too deep for me."⁸ His theme and the very language of religion—"the charge of the ethereal into the material," and "substantiation"—are almost identical to the metaphors in his poems in "Cluster of Faith" and "Kitty Hawk" in his final volume. In the first poem in his last book, "Pod of the Milkweed," his comments on "waste" in evolution also anticipated the themes in some of the poems in his final volume. Even though some of the poems were written before the symposium on "The Future of Man," they contribute to a better understanding of the poet's views on science in the light of his philosophical dualism.

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The third version of "The Future of Man" symposium, revised and extended by Frost himself, appeared in Edward C. Lathem's *Interviews with Robert Frost* (1966), under the significant title "Of Passionate Preference." It is more specific and detailed than the two earlier versions about the mechanisms of evolutionary changes in the human species and indirectly about dualism in the poet's confrontation with Sir Julian's monism of matter. During the last half of the symposium, when the participants were subjected to questions and comments by three shrewd journalists, mainly regarding Darwin's principle of "natural selection," Frost challenged Huxley to identify the method of evolutionary changes in man. The scientist was clearly ill at ease in his response, because he could not justify a wholly external mechanistic and materialistic force or method to explain how evolutionary changes have lifted man upward. Finally, he intimated that chance had arbitrarily determined evolutionary biological changes in man.

Frost countered by specifying that "passionate preference" was the most vital instrument in human natural selection. Passionate preference clearly included the whole human psyche, centered in the will and reason of man, and all that was involved in man's power of creativity. But then Frost added a new dimension to the evolutionary mix; he identified "passionate preference" as "a Biblical thing." This meant that love, as understood within orthodox revealed religion between God and man, and between the two sexes in procreation, rather than chance, biology, and the law of the jungle, was the most vital factor in the poet's conception of natural selection and evolution. The full impact of this belief

⁸ *Ibid.*, 870.

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would become evident in the critical commentaries on Frost's poems in "Cluster of Faith," especially in "Accidentally on Purpose," as a prelude to "Kitty Hawk." But in the symposium, the poet's main criticism of Sir Julian Huxley was directed against the scientist's social theory, prophecy and extension of the growing modern welfare state into an ideological future Utopian social order that he called "the fulfillment society." Huxley's international social theory was the logical extension of his Marxist materialism. He believed that a secular system of education based upon the physical sciences that assumed a monism of matter, and transcended nationalism, would ultimately result in the establishment of one-world government. Nothing could be more completely opposed to Frost's philosophical dualism and his view of the social order and politics of free men under constitutional law than Huxley's monistic and materialistic vision of mankind's historical future.

The social and political issues raised during Frost's conflict with Sir Julian Huxley continued to concern the poet for the remaining four years of his life. About six weeks after the symposium, on November 19, 1959, during a poetry reading at the Fountain Street Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, between reading poems he interspersed comments on his conflict with Huxley.⁹ He recalled some of his most trenchant critical remarks during the symposium—on pure science, on the place of science within the humanities, and on the "double meanings" in the Bible. Although he softened his personal criticism of Huxley, he remained adamantly opposed to the scientist's belief that an international united world government would eventually displace the legal sovereignty of existing independent nations. He condemned the idea of a compulsory social benevolence or political "togetherness" implicit in Huxley's monistic theory; he referred to "the one-sided crowd that think we can have one world, no more nations and all that." He opposed Huxley's monistic world politics with an aphorism that he frequently had applied to poetry and that he had voiced to President John F. Kennedy in defense of a foreign policy centered in national self-interest: "The separateness

⁹ For a detailed account of this poetry reading, and Frost's interspersed remarks, see Lisa Seal, ed., "Robert Frost at the Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 19 November, 1959," *The Robert Frost Review*, No. 13 (Fall 2003), 12-33, also 15-16.

of the parts is equally important with the connection of the parts." During the summers of 1961 and 1962, Frost repeated in discussions with me at Bread Loaf his statement to Kennedy while recalling his conflict with Huxley during the symposium on the future of man.

But the philosophical, scientific, and political issues raised by Frost's differences with Huxley are most evident in his final volume of poetry. *In the Clearing* was published on Frost's eighty-eighth birthday, March 26, 1962. Because it is consciously and deliberately connected with so many of his most important beliefs held throughout his long life, it can well be regarded as his last poetic will and testament, his confession of faith as a philosophical poet. The word "philosophical" is here obviously not meant to suggest that he wished to be didactic but that he wanted to speak poetically about humanity's central questions. Frost died late in January 1963. The very title of *In the Clearing* hearkens back to "The Pasture" in *A Boy's Will* (1913), especially to the metaphorical line "and wait to watch the water clear." The continuity with the poet's past is also evident in his dedication, to his early closest and most devoted friends, John Bartlett, Sidney Cox, and Louis Untermeyer. To them he had first confided his ambition as a boy to come into his own as a great poet. Just as "The Pasture" ends with an invitation, "you come too," to share in his long journey as a poet, so too his final dedication includes an unidentified "you," certainly an echo of his first dedication to his wife, Eleanor Frost, but also including friends and the general public. Some commentators have also suggested that the invitation includes his secretary, Kay Morrison. Frost always counted upon those closest to him in spirit to know how to "take" him, both as a man and in his self-belief as a poet, and ultimately in his dualistic philosophy. In "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," he had refined upon the couplet in "Into My Own," on how in time his friends would understand him, "only more sure of all I thought was true":

We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain.

All that Frost thought was true attained its final refinement in the themes of dualism involving spirit and matter in *In the Clearing*.

There is nothing mechanistic about Frost's extension of his dualistic beliefs, because his eclectic and complex mind was never fixed rigidly upon any one philosophical system of thought, but

was always open to consider and absorb whatever he found valid through his experiences of life. The continuity recognizable in his final volume, therefore, is not merely a logical extension of his previous art and thought. It includes fresh developments and intuitional insights in the forms, style, techniques, and content of his poems, and in the themes of his beliefs as a dualist. Although his final collection falls short as art when compared with *North of Boston* or *New Hampshire*, in his dualism Frost truly came into his own in his final collection of poems. Within its great diversity, *In the Clearing* provides a continuity and unity that is the fitting climax of his affirmative beliefs.

The poet acknowledged that the most important poem in his final book is "Kitty Hawk," and any critical summation or "afterthoughts" on his philosophical dualism must take that poem into full account. But "Kitty Hawk" is itself introduced by five poems, significantly called "Cluster of Faith."¹⁰ The first two poems in this group, which Frost set off as a unit, are clearly an explicit sequel to his differences with Sir Julian Huxley as well as a prelude to "Kitty Hawk." In light of all that he had said previously on science, evolution, God's purposes, and love, the first poem in "Cluster of Faith" is especially significant:

Accidentally on Purpose

The universe is but the Thing of things,
The things but balls all going round in rings.
Some of them mighty huge, some mighty tiny,
All of them radiant and mighty shiny.

They mean to tell us all was rolling blind
Till accidentally it hit on mind
In an albino monkey in a jungle
And even then it had to grope and bungle,

Till Darwin came to earth upon a year
To show the evolution how to steer.
They mean to tell us, though, the Omnibus
Had no real purpose till it got to us.

Never believe it. At the very worst

¹⁰ The poems in "Cluster of Faith" repeat and echo statements made by Frost's friend Rabbi Victor Reichert in talks with Peter Stanlis at Bread Loaf during the last two summers of the poet's life. The influence of Reichert's Biblical beliefs on Frost's religious thought in "Cluster of Faith," and in *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*, remains an important, insufficiently explored subject.

It must have had the purpose from the first
To produce purpose as the fitter bred:
We were just purpose coming to a head.

Whose purpose was it? His or Hers or Its?
Let's leave that to the scientific wits.
Grant me intention, purpose, and design—
That's near enough for me to the Divine.

And yet for all this help of head and brain
How happily instinctive we remain,
Our best guide upward further to the light,
Passionate preference such as love at sight.

Undoubtedly, there is much room for a metaphorical range of interpretations of this poem. But, in light of Frost's conflicts with "the three generations of Huxleys," nothing is more evident than that "Accidentally on Purpose" emphatically rejects the whole Victorian ethos regarding evolution as interpreted by Thomas Henry Huxley and his grandson. A close reading of this poem provides some strong hints of Frost's own anti-Huxley alternatives in interpreting Darwin's theory. Among other possibilities, the poem includes not only the poet's conception of "intention, purpose, and design" as God's will and reason, but also the cosmic role of love in giving shape and meaning to the universe.

The first stanza describes the physical cosmos as perceived by physicists. The second and third stanzas summarize Julian Huxley's interpretation of evolution as set forth during "The Future of Man" symposium. Frost was particularly skeptical of Huxley's claim, so often put forth since the time of Thomas Henry Huxley and other Victorian scientists, that through the evolutionary process the mind or spirit of man as a biological species was gradually derived from matter. Such an unproved assumption or belief, the poet contended, meant that the universe had no meaning until Darwin's conception of "natural selection" provided mankind with a biological yet mechanistic basis in matter for belief in a purposeful evolving universe. But even granting Huxley's assumption, Darwin's theory and principle of natural selection provided no empirical or rational evidence for faith in a purposeful universe. Frost's emphatic rejection of Julian Huxley, beginning with the fourth stanza, "never believe it," fills the final three stanzas with some of his alternative views and beliefs regarding man in relation to the physical universe. And beyond the physical uni-

verse, Frost perceived meaningful purpose within historical rather than evolutionary time, in the social life of man as distinct from life in the jungle.

Frost believed that among the enduring mysteries of the origin and purpose of the universe, including man as a species, neither science, nor religion, nor philosophy, nor art had yet solved beyond doubt the unresolved questions regarding God, man, and physical nature. Whatever men believed was far more a matter of faith than of knowledge. In *A Masque of Reason* (1945), Job had lamented to God the lack of decisive knowledge in man's attempts to penetrate the great mysteries:

We don't know where we are, or who we are,
We don't know one another; don't know You;
Don't know what time it is. . . .

Man's limited knowledge concerning life's mysteries not cause for despair.

Job's appeals to God to provide man with rational answers to life's mysteries provoked much equivocation on the part of God; He remained unwilling to satisfy Job's request. The same theme regarding the great unsolved mysteries is repeated with variations seventeen years later in "A Cabin in the Clearing." The human condition is characterized by man's lack of knowledge regarding the mysteries, and this is the source of many bitter conflicts. This theme is central in "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep," yet man's limited knowledge did not lead Frost into despair or cynicism regarding purpose in the universe. Neither did it result in contempt for human nature in its persistent attempts to penetrate the unknown, as was claimed by Lionel Trilling in his shallow analysis of that poem. On the contrary, Frost had a sense of awe and reverence toward human nature for persisting and remaining steadfast in its belief and faith that man's life on Earth had a purpose. In "A Cabin in the Clearing," as in the positive beliefs expressed in the "Cluster of Faith" poems and in "Kitty Hawk," Frost praised "the sleepers in the house" for clearing the woods back from around the house, even though this knowledge did not solve the great mystery of their nature or orientation in the universe:

And still I doubt if they know where they are.
And I begin to fear they never will.

But, contrary to Trilling and other literary critics, Frost expressed a positive view of the faith of mankind that extends beyond man's limited knowledge:

No one—not I—would give them up for lost
Simply because they don't know where they are.

These lines present the poet's alternative to any dogmatic claims that the universe is without purpose or meaning, without any guide upward toward the light of knowledge and belief.

In the final stanza of "Accidentally on Purpose" he identified human consciousness and the instinct of passionate love beyond biology as a basis for upward mobility that transcends a merely mechanistic and deterministic conception of evolution through "natural selection." Frost believed that mankind has the power to change both evolutionary and historical developments and thus to provide meaning and direction to both its temporal and spiritual destiny. In place of the conception of evolution offered by the three generations of Huxleys, Frost proposed "passionate preference such as love at sight." In this climactic line, he conflated Walt Whitman's phrase, "passionate preference," with a compressed, version of Christopher Marlowe's line from "Hero and Leander" (line 176), "whoever loved, that loved not at first sight?" This fusing of Whitman and Marlowe is one of Frost's most brilliant original acts of creative imagination, achieved through literary allusions. In the last line of "Accidentally on Purpose" he snatched a grace beyond the reach of art and made man's conscious purpose, not accident or chance, the essential element in evolution and history. His poem is a triumphant trumpet blast that refuted Julian Huxley and was the prelude to his expanded dualism of spirit and matter in the theme of "Kitty Hawk."

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Whereas, as George Santayana had pointed out, Whitman had applied the phrase "passionate preference" to the average American's faith and devotion to democracy as his favored form of government, leading to improvements in human affairs in civil society, Frost extended the phrase to include evolution and history, seen as involving spirit and matter, and made it the central theme in "Kitty Hawk." By identifying "passionate preference" as "a Biblical thing," the poet expanded its meaning beyond biology and politics to include ethics and the realm of religion and even the creative power of man that included art, science, and the evolution of civil society from primitive to modern times. Whereas Whitman had limited "passionate preference" to politics, and Julian Huxley had restricted the procreative instinct in human nature to biology and physical nature—to what Frost called "an al-

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bino monkey in a jungle”—the poet elevated the meaning of the term beyond lust in a pre-civil state of physical nature to the level of love between the sexes as directed by a moral code in religion within an historically evolved society. By combining Whitman’s phrase with Marlowe’s conception of intuitive love, Frost gave love a religious, moral, and aesthetic dimension, governed by a code of behavior. His view of the evolutionary and historical development of human nature attributed the formative force not to physical nature but to organized civil society and religion and, above all, the creative power in human nature. Within organized society, which is something very different from the jungle of nature, the union of the sexes in marriage, whether perceived as a social contract or a sacrament, made love a dualistic fusion of spirit and body. As Frost’s principle of natural selection, love was far more than a matter of physical necessity. By including spirit in the evolutionary process, he harmonized religion and science and made creative evolution his substitute for how the three generations of Huxleys had interpreted Darwin’s theory.

In “Kitty Hawk” Frost acknowledged that love is one of the mysteries that baffle human knowledge: “There’s no knowing what/ Love is all about.” As a factor in genetics, Frost’s conception of love included spirit, and therefore it transcended Gregor Mendel’s laws of genetics as botany or biology transmitting dominant or recessive genes according to fixed mathematical and predictable patterns. To the poet, changes in the human species through evolution included biological and physical matters accessible to science, but also such elements as aesthetic, moral, religious, and social considerations and laws. The Biblical dimension in Frost’s account of God’s “intention, purpose, and design” was manifested in love beyond lust; it included God’s love for mankind as a species. This love provided what was most lacking in Darwin’s theory as understood by so many of his Victorian and modern disciples. Although Darwin knew nothing about Mendel’s laws of genetics, Julian Huxley was thoroughly familiar with the Austrian monk’s experiments in botany. Yet in Huxley’s account of the twentieth-century revival of Darwin’s theory through a synthesis of the physical sciences beyond biology, his genetics remained rooted in a monism of matter. The ultimate basis of Frost’s quarrel with Huxley in “The Future of Man” symposium was more than a disagreement regarding biology. Their differences

were philosophical: Matter was for Frost not physicalistic and mechanistic; it interacted with, and was, in a sense, even indistinguishable from spirit. The poet's dualism and Huxley's monism of matter could not be reconciled.

In the second poem in "Cluster of Faith," "A Never Naught Song," the opening couplet summarizes the main theme in Frost's criticism of Julian Huxley in "Accidentally on Purpose": "There was never naught/ There was always thought." The poet assumed that even before the creation of the physical universe, God always existed, as a spirit infinitely perfect. He acknowledged the importance of matter, but he placed a premium upon man's mind or spirit as the source of perceptions of all earthly reality as "caught . . . by the force of thought." The full import of the dimensions of his theme in "A Never Naught Song" was anticipated in Frost's Horatian poem, "The Lesson for Today," in *A Witness Tree*, in the long passage that begins "Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space," and concludes with "So science and religion really meet." In "A Never Naught Song" Frost acknowledged that undoubtedly a universe consisting of matter had to exist before man as a species of life appeared on Earth. This meant that a monism of matter, though hardly of the kind assumed by the Huxleys, existed for God before it could be perceived dualistically by the mind or spirit of man:

It was in a state
Of atomic One.
Matter was begun
And in fact complete,
One and yet discrete
To conflict and pair.
Everything was there
Every single thing
Waiting was to bring,
Clear from hydrogen
All the way to men.

Frost concluded this highly speculative poem on the hypothetical physical origins of the universe, and even of man, with what may be a concession to the philosophical idealism and monism of Bishop George Berkeley:

So the picture's caught
Almost next to naught
But the force of thought.

But as Sidney Cox had observed, Frost "is constantly bringing

"On earth things are dual."

himself down to earth," and "on earth things are dual." This meant that once man was created, or evolved, "the force of thought" in the perception of matter and all things on earth replaced God's original creation of matter as a self-sufficient monism with man's dualistic perception of matter. As Berkeley was to argue: "to be is to be perceived."

Humor not incompatible with seriousness.

The third poem in "Cluster of Faith," "Version," compares God as the creator of the universe to an archer who "shot a shaft/ On a new departure." Frost believed that, like all acts of original creativity, God's "new departure" involved moral courage and intellectual daring, particularly when man was created. The creation of the universe and man was fraught with risks and dangerous possibilities of potential tragedy, a hazard that needed to be accepted, but which was balanced off with the spirit of comedy. This meant that, as creator of all reality and life, God had to have a profound sense of humor: "Then He must have laughed/ Comedy was in it." By way of analogy, the creative power in human nature also needed to include the potential for both comedy and tragedy. This view was consistent with Frost's contention over many years that all good creative writing needed to include the dualism of "the pleasure of alteriority," that is, of wit, irony, humor, or ambiguity—essential ways of establishing the dramatic "tone" or sense of "play" even in serious discourse. Perceiving a sense of comedy in God confirms and gives metaphysical substance to Frost's statement that he was never more serious than when he was joking. Like the dynamic interaction of mind or spirit with matter, comedy and tragedy play ambiguously in the dualistic conflicts in the complex life of man on earth. The theme of comedy in "Version" is confirmed and extended from God to man and then made reciprocal, from man to God, in Frost's final, untitled, and often quoted couplet in "Cluster of Faith":

Forgive O Lord my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

Finally, serving as a prelude to "Kitty Hawk," these contentions about comedy and God's sense of humor help to explain, and perhaps to justify, Frost's joke in the whimsical verse form and technique in "Kitty Hawk," his most important serious poem in *In the Clearing*.

The fifth poem in "Cluster of Faith," "A Concept-Self-Conceived," expressly rejects the kind of monism (of matter) that is "no more

than good old Pantheism." It is at once a rebuttal of monism and a serious prelude to the dualism and comic spirit that permeates "Kitty Hawk." Taken together, all five poems in "Cluster of Faith" prefigure and introduce the serious subject and worldview of "Kitty Hawk" and also its whimsical form, technique, and tone. At the same time, all of the poems in *In the Clearing* illuminate Frost's entire life as a poet and an intellectual, specifically, all that he voiced about creativity and dualism in prose and poetry, during his poetry readings and in conversations with friends.

Before examining Frost's dualism in "Kitty Hawk," it is useful to take note of the importance that he attached to this poem as well as the most unusual verse form and technique in which it is cast. The history of its composition underscores the great concern that he had for "Kitty Hawk." It was first published in booklet form as his Christmas poem in 1956. It consisted of 128 lines. In November 1957 it appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, drastically revised and now in 482 lines. After further minor revisions, it appeared in *Anthology of Magazine Verse* for 1958.¹¹ Following an interview with John Ciardi, a new concentrated version of sixty-four lines was published in *The Saturday Review* (March 21, 1959), in which, for the first time, Frost's mature view of science as part of man's original creativity was made explicit. All sixty-four lines were incorporated into the final version of "Kitty Hawk."¹²

The history of its composition underscores the importance for Frost of "Kitty Hawk."

The structure, verse form, technique, and light tone in presenting the deeply serious subjects in "Kitty Hawk" have appeared incongruous, or at least aesthetically lacking in harmony, to many literary critics whose conventional assumptions regarding serious poetry are too restrictive. The "in-and-outdoor-schooling" that Frost said was required to understand and appreciate his sense of humor is not easily mastered. First, it is necessary to set aside the common conventional assumption that serious discourse on such subjects as the nature of man and the universe or on the spiritual destiny of man must necessarily be presented in the form and tone of solemn *gravitas* and with somber demeanor, in an exalted and rhetorical blank verse like "the Chinese wall" of John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

¹¹ *Anthology of Magazine Verse* (New York: Schulte's Book Store, 1959).

¹² For a complete bibliographical account of "Kitty Hawk," see Jeffrey S. Cramer, *Robert Frost Among His Poems* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1996), 169-171.

*Poetry never
served for
Frost as a
substitute for
religious faith.*

Frost once asserted that the creation of form, however trivial, “stroked faith the right way.” In his adherence to the traditional verse forms and techniques of English poetry, he shared a bond of aesthetic fellowship with poets from past ages. His sense of creative identity with a past tradition of poetry served the same general and psychological function as corporate membership in a church did for religious believers who shared a common faith, or as national self-identity for citizens, or even as school pride for students attending the same institution of learning. Frost’s deep reverence for the humanities was a broader cultural version of the same thing; it extended his aesthetic and intellectual identity even to the Ancient Greek and Latin poets. But, unlike Matthew Arnold, Frost never confounded the nature and function of art with those of religion. For him, poetry was never a substitute for faith or for the doctrines or liturgy of any institutional religion. While art and religion often supplemented each other in a nation’s culture, they remained distinct. But Frost assumed that, as an art form, poetry was capable of much originality, so that the light tones of comedy, or the spirit of fables like Mother Goose, could be utilized even in serious discourse. Alexander Pope’s dictum that in poetry “the sound must seem an echo to the sense” did not mean for Frost that the tone of *gravitas* could not be balanced, or even displaced, by humor, irony, and light comedy.

In “Kitty Hawk” he challenged himself to write in the light form, technique, and tone of comedy a serious poem expressing his dualism, which involves both the spirit of religion and the matter studied by science. This demand upon his aesthetic imagination also applied to his readers, who had to have the ability, willingness and taste to accept his unconventional verse form. Among his predecessors in such an unusual enterprise in English poetry, he praised John Skelton (1460?-1529), the Tudor poet-laureate and teacher of Prince Henry (Henry VIII). Skelton castigated abuses in church and state in a verse form described as “a headlong voluble breathless doggerel . . . rattling and clashing on through quick recurring rhymes.”¹³ In a similar vein, Frost introduced “Kitty

¹³ Sir Paul Harvey, ed., *The Oxford Companion in English Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 760. In “Colin Cloute,” Skelton appealed to his readers in much the same way that Frost hoped he would be taken in “Kitty Hawk” regarding his whimsical light verse form: “For though my ryme be ragged/ Tattered and jagged/ Rudely rayne beaten/ Rusty and moth eaten/ If ye take well therein/ It hath in it some pyth.”

Hawk" as "a skylark . . . in three-beat phrases." During a conversation with me in 1961, he praised the "hyperdithramic meters of Ogden Nash"; he insisted that such bantering good humor and wit was a fit vehicle for serious ideas. He noted, furthermore, that William Blake's simple lyrical verse forms in *Songs of Innocence* were also utilized in his far more serious *Songs of Experience*. But in "Kitty Hawk" Frost refined upon the methods of such contemporaries and predecessors by taking for his touchstone of comedy the parables and metaphors of fairy stories, especially *Mother Goose*.

During his early friendship with Sidney Cox, just before and after World War One, he had engaged often in banter about the serious function of humor and wit as a metaphor in the art of poetry. He told Cox that "you start, say, with a jingle from *Mother Goose*," and then "you spread from a limited range of reference to a wider and wider range."¹⁴ Over the next three decades, during poetry readings he often praised nursery rhymes, and referred to the child-like parables and metaphors in *Mother Goose* as containing a profound wisdom in human experience. In an interview with Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, "Conversations on the Craft of Poetry" (1959), he insisted that a dramatic prerequisite for all poetry is "catchiness," "from the ballads you hear on the street to the lines in Shakespeare that stay with you without your trying to remember them."¹⁵ Although he cautioned that in verse technique "doggerel," or the mechanical meter of "sing-song," must be avoided and insisted that the rhythm has "got to ruffle the meter," he stated that the philosophical content of *Mother Goose* was "very deep" and "meant a lot to me . . . all my life."¹⁶ For

¹⁴ Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* (Collier Books edition, 1961), 59.

¹⁵ Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 853.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 858-859. During Frost's poetry reading at the University of Detroit (November 14, 1962), he referred to *Mother Goose* as "a profound philosopher." This statement needs to be understood metaphorically, as part of the comic spirit in serious literature. Prior to "Kitty Hawk," Frost's most notable use of comedy in serious discourse was in *A Masque of Reason*, in the fictional character of Job's wife, Thyatira. She functioned as a satirical and humorous foil or contrast to the serious theological discourse between God and Job. Like many reviewers of *A Masque of Reason*, Lawrance Thompson failed to understand Frost's use of the comic dimension in that serious closet drama. This led Thompson to misread *A Masque of Reason* as a satire against orthodox religion. Frost's extension of the comic spirit beyond character into the verse form of "Kitty Hawk" was simply too much for many literary critics of that poem.

Frost, a poem was “a little voyage of discovery,” in which the initial mood or tone “foretells the end-product.” A valid description of all poetry, he said, was in a phrase of the ancient Roman poet Catullus, “*mens animi*,” interpreted by Frost as “the thoughts of my heart,” and this included the lightest forms of comedy as a metaphor. He believed that throughout man’s “trial by existence” on earth, the elements of comedy were a necessary dimension in man’s tragic struggle to save himself from despair. In short, Frost believed that comedy and tragedy should supplement each other and that they could be combined within a poem or play. This aesthetic principle was in the best tradition of Shakespeare, a convention that Milton abandoned in favor of pure tragedy in *Paradise Lost*.

To introduce all of the poems in *In the Clearing* he fused together two separate passages from “Kitty Hawk.” He sought to create an emblematic theme that served the same general function for his final volume that “The Pasture” had performed for all of his previous books of poetry:

But God’s own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.
Spirit enters flesh
And for all it’s worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh,
We may take the view
That its derring-do
Thought of in the large
In one mighty charge
On our human part
Of the soul’s ethereal
Into the material.

This vital archetypal passage, centered in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, extended to all mankind “in birth after birth,” raises once more the complex, contentious, and unresolved question of Frost’s religion. It presents a view that has proven to be beyond the grasp of any of the scholarship that has dealt with that subject. Yet it should be clear that the reference to the “mighty charge . . . Of the soul’s ethereal/ Into the material,” involves Frost’s perennial concern with the dualism of spirit and matter.

Regarding his religion, forty-five years before his emblematic passage introducing *In the Clearing*, he had written to Louis Untermeyer (October 27, 1917), “. . . Do or say my damndest I can’t be other than orthodox in politics, love and religion. I can’t escape salvation.” But in all of the intervening years, between 1917 and 1959, he had never made clear precisely which religious beliefs he included in regarding himself as “orthodox.” This deliberate omission characterized his usual public reticence to respond to questions about his religious beliefs. The same prudent reserve and silence marked his constant refusal to explain what he meant by any of his poems. The two omissions may well have something in common: a recognition of the inability of human reason to grasp the ultimate mystery at the core of our dualistic existence. There is no question that throughout his life Frost was some kind of theist. Early in his friendship with Louis Untermeyer, on January 1, 1916, he wrote: “If there were no God—but there is one” But the poet’s undoubted life-long monotheism remained diffuse. Although it excluded atheism, agnosticism, deism, and pantheism, precisely what he meant by God remained elusive, at least in public. To call him a “mystic” does not help matters. To friends he trusted or revered he could be very candid in private about his religious beliefs. During my first acquaintance with Frost, in the summer of 1939 at Bread Loaf, he surprised me on several occasions by the intensity and depth of his religious feelings. Although he was securely rooted in his family’s Protestant inheritance, essentially as a Congregationalist, he was fond of discussing theology with Jesuit priests, and he had long discussions on Biblical themes with his friend Rabbi Victor Reichert, because, he contended, they had “original ideas” to stimulate his moral imagination. In his “Sermon at Rockdale Avenue Temple” to Reichert’s congregation (October 10, 1946), he said: “Religion always seems to me to come round to something beyond wisdom. It’s a straining of the spirit forward to a wisdom beyond wisdom.”

But in “Kitty Hawk,” in refining and extending his dualism of spirit and matter, or body and soul, Frost identified his religious “orthodoxy” as affirmed in the central doctrine of all branches of Christianity—the Incarnation of Christ—the “substantiation” of God’s spirit into human flesh. In the second part of the emblematic passage Frost shifted from God to man, and he extended to human beings, as biological creatures made in the image of God,

*“What the
Christian
religion
means—
God’s own
descent into
flesh in
substantiation.”*

God’s courage and risk, or “derring-do.” He extended it metaphorically to human nature, in its power of creativity in all things. Frost left no doubt that his emblematic passage on transubstantiation, a crucial doctrine in orthodox Christianity, corresponded with his own religious beliefs. During a poetry reading of “Kitty Hawk” in 1959, he said: “That’s what our religion means. That’s what the Christian religion means—God’s own descent into flesh in substantiation.”¹⁷ In effect, “Kitty Hawk” provided a Christian basis for the seemingly pagan theme in “The Trial by Existence,” Frost’s first explicitly religious poem.

Frost’s closest friend at Amherst College in matters of religion, George Ray Elliott, has recorded some important observations on the poet’s religious beliefs late in life. In five unpublished letters to Lawrance Thompson, written between 1947 and 1963, Elliott traced what he considered to be the most significant changes in Frost’s theism. On April 11, 1947, he stated that for many years Frost had held to “a sort of theism along with disbelief in the Incarnation, i.e., a historically unique manifestation of God in Christ.” On March 25, 1963, in a letter after Frost’s death, he wrote that since the death of Eleanor Frost in 1938, if not before, “RF has accepted more and more the Divinity of Christ just because RF was a brainy and insightful student of the New Testament—though reticent on that. And he saw that the accounts there, and the affairs in history, were inexplicable unless Christ were God in human form.”¹⁸ In his many years of friendship with Frost, Elliott said that his friend “often talked to me about religion because of my keen interest in it, inherited from Scottish Presbyterian ancestors through my father and mother.” To Lawrance Thompson, Elliott identified himself as an “Episcopalian.” In light of Frost’s comments during a reading of “Kitty Hawk” on “God’s own descent into flesh in substantiation” and of Elliott’s account of Frost’s adoption of the Christian view of the Incarnation after his wife’s death, the poems in *In the Clearing* take on a strong religious significance.

It is in this context important to note that the last letter Frost ever wrote, dictated from his deathbed, was to Elliott and his wife.

¹⁷ See Cramer, *Robert Frost Among His Poems*, 170.

¹⁸ See Amherst College Special Collections, #341. Elliott’s other unpublished letters are listed as #331, #332, #336, and #339. Frost’s final letter to Elliott is listed as #304.

Their closeness in spirit is evident in the poet's last words to his friend:

Why will the quidnuncs always be hoping for a salvation man will never have from anyone but God? I was just saying today how Christ posed Himself the whole problem and died for it. How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice It seems as if I never wrote these plunges into the depths to anyone but you. . . . If only I get well . . . I'll go deeper into my life with you than I ever have before.¹⁹

Since Elliott believed that Frost knew that he would not recover from his final illness, these words can well be taken as his last will and testament in matters of religion. One of his earliest and most important dualistic concerns, the perennial conflict between justice and mercy in human affairs, so evident in "The Death of the Hired Man" (1913) and in "The Masque of Reason" (1945) and "A Masque of Mercy" (1947), remained with him to the end of his life.

But Frost's emblematic passage from "Kitty Hawk" applies not only to religion and dualism but to all of life. By using the passage as an introduction to the entire volume of poems in *In the Clearing*, Frost signaled his belief that the penetration of God's spirit into matter encompasses the whole history and development of European and Western civilization. By applying the doctrine of God's incarnation to the temporal affairs of man as a species, Frost indicated that, as creatures who share God's creative power, men and women give shape and direction to the whole temporal order of civil society and to their changing conceptions of physical nature. The central metaphor in "Kitty Hawk" now illuminated not only the arts and the humanities and religion, but science and the formation and evolution of society in all of its enduring achievements. Through much of his life Frost had assumed that only the creative arts reflected a God-like power in especially gifted and disciplined men and women. Not until around 1959 did he consciously begin to attribute such an original power to the physical sciences. As perceived and practiced by most scientists, science assumed a monism of matter, and Frost had long been highly critical of that form of monism as the chief source of the abuse of science in positivistic scientism. His strong disagreements with "the three generations of Huxleys" were centered in his rejection of a

Monism of matter the chief source of the abuse of science in scientism.

¹⁹ See Amherst College Special Collections, #304.

monism of matter and in his insistence that science was properly one of the humanities.

Frost's life-long distinction between science and scientism, between the valid uses of science and its abuses, was well stated in terms of his dualism of spirit and matter: "But in taking us deeper and deeper into matter," he observed, "science has left all of us with this great misgiving, this fear that we won't be able to substantiate the spirit."²⁰ In 1959, in "The Future of Man" symposium, he had summarized his mixed views about science: "It comes into our lives as domestic science for our hold on the planet, into our deaths with its deadly weapons, bombs, and airplanes, for war, and into our souls as pure science for nothing but glory."²¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Frost originally intended to title his final volume of poetry *The Great Misgiving*. That would have been in keeping with the theme of his first poem on science, "The Demiurge's Laugh." Although that poem was probably written around 1906, it was first published in *A Boy's Will* in 1913.

Material monism, excluding the realm of spirit, is incapable of creating a sound civilization.

The Demiurge is a lesser and ominous deity in Greek and Platonic mythology, reputed to be in control of the material world, where science is supreme. The poem is cast in the form of a monologue, in which the speaker initially expresses his joy during his obsessive pursuit of the Demiurge, even while admitting that it is "no true god." Only when the light of this illusory belief begins to fail and metaphysical and intellectual darkness sets in does he discover through the Demiurge's derisive laugh that his idealistic faith in science as man's redeemer is an illusion, that while he thought that he was pursuing the Demiurge, he discovers that he is the one being pursued. Thus the speaker is shocked into an awareness that he does not control science, but that science commands him. In essence, this revelation is Frost's warning to the twentieth century that material monism and science are not capable of creating a sound civilization. His poem expresses his distinction between admirable science, which serves the material needs of human nature, and corrupt science, which serves destructive practical ends and sacrifices humanity to a materialist ideology. The abuse of science is most evident in time of war. Positivism, with its unbounded faith in a monism of matter and in a discursive reason pursued along abstract mathematical lines and

²⁰ See Cramer, *Robert Frost Among His Poems*, 170.

²¹ Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 870.

with its exclusion of the whole realm of spirit, prepares the way for a corrupt and brutal civilization.

Implicit in "The Demiurge's Laugh" is Frost's early satire on the uncritical belief of many modern persons that science is the supreme instrument of man's inevitable "progress" toward an eventual Utopian world society. Not only positivists but the public at large—indeed, everyone devoted to merely abstract rationality in the tradition of Descartes and to a view of the universe wholly centered in matter in the Victorian tradition of Thomas Henry Huxley, H. G. Wells, and other material monists—were in revolt against belief in a dualism of spirit and matter. Frost perceived the catastrophe that totalitarian ideology and politics were to inflict upon mankind during the twentieth century in terms of the conflict between his dualism of spirit and matter and the monism of matter that came to dominate the modern world. It was Frost's great misfortune that he chose for his official biographer Lawrence Thompson, who was among those swept up in the revolt against dualism and therefore presented a wholly garbled picture of the poet's central beliefs in his three-volume biography. He accused Frost of being "against science." Such satirical poems as "Why Wait for Science" and "Some Science Fiction," taken literally rather than metaphorically, seemed to support the biographer's contention that Frost's view of science was wholly negative. Thompson ignored such of Frost's statements on science in "The Future of Man" symposium as the following: "It is man's greatest enterprise. It is the charge of the ethereal into the material. It is our substantiation of our meaning. It can't go too far or deep for me."²² The biographer also paid no attention to the poet's great admiration for truly superior scientists such as Newton, Darwin in *The Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*, and Einstein. So far as these scientists retained a belief in spirit and mind distinct from a wholly mechanistic conception of human nature and the physical universe, Frost believed that they contributed to the knowledge and understanding that are necessary for a civilized social order. In a conversation with me, Frost noted that Einstein initially opposed creating the atomic bomb, which indicated that he distinguished between science and its abuses. But when science put great power into the hands of morally depraved totalitarian rul-

²² Ibid.

ers, it became necessary for civilized men to oppose their power with greater power. This was one of the terrible dilemmas of science in the modern world. Frost finally rejected the phrase "the great misgiving" as the title of his last book (though the phrase does appear in the book in "Kitty Hawk"), and, although he remained fearful of the abuses of science, an important change is evident in his adopting a favorable view of science late in life.

At Bread Loaf in 1959, during a retrospective remembrance, Frost voiced his new or radically modified conviction about the positive role of science in contemporary life:

. . . It begins with my visit when young . . . to Kitty Hawk, long before the Wright brothers were there. And it ends with its dawning on me that all science . . . is our hold on the planet. . . . But it dawned on me at the point that all, the whole, the great enterprise of our race, is our penetration into matter, deeper and deeper, carrying the spirit deeper into matter. And though it looks like something different out into space, that's just deeper into matter, that's material penetration of the spirit—of the ethereal into the material. Put it that way, and that is our destiny—that is why science is our greatness, it's got to do with our penetration into the material.²³

Although the first part of "Kitty Hawk" is largely biographical, Frost called part two, the part that dealt with his life-long commitment to the dualism of spirit and matter, "the philosophical section" of the poem. He had long claimed for poetry and the creative arts and religion the dualistic interaction between spirit and matter; now through his celebration of the Wright brothers' invention of the airplane, he extended the creative power of the human mind or spirit to science. This further spiritualization of matter related to what was for modern man "the great enterprise of our race."

Frost believed that the apprehension of dualism in all areas of life, including science, could be attained only with delayed, mature experience. Undeveloped youth could not perceive the systematic and universal application of human creativity. Early in his adult life, in his conversations with Sidney Cox, Frost had re-

²³ Cramer, *Robert Frost Among His Poems*, 168. Eighteen years earlier, in 1941, during a conversation with me at Bread Loaf on the creative power of mind in relation to matter, Frost said: "The more powerful the mind, the more it could penetrate into matter and space." Peter J. Stanlis, "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," *Frost Centennial Essays*, III, 287.

vealed some highly individualistic character traits that only maturity could harmonize into a general philosophy of life. "Youth . . . I believe should not analyze its enjoyments," he told Cox. "It should live. . . . Criticism is the province of age, not of youth." Cox recorded that in his philosophical thinking Frost did not rely on modern "commentators and systematizers"; instead, he went "always to the original finders and makers: the physicist Bohr for information about the behavior of electrons, Gibbon for his large and daring look and his innocent give-away facts, Mayan explorers, Latin and Medieval Latin poets, Darwin in his *Voyage of the Beagle*, Prescott for the conquistadors, Aquinas for a specimen of the way theologians think." Through eclectic knowledge acquired over many years, Frost achieved a kind of intellectual originality that resisted the wholesale adoption of any one philosophy or intellectual movement. He gradually shaped acquired knowledge into elements of a personal philosophy. Cox noted that, according to Frost, "the piecing together comes gradually. . . . Philosophy that you accept crumbles beneath you when you are exposed to a new situation. It doesn't work then. A truly personal philosophy is a slow growth . . . and . . . is articulate chiefly in deeds." To Frost this meant that many isolated strands and facts of knowledge acquired since early in life formed recognizable clusters, as when separate stars perceived at night begin to form patterns. Time is required for unity and continuity to emerge: "Constellations of intention gradually emerge. It is the same for a life as it is for history or for the meaning of a poet's whole work."²⁴ Just as individual poems and prose statements are recorded piecemeal over many years before they acquire and are perceived to have order and continuity, so too the poet's philosophical beliefs regarding spirit and matter develop until they achieve something like universality. Thus did the organic unity of spirit and matter finally come together in *In the Clearing*. Indeed, even after such a continuity and unity was recorded in complex detail in Frost's final volume, many scholars and literary critics did not perceive his dualism, much less his extension of it beyond art, the humanities, and religion into the realms of science and social institutions, to the historical evolution of civilization as a whole.

"A truly personal philosophy is a slow growth . . . articulate chiefly in deeds."

One of Frost's deepest and life-long convictions was that the whole course of modern civilization began in pre-Christian times

²⁴ Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches* (1961 edition), 61-63.

in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. From there the culture and laws of organized society gradually emerged, moving constantly west and northwest, absorbing the Biblical culture of Israel and the classical culture of Greece and Rome, until it included all of Europe, and finally, after the voyage of Columbus, the whole of the Western Hemisphere. In "Kitty Hawk" he summarized this combined secular and providential view of history:

Then for years and years
And for miles and miles
'Cross the Aegean isles
Athens Rome France Britain
Always west northwest,
As have I not written,
Till the so-long kept
Purpose was expressed
In the leap we leapt.

Frost's poetical conception of the history of civilization included, as a single unified event, the discovery of America by Columbus and the invention of the airplane by the Wright brothers. These two separate events constituted an epical leap in man's constant pursuit of his temporal and spiritual destiny.

In one of his poems in *In the Clearing*, "America is Hard to See," Frost noted the great irony that Columbus himself never understood the true nature and importance of his historical achievement. He then rebuked modern Americans who, even with the advantage of historical hindsight, lacked the imagination and spiritual insight to understand America as part of the epic continuity that connects them both with their ancient social origins and their future destiny. Frost even chided himself that in his youth he had failed to celebrate the god-like gift of Columbus:

If I had had my chance when young
I should have had Columbus sung
As a god who had given us
A more than Moses' exodus.

In his poem "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration," Frost perceived the Wright brothers as "the Columbuses of the air." He praised "the new world Christopher Columbus found" and explicitly linked it with the future world of space exploration inaugurated by the Wright brothers:

Everyone knows the glory of the twain
Who gave America the aeroplane
To ride the whirlwind and the hurricane.

Twenty-two years earlier, in his poem "The Wrights' Biplane" (*A Further Range*, 1937), he had summarized in one line a metaphorical image for mankind's future explorations in space: "This biplane is the shape of human flight." In "Kitty Hawk" Frost fused the historical, religious, scientific, social and political metaphors that formed his conception of the god-like creativity of human nature that gave shape to Western civilization.

Like Edmund Burke, who saw temporal events guided by man's moral prudence as forming part of "the known march of the ordinary providence of God," Frost regarded truly epical events in history as metaphors of Divine revelation in the secular affairs of mankind. During a conversation with me at Bread Loaf in 1961, while discussing my book *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (1958), Frost said that his agreement with Burke's politics, including his theory of politics, went very deep. He agreed with Burke that historical events which appeared disconnected to many persons really possessed a continuity and ultimate unity in forming Western civilization. To Frost, as a dualist, that unity in culture always included a spiritual ordering. He believed that the Wright brothers' invention of the airplane was more than a scientific achievement. It was also an instrument of man's future history. It advanced the new world discovered by Columbus. It extended man's power over physical nature beyond earthly limits into outer space. Thus perceived, science shared with religion and the creative arts the power of the human spirit to penetrate all matter. Perhaps even more than religion and the arts, science was to Frost "the fine point of daring in our time."²⁵ One of his grand themes in *In the Clearing* was that the original creative power in the mind and spirit of man imitated God. Through the ability of mankind to penetrate and master matter across a broad range of concerns, a vast civil-social order of many civilized nations was created.

To Frost, as a dualist, unity in culture always included a spiritual ordering.

Frost's perception of the continuity and unity in historical events came to him through an intuition, or revelation, expressed in "Kitty Hawk": "Then I saw it all." In the final two sections of part two, the "philosophical" part of his poem, "The Holiness of Wholeness" and "The Mixture Mechanic," religion and science are

²⁵ See Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost in Context," *Frost Centennial Essays*, III, 172-173.

telescoped together in a kind of sacred and secular covenant. Each is perceived metaphorically as a segment united with the other, within the whole, much as a particular image or metaphor in a poem suggests the whole. To Frost, man's original creativity, in whatever form, whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, shares in the power and purpose of God, and therefore is redemptive. Religion, art, science, and all human activities work both separately and together toward the divine and temporal culture that shapes the nature and destiny of mankind throughout history. As the culmination of Frost's articulation of dualism, of the unity of spirit or mind and matter, expressed throughout his poetry, prose, correspondence, and conversations with friends, "Kitty Hawk" provides the ultimate continuity and unity, not only in *In the Clearing*, but, in retrospect, in Frost's entire literary career and life.