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# Robert Frost: The Village and Beyond

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Praha, 30.4. 2010 Michal Mecner

# Permission

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| *CPP* | *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays of Robert Frost* |
| *CIF* | *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost* |
| *CCF* | *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* |

# Introduction

The rain to the wind said,
'You push and I'll pelt.'
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged--though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt.
*Lodged*

Robert Frost (1874 – 1963) was a prominent American poet, teacher, lecturer, scholar, public figure, American symbol and thinker of the 20th century. As Archibald MacLeish emphasizes, Frost was not only a poet of his time, of the American nation, but – much like William Shakespeare – a poet of the English language itself (MacLeish, 439). Frost's command of colloquial speech and the New England dialect is considered by the critics to be outstanding. Depiction of rural life is dominant in Frost's poetry and Frost himself took the life of a farmer-poet. And, as MacLeish reminds us, Frost was city-born, town-bred and his story is rather one of a stranger who falls in love with New England and makes his life in it (MacLeish, 442). However, there is a gap between the traditional pastoral poetry and Frost's *oeuvre* which is modernistic in many ways. Nature clearly dominates Frost's verse but it is arguably not its central theme. Rather, it serves as a shifting background for the portrait of man, for the experience of what it means to be human. The merit of Frost's poetry lies in the dramatized relationship between the character portrayed and the environment surrounding him. Rather than depicting the dominance of one over the other (e.g. of man and technology over nature or the submission of man before nature), Frost traces a delicate, balanced relationship between the two, without drawing a line between, because one is always part of the other. There is a continual reciprocity, there is a constant mirroring of semblances between the face and

character of man and between the landscape and ways of nature. While in subject choice this may remind us of the Romanticists, Frost is in fact far from Romanticism as a farmer is. A farmer has no time to tarry, he must yield to various errands the land and the living demand. This, however, by no means implies that contemplation is absent in the tone of Frost's poetry. The opposite is true, though it is a different hue of reflection.

In his poetry Frost presents a dynamic way of encountering the world, i.e. by walking or amidst heavy work in the field. These offer a wholly different perspective than sitting at home and thinking or trying to transcend nature by meditation. These are of no interest to Frost, as his goal is survival, like the Darwinian view of nature. What is left, then, is the dynamism of the moment. This is emphasized by a tendency to characterize nature – rather than merely describe it – in terms of verbs instead of nouns, as the critic Bonnie Costello observes (Costello, 20). Frost's own way of dealing with nature, that is, *on the go*, severely restricts the possibility of approaching a scene or a situation from a multitude of angles, a technique typical of modernism. For him, Nature's ways are twofold: it is either fight or flight. Frost may envision a manifold confrontation of sides, for example in the poem 'Two Look at Two', but the conclusion does not entail a kaleidoscope interpretation like Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird'; in Frost the conclusion mirrors the title – two look at two, nothing more, nothing less. Nature's ways are infinitely diverse but for the traveler it is always either uphill, downhill or along a flat path. At the core of Frost's poetry lies *experience* which is gained at great cost – the road not taken.

Frost shows us a way of seeing, a way of living. His poems do not take the place of mountains or of religions. Frost often oscillates between wilderness and the village, between human society and isolation. He is always in the middle of something, a season, a life, a relationship, a journey. Just as for Frost's people there are no beginnings and ends, for the poet poetry itself does not offer a ultimate answer to everything. Poetry is for him a daily necessity, an ongoing task. What can poetry do? This will be one of our major concerns in this thesis.

In our analysis of Frost's poetry we include not only well known poems, but also many, often minor poems that are neglected in criticism of Frost's poetry. Among these are poems that Frost wrote well before the publication of *A Boy's Will*, the earliest poems, but also the later ones and many other poems that do not usually appear in Frost collections and anthologies. We believe that a rich variety of primary materials is essential for a thorough survey of the Frostian world; the village and beyond in particular. Besides Frost's poems we will take into consideration the poet's own essays, prose and

letters. Our discussion of Frost's poetry will be supported by a varied selection of secondary sources, providing the theoretical and critical background for our thesis. These range from Mark Richardson and Richard Poirier to more recent criticism by Frank Lentricchia, Robert Faggen, Bonnie Costello and Langdon Hammer. Apart from these scholarly texts, there appears an essay by MacLeish, Frost's friend, who summarized a way of reading the poet and his work in a 1976 issue of *National Geographic*. This article will be of use to us, particularly at times when the question is not what is Frost trying to say but how he means what he is saying. A lot of Frost's poems have puzzled and fascinated readers, young or old, scholarly or casual alike. For example, the poem 'Birches' can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, but why not, as Judith Oster suggests, take the poem literally and see what is it about (*CCF*, 160)? Further, we will frequently consult a collection of essays, *Vermont: A Special World*, which deals with New England and Vermont, places that are the setting in many, if not all Frost's poems. Both the book and the poet's work show countryside as a priceless treasure that reflects New England colonial traditions and must be preserved. As a more theoretical source on the history of New England and in dealing with the concept of a village and with the image of the New England community, we will look at Joseph Wood's treatise *The New England Village: Creating the North American Landscape*.

Throughout the thesis we will turn to Guy Debord's work of philosophy and critical theory *The Society of the Spectacle*. Much of what Frost writes about in his poetry, and especially his nightmares representing the fears of New Englanders facing urbanisation, is echoed, elaborated and amplified in Debord's work. Frost the poet sees far into the 20th century and beyond. In contrast with Debord, Frost offers to us a means of re-entering a lost world. Where Debord speaks about theoretical possibilities, Frost shows us a practical way and allows us to have a direct experience with the world of his own, the world that seems now to be lost and were it not for Frost's *oeuvre*, would not be only lost but forgotten. For convenience, we will now present an important definition Debord uses when speaking about the spectacle, which in Frost's context we can envisage as a spectre invading and eating at what at first glance seems to be rural paradise:

> In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation. […] The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.

> […] The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation. […] The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images. […] The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective. (Debord, Theses 1-5)

From what Debord describes, of interest to us will be in particular changes in the village, changes in the countryside, changes in communication, changes in the community and changes in human relationships in connection to the above mentioned separation. Most of all, we will will focus on the changes that occur at the very heart of modern man – because they lie at the core of Frost's poetry. Frost's poems often depict the condition of life deprived of unity. Like in the works of other modernist poets, human experience is fragmented and we are only allowed to catch a glimpse of reality. Debord warns that these fragmented views regroup themselves into a new unity in accordance with the spectacle's internal dynamics. Frost offers us a means through which a more worthy and rewarding unity is attainable. His poetry shows that through the conjugation of disparate complementary elements and experiences, such as chaos and order, make-believe and truth, or darkness and illumination, one can achieve a state of "wholeness beyond confusion" (*CPP*, 342). Debord declares that separation is itself an integral part of the unity of this world – "of a global social practice split into reality and image" (Debord, Thesis 7). Further, the spectacle presents itself as a means of unification but actually it is a source of further division. For example, communication is made easier with modern technologies but in a way it actually hinders real communication from taking place, because the spectacle is a social relation between people that is *mediated* by images and ideas that, however, are not a product of direct personal experience. In Frost, the remnants of rural world are slowly falling victim to urbanization and we will see that the spectacle is not a mere decoration added to the rural world but it is becoming deeply set in the center of the village and country life. The spectacle appears in all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — and in consequence "the spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life" (Debord, Thesis 6). Apart from these manifestations, New England villages and rural life in Frost are facing the influx of city visitors with new cars, new cash and other advances of modern life. The problem with the spectacle, as Debord proposes, lies in the fact that the spectacle demands passive acceptance, "without allowing any reply" (Debord, Thesis 12). The worst aspect of the spectacle, as far as Frost's people are concerned, is that the spectacle is able to subject human being to itself because the economy has already done that. Debord argues that the spectacle is in fact nothing other than the economy devel-

oping for itself (Debord, Thesis 14). For Frost's New Englanders – people inhabiting a region traditionally conservative and inclining toward the principles of self-reliance and self-dependence – this is a great challenge because economic need has made them materialists and realists.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. We will begin outside, by surveying Frost's poetry in various contexts, namely those of modernism and Romanticism. Frost's status as a New England poet and his allegiance to pastoral poetry will be reviewed as well. Then we will examine the environment in Frost's poetry, with special attention to the village. In one direction from the village lies the expanding urban sector. In the other direction, dark, ominous woods seem to stretch to the edge of doom, as the poet likes to think. But there is really no edge; where the forest ends, there begin endless plains and desolate fields which in Frost's poetry bear a strong symbolic value. The third chapter focuses on work. For Frost, poetry is a kind of work and work is also for him a model for poetry. In his poetry, emphasis is put on tools with which work is done, but one must know how to use them, which is emphasized in the tragic poem 'Out, Out—'. Further, in the age of modernity, the worker is separated from the final product which negatively affects particularly agricultural and rural workers. Finally, following the trajectory from the outside to the inside, just as in the poet's opening poem 'Into My Own', in the last chapter we will arrive in the heart of Frost's poetry, that is, in the village community, human relations, communication and an assortment of “New Hampshire Specimen”.

# Chapter 1

### Frost's poetry in context

'Fred, where is north?
'North? North is there, my love.'
*West-Running Brook*

A good place to begin our exploration of Robert Frost's poetry is the context in which it has been read, analyzed and criticized. Almost one hundred years have passed since the publication of *A Boy's Will* and with each passing decade, the context varies. In the 60s and 70s there was an era of the criticism of Mark Richardson and Richard Poirier whose understanding and interpretation remain highly esteemed to this day. Of special interest is Archibald MacLeish's short but illuminating essay published in 1976. In this thesis we will consider also most recent criticism by prominent scholars such as Bonnie Costello, Langdon Hammer, Frank Lentricchia, Robert Faggen, and several others. It would be futile to try categorizing and identifying Frost's *oeuvre* with one specific literary genre or movement. Rather, we prefer to show what similarities and, importantly, differences can be traced with the context varying from modernism to Romanticism, pastoral poetry and, finally, bring Frost in focus as a New England poet. Frost's position in literature is not unlike that of Thomas Hardy's, for example, whose *oeuvre* abounds in features typical to Victorian novels but Hardy cannot be solely regarded as a Victorian novelist. Neither, however, can he be regarded as one of the modernists who exploded the conventions of 19th century literature. Hardy seems to be trapped in the middle ground between these two literary movements. Frost's position in modern poetry is likewise ambiguous. He follows in the 19th century tradition: as Hammer remarks, "[Frost] spoke for and to an audience trained by the genteel poetry of late nineteenth-century America, read-

ers who loved Longfellow, the Fireside Poets, poets who published in Victorian popular magazines and wrote those gilt-embossed books that cultured families kept behind glass bookcases and that you can still find at tag sales on New England greens” (Hammer, Lecture 1). And, as Lentricchia reminds us, for the young Frost popular success in the mode of the Fireside Poets was not the mainstream but the only “stream” (Lentricchia, 18). Yet at the same time, as the focus in Frost's poetry shifts from the pastoral and mythic quality of *A Boy's Will* to the historical and evolutionary concerns in *A Further Range* and, ultimately, to the philosophical and theological skepticism of *A Witness Tree*, there can be no doubt about Frost's place in modernism and even beyond, as he anticipates the challenges and crises man has been facing since post-modernity. This chapter will provide the ground for the following discussion and analysis of Frost's work and should particularly emphasize the importance of looking at Frost from different perspectives. After all, Frost in the poem 'I Could Give All to Time' writes :

> I could give all to Time except—except
> What I myself have held. But why declare
> The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
> I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
> And what I would not part with I have kept. (*CPP*, 304)

Frost will forever keep something to himself and that is what makes his poetry so durable against the thrust of time and the critic's efforts. As Edna Longley summarizes, some things in Frost“remain too well-hidden” (Longley, 46).

## *1.1 Frost and modernism*

With certainty we can only say that Frost's status as a modernist poet is highly ambiguous. There is no denying that Frost was a first-wave modernist, but at the same time he stood at the margin of modernism. He was definitely not at the center of the conflict modernism was both spawning and facing; Frost was rather outside it. But as Bernard Bergonzi suggests, the concept 'modernism' is easier to employ than to define. According to him, “At its broadest it refers not just to innovation in literature but to the radical remaking of all the arts that went on in Europe and America in the years before 1914” (*The Oxford History of English Literature*, 408). Essentially, modernist poetry relied on two fundamental principles. First, realization replaced description, which allowed the poets to render the external world in “an image insisting on its own distinctive form of

reality" (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 793) instead of copying the external world. Second, the poets developed collage techniques "for intensifying the sense of productive immediacy" which in turn became the spaces between images that offer "the audience its access to the mode of spirit defined by the work" (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 793). Bergonzi offers a concise definition of modernist poetry which emphasizes the key characteristics of modernism: "1) there must be no unthinking reproduction of what is already familiar 2) our perceptions of reality are necessarily uncertain and provisional 3) the unparalleled complexity of modern urban life must be reflected in literary form 4) supposedly primitive myths can help us to grasp and order the chaos of the twentieth-century experience 5) the intense but isolated 'image', 'moment', or 'epiphany' provides our truest sense of the nature of things 6) 'personality' is precarious and fragmentary rather than substantial and unchanging" (*The Oxford History of English Literature*, 408).

Compared to other modernist poets, Frost's poetry is not heroic and glorious like that of Hart Crane's. He is not a scholar and critic like T. S. Eliot. His poetry is not sensualist and intellectual like that of Wallace Stevens. He was neither an imagist like H.D. or patron poet like Ezra Pound. And, most importantly, Frost is not a poet of the urban scene, like Marianne Moore, Stevens, Langston Hughes, Crane, Williams Carlos Williams, Eliot, Pound – perhaps all American modernist poets. These all were poets of the metropolis. In fact, Frost defines himself against such a context, against the metropolitan environment. And how does one define oneself against something? By doing the opposite, or going by contrary. In *West-Running Brook*, there is a poem that marks the self-appointed anti-modernist tendency of Frost's poetry:

> 'What does it think it's doing running west
> When all the other country brooks flow east
> To reach the ocean? It must be the brook
> Can trust itself to go by contraries. (*CPP,* 236)

Like the brook, Frost the poet chooses the road less traveled. While other poets are exploring the city, he goes north of Boston, back to the country, in the opposite direction than the rest of America is going. In a sense, he moves in a strictly anti-modernist direction. And what does it mean that he goes north of Boston, specifically? As Langdon Hammer observes, "[Boston] was the capital of nineteenth-century American literature and culture, a name synonymous, eventually, with gentility, Puritanism, old American money and style; exactly, in other words, everything modernism was attacking" (Hammer, Lecture 3). Modernism exploded the conventions of $19^{th}$ century literature in both form and content. Primarily, modernist poets were each in their own way engaged in a struggle

to voice an answer to two central questions: what is poetry and what can poetry do? Like his contemporaries, Frost was intensely interested in the function of poetry in the modern world. Yet whereas the other poets went on to look for an answer south of Boston, to cultural centers such as New York City, or overseas to London and Paris, Frost headed north of Boston. He took a direction but did not know where he was going. Yes, this is seemingly a paradox. Because as Bonnie Costello points out, “Richard Poirier may be right that Frost doesn't really know where he's going. But that is precisely the point. Critics have not taken seriously enough Frost's confession about getting us lost” (Costello, 49). This seeming paradox will puzzle us only insofar as we ignore the fact that for Frost it is the journey itself that counts, not the destination. Robert Pogue Harrison finds such an attempt to break the rules of modern civilization honorable and especially compelling in view of the fact that the countryside was disappearing quickly from the face of the Western world:

> Those who stay at home, who dwell strictly within the cleared space of the institutional order, are left homeless without the containment of the province. More essentially, they are left homeless the moment they are left without a provincial envoy who departs from the homeland and returns from afar with the message of estrangement. Such an envoy is not someone who leaves the province for the capitals of the world, returning with reports about the wonders of the metropolis, but rather the poet who departs in the opposite direction—beyond the bounds of the province. (Harrison, 247)

That is what Frost does. So while Crane's poetry is full of glorious images of Brooklyn Bridge, Eliot's poetry is a blend of cultures and tongues and Pound revives sacred texts and old civilizations, Frost presents the image of a patch of old snow which he mistakes for a blown-away paper, or the images of abandoned farms, or a discarded wood pile which has been left by some worker who probably went to look for a job in the city:

> And then there was a pile of wood
> […]
> And it was older sure than this year's cutting,
> Or even last year's or the year's before.
> The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
> And the pile somewhat sunken.
>
> [how could someone] 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. (*CPP*, 101)

Unlike Eliot who is figuring what to make of a split world and broken pieces of culture, Frost is picking up rusted fragments of a rural world. He *physically* encounters *physical* ruin and this, along with his going in the opposite direction, distinguishes him strongly from other modernists. Eliot is also physical but the actual physical experience in Eliot's poetry is inaccessible and untouchable, because it is reduced to a mechanized process, while in Frost physicality offers a means of transcendence and anyone, even the casual reader, can have direct, first-hand experience with what is going on in Frost's world.

However, in a sense, Frost does rightfully belong to modernism, so what does he share with modernist poets, what is modern about him? For one thing, Frost shares with modernists a fascination with language – with the nature of language, with the strength of metaphor and belief in the power poetry. According to Hammer,

> Life in the modern metropolis was de-familiarizing. It de-naturalized language. Where there are many languages in use, language comes to seem arbitrary rather than natural, as the product of convention; not as something you're simply born into but something that you learn, something that is made and that can be remade. (Hammer, Lecture 1)

Like modernists, Frost is intrigued with the nature of language, yet he uses it differently. As, for example, Langston Hughes tried to get his black speech and vernacular into poetry, or as Eliot incorporates a lower-class vernacular in the second section of *The Waste Land*, Frost uses language as a means of regional identification. Frank Lentricchia reminds us that Frost was fully conscious of his efforts:

> Frost believed that in *North of Boston* he had scored a decisive victory in literary history, because there he had "dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above"; he had performed "in a language absolutely unliterary" and had barred from his writing all "words and expressions he had merely *seen*"(in books) and had not "*heard* used in running speech." (Lentricchia, 34)

Frost also insisted that words that are products of another poet's imagination "cannot be passed-off again" (Lentricchia, 34). Further, Robert Faggen considers Frost the greatest innovator in blank verse after Milton and Browning: "Frost cultivated an ingeniously sophisticated use of colloquial

speech, giving new life to the ancient tradition of pastoral poetry. And few poets have encompassed the realms of religion, science, politics, and philosophy with as much such unassuming subtlety" *(CCF*, 2). Frost's combination of colloquial sentence sound, local talk and unrhymed iambic pentameter is innovative within the context of American poetry. Thus, Frost's triumph seems to lie in giving New England rural citizenry the language of the great English poets.

Apart from a fresh approach to language and poetic diction, Frost shares with other American modernists a certain internationalism. He, too, went to Europe and it was there in London, a famous cultural center of literary émigrés, where he first declared himself. Thus while Frost the poet goes north of Boston, Robert Frost finds himself among a community of literary expatriates. Arguably, expatriation and internationalism are characteristic signs of modernity, though, of course, not a necessary condition. Because, in some ways, the modernism of Eliot and Pound is based on expatriation and a kind of internationalism. In contrast, Frost's poetry seems decidedly and strictly American. However, we must bear in mind that there is a modernist in Frost, none less international than Pound or Eliot. The Frost who launched his career beside them, as an England expatriate. So there is again the Frostian doubleness. Frost wanted to be widely read, he wanted to win the general reader who buys popular poetry books. As Lentricchia remarks, Frost wanted it both ways. Frost's literary identity was to some extent shaped by the critical ideas of the emerging avant-garde and modernist manifestos, but he wanted both to win Pound's approval as well as the readership of the *Atlantic* (Lentricchia, 18). That is why he went to England. But 'popular' does not equal 'good', and good poetry – as defined by modernism – could not make money, which leaves Frost somewhere in between the conventions of 19th century literature and modernism, as was already said above. These were all reasons why Frost's poetry is oriented north of Boston.

There is another characteristic in which Frost significantly differs from modernism. In general, there is a great deal of uncertainty in Frost's poetry. The destination "North of Boston" is quite vague. His poems are full of doubts and half-forgotten memories such as in 'The Exposed Nest': "I haven't any memory—have you?—/ Of ever coming to the place again / To see if the birds lived the first night through, / And so at last to learn to use their wings" (*CPP*, 107). When Frost notices a patch of old snow, he mistakes it for a paper:

> There's a patch of old snow in a corner
> That I should have guessed
> Was a blow-away paper the rain

Had brought to rest.

It is speckled with grime as if
Small print overspread it,
The news of a day I've forgotten--
If I ever read it. (*CPP,* 107)

This runs contrary to the modernist belief in the power of poetry and the autonomy of art itself. The poem offers vague, dim images which stand in contrast with sharp, concise and exact images of modernism. Frost's vagueness is perhaps closer to the generation before modernism, to Thomas Hardy and Elizabeth B. Browning who employed in their poetry a mode of doubt and uncertainty, and to the generation after modernism whose literary claims and works were much more modest. For example, Elizabeth Bishop, who in a way provides an endpoint of modernism, is a minor poet; she is certainly neither unacknowledged nor self-acknowledged legislator of the world. On 'The Map', North is as near as West and topography from her point of view displays no favorites. There is no focal point in her poetry, in fact her poems exhibit “centerlessness” and “homelessness” and in consequence there is a need for constant re-adjustment, as Costello observes (*Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 122). Ultimately, for Bishop this constant re-adjustment represents the structure of human experience (*Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, 124). In stark contrast, the ambitions of modernists were bolder and a lot more daring. Frost's vagueness is deliberate and intended but he, too, like Bishop is more a weary traveler than a heroic poet. Yet, his poetry has a well-defined center represented by the stable voice of the narrator and by the setting explicitly localized in New England, as will be seen in the next section. In the poem 'West-Running Brook', the couple looking at the brook comment on its going by contraries:

The way I can with you–and you with me–
Because we're–we're–I don't know what we are.
What are we?'
'Young or new?'
'We must be something.' (*CPP,* 236)

Frost is practical and does not go on analyzing the self or identity. The couple concludes “We've said we two. Let's change that to three,” (*CPP*, 236) just like the old-fashioned country way. That means, they employ simple solutions to complex issues. Being rather a keen, if somewhat passive observer, Bishop would likely have gone on figuring out that 'something'. This leads us to a consideration of perspective which is an important aspect both in modernism and in Frost's poetry. One and one do not always make two, and two do not always make three as above. This all depends on perspective, which renders reality relative and invites constant measuring and re-measuring, partic-

ularly in the Frostian world where the people are somewhat materialistic in consequence of economic need. In 'Storm Fear', "when the wind works against [them] in the dark," the couple count their strength: "Two and a child" (*CPP*, 19). That equals two and something which is less than three. At other times one and one make even less than two, as in the poem 'Meeting and Passing': "But all we did that day was mingle great and small / Footprints in summer dust as if we drew / The figure of our being less than two / But more than one yet" (*CPP*, 115). Shifting perspective is a frequent and important feature in Frost's poetry but the poet always obeys the rules of the ordinary world and common sense. In other words, Frost does not approach the event, a thing or an encounter from a multitude of angles. In contrast, Stevens presents a kaleidoscopic interpretation of reality as in 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird'. Frost preserves the strictly twofold way of nature: fight or flight. In 'Two Look at Two,' "Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from," (*CPP*, 212) and that is all. The above examples of two being more or less than two is rather an illustration of practicality, a constant measuring which is absolutely necessary in order to make-do in the countryside. When Frost changes perspective, he does so to take a close-up shot or to bring in focus a previously unnoticed detail. He never, in opposition to modernists, changes perspective to turn the world upside down or to tweak reality in an unusual manner. Although an innovator in some respects, namely the use of colloquial speech and the opposition of the local and the universal in his poetry within the context of American literature, he does not try to break the mode of poetic realism, which he inherited from Hardy and others, and which he mastered to a remarkable degree. And, as mentioned above, Frost in his poetry brings in a great deal of uncertainty and doubt into this highly realistic mode of poetic representation.

This conclusion can be extended to narrative perspective as well. The narrator of Frost's poems is always consistent and coherent which by no means contradicts his perpetual doubting or feeling of uncertainty. For modernism a collage of quotations and translations, a multiplicity of voices that do not have clearly defined speakers is typical. Many of Frost's poems take the form of dialogues where the speakers are distinctly identified and situated. When Frost does quote, he quotes the local gossip or who said what, where and when. This is a crucial point of difference between Frost and the modernists. For example, in order to understand the poetry of Eliot or Pound, one needs more extra-textual knowledge, which means that their poetry challenges the reader with problems of reference. Frost's poetry does not depend on dictionaries, encyclopedias and other miscellaneous texts the way Eliot's or Pound's do (c.f. Lentricchia's remark above on Frost's exclusive use of words *heard* used in running speech, not merely *seen* in books). Instead, the problems that Frost's poetry poses are problems of interpretation. For example, often the issue is not "What exactly does the poet

mean?” but rather “How does he man what he is saying?” or “In what tone is he speaking to us?” Is Frost joking or is he serious? Is it irony or is he in earnest? This characteristic clearly distinguishes Frost from many of his contemporaries, not only Eliot and Pound but Crane and, of course, Moore as well. This is closely related to the fact that Frost plays a game of subtlety masked by casual obviousness. Lentricchia sees here another crucial difference between Frost and other modernists:

> Frost's desire to reach a mass audience by becoming, among other things, acceptable to mass-circulation magazines like the *Atlantic*, shaped his rhetorical literary relations to his imagined ordinary reader. He could become a poet for all kinds, but only by favoring the ordinary reader, by fashioning an accessible and seductively inviting literary surface that would welcome the causal reader of poetry (as opposed to the intellectually armed scholar of modernism), while burying very deep the sorts of subtleties that might please those accustomed to Pound's aesthetic caviar. (Lentricchia, 22)

In addition, Frost's effort – successful effort – to put himself on constant public display as the people's poet, can bee considered as an antithesis to all avant-garde ideals of the writer (Lentricchia, 47).

To conclude this section, let us look again at the central questions of modernism, that is, what is poetry and what can poetry do. For Frost, poetry is a type of work and work itself is for him a model for poetry. As Hammer concludes, the goal of writing poetry may be *meaning*:

> [meaning] is always something made, something the poet works on and works for. Frost's modernity consists in that: the idea that truth is something that's concrete and contingent, not a metaphysical matter, not an ideal principle, and that it's something that's only available in the act of deriving it, constructing it; an act that is ordinary, that's not capable of being completed and therefore necessarily always to be repeated; an ongoing task, something you have to get up and do every day. (Hammer, Lecture 3)

This answers the second question as well, because poetry in Frost's belief allows us to make some sense of the world, if only for a fleeting moment.

## *1.2 Frost, Romanticism and pastoral poetry*

An important defining and distinguishing quality of Frost's poetry consists in that the poet is always on the road, he is “one no dwelling can contain” (*CPP*, 307), he is always going

*somewhere*, churchward, homeward, outward from the village (*CPP*, 305). For example, he does not, like Stevens, place a jar on the top of a hill and meditate on what he sees. Frost prefers walking over staying at home, sitting at the table and thinking. Walking is a fundamentally different way of encountering the world from musing about what-ifs and what-nots. For him, walking is an essential method of discovering the world and it is by no means a mindless process, since as Frost himself claims, “you call this thinking, but it's walking” (*CPP*, 298). Nature's ways are infinitely diverse but for the traveler it is always either uphill, downhill or along a flat path. Therefore, Frost's poetry is framed not by a static world but by a constantly changing flux of settings and events. Nothing is static, there is no place for a vacuum from whence one could watch nature while at a safe distance from her grasp. With regard to the strong dynamism of Frost's poetry, we say that at its core lies *experience* which is gained at a great cost. The cost is the road not taken because, as Costello points out, Frost's landscapes are full of choices and boundaries encountered (Costello, 38). The poet does occasionally muse on what might have been should he have chosen the other path, as in the notoriously known poem 'The Road Not Taken'. However, as John Cunningham remarks, the traveler “looks back with regret but without paralysis” (*CCF*, 267). An occasional moment of reflection, a moment of “looking into going past” in 'Desert Places' (*CPP*, 269) are all right but no more than that, as for example autumnal nostalgia must give way to preparation for sowing and planting so that another harvest can take place. Costello emphasizes a key difference between Frost and Romantic poets:

> Frost's backward look does not produce the Wordsworthian completion of vision in afterimage, but rather a *via negativa* of quickly canceled frames. [Frost] creates a series of unromantic, fragmentary landscapes, places where beauty arises within the impoverishments of that 'diminished thing.' Frost finds nature at the margins of man's world, growing alongside the railroad track, not in the garden of Hesperides. (Costello, 21)

In fact, Frost is as far from Romanticism as a farmer is. But first we need to introduce a brief definition of Romanticism. As Claire Lamont suggests, it is hard to see the significance of the Romantic period without looking at what it was reacting against. This period saw changes in philosophy, politics, and religion, as well as in the arts of literature, painting, and music. The English Romantic poets both articulated and symbolized these changes. As Lamont observes, “In philosophy the Romantic period saw a reaction against rationalism of the eighteenth century” (*The Oxford History of English Literature*, 275). Hence, Romanticism can be understood as a revolt against social and political norms of the Age of Reason and a reaction against scientific rationalization of nature.

As was suggested in the previous section, Frost's understanding of the role of poetry and its function converges neither with the ideals of Romanticism nor with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's and Wordsworth's texts which eventually became the manifesto of the English Romantic movement in poetry. For example, Frost's poetry does not represent a moment recollected in tranquility or a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Frost's poetry is oriented to action, he is physically in the scene itself, participating in first-person, not musing on the scene from the outside. Frost is not an unacknowledged legislator of the world. He is not a redeemer of the waning rural world either. He merely portrays this world and preserves it in both a highly realistic and poetic form. Poetry for him is a vocation *and* avocation. Further, for Frost writing poetry is work. And he is not after "easy gold" (*CPP*, 26) but rather after hard-earned wages. Frost wants it the hard way. He knows very well that nature is beautiful and cruel. He is not alone to think so but he differs from others by being aware and accepting completely the fact that there is nothing he or you or we or anyone else can do about it. There now arises a question, how does Frost see nature and how can it be defined? As Costello explains, "nature [in Frost's poetry] is best identified with movement and energy, and in particular energy that dissolves form. […] it is a force rather than space" (Costello, 20). Nature is not a state, it is a process of being and becoming, an essence that asserts itself on its own. It affects the human presence and yet at the same time it is affected by it. And Frost's ultimate goal is survival. Apart from surviving, he is also keenly interested in exploration which can be undertaken anytime and anywhere. So while most villagers are huddling in their houses and "all animals are smothered in their lairs" (*CPP*, 269), Frost and perhaps the preacher in 'Snow' are enticed by the snowstorm, it is luring them and urging them to answer the desire for lostness. What sense would it make, after all, to merely weather the period when, "An hour of winter day might seem too short / To make it worth life's while to wake and sport" (*CPP*, 232)? The poet refuses to stand still until winter is over. His choice is to wander in the snow-covered landscape to see if there is something left and find out what it is.

Even though Frost's poetry is largely free of the Romantic longing, there is no doubt that he pays tribute to nature and is generously appreciative of her beauty. Costello asserts that "Like other modern poets, [Frost] reads in a book of nature for which the great code is lost" (Costello, 25). Yet Frost's relationship to nature and landscape is fundamentally different from both modernism and Romanticism, because his landscapes revert to an older model, "in which our relation to nature is one of resemblance rather than mastery" (Costello, 23). Likewise, in this way Frost "deviates from his nineteenth-century precursors, British and American, whose wandering is confident of a transcendental reality. [...] He is always *in* the landscape, not the master of a maze, and the landscape

obeys the law of flux" (Costello, 47). In consequence, Frost at one time goes to praise the beauty of nature and then a moment after he reveals its heedless destruction. Hence, Frost's devotion to pastoral poetry is somewhat ambiguous. He himself lived the existence of a farmer-poet which is a tradition extending back to Greek and Roman poets. However, as Lentricchia points out, Frost the literate farmer is more literate than farmer and uneasily so at that. In a sense, Frost seems to be rather "guilty pastoral" and writes not out of leisure-class privilege but out of "American social constraint by a man who wanted his work to be writing, not those other jobs he did that qualify officially in our culture as work and that he found so dissatisfying" (Lentricchia, 43). Faggen further claims that while Frost pays homage to, and is in dialogue with the pastoral tradition, we should be careful about including him in that tradition:

> Though Frost's poetry invites longing for a lost Eden or Arcadia, his vision constantly resists temptations of nostalgia while refusing to make grandiose claims about the difficulties of modernity. In fact, Frost's lover's quarrel with the spirit and substance of modern science distinguishes his vision of nature and man's place in it from almost all other modern poets. (Faggen, 3)

As stated in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "Robert Frost learned the pastoral, regional verse of Thomas Hardy and his friend Edward Thomas" (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 54). But, ultimately, his New England pastorals, such as 'Home Burial', 'Design', 'Directive' and many others rather "test out the premises of Puritanism and Transcendentalism and leave the answer open" (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 54). Thus, what truly connects Frost to pastoral poetry is a tendency to conceal his learning, a preference for hints and seemingly innocents remarks. Faggen insists that "pastoral literature has always been a mode of examining questions of political and social hierarchy, a form associated with simplicity but masking complexity" (Faggen, 3). Close reading of many poems will reveal that Frost was indeed interested in social – social particularly – , philosophical, cultural (function of poetry), ethical (sciences), ethnic-related (French Canadians vs. indigenous people) and national issues. But these are all very well masked, as Frost knows enough of hate to be wary about being explicit, hence the hidden complexity and meaning left to make. In other words, he conceals his intellectual preoccupation in seemingly simple poems about farming and the landscape. That is what allows him to reach out both to a mass audience and also "to butter no parsnips", or to speak to those more interested in Pound's caviar and the complexities of modernism.

According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, pastoral poetry is a fictionalized imitation of rural life.

Pastoral poems may end in sentimental and Romantic or sometimes political and satirical ways. “To insist on a realistic presentation of actual [rural] life would exclude the greater part of the works that are called pastoral. Only when poetry ceases to imitate actual rural life does it become distinctly pastoral. It must be admitted, however, that the term has been and still is used loosely to designate any treatment of rural life” (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 885). Beyond doubt, a lot of these conditions apply to Frost's *oeuvre*. But we should be wary when for example Louis Untermeyer includes Frost in the pastoral tradition. In general, the setting and mode of Frost's poetry are pastoral. The method is realistic and since realism is a mode of fiction, it satisfies the above definition. But the subject itself is not pastoral. By setting so much of his poetry in the country, Frost invoked the ancient mode of the pastoral, which Faggen interprets as “a symbolic landscape which often sets the world of contemplation of the rural against the tumult and sophistication of the urban” (*CIF*, 24). As pointed out above, the pastoral mode has always been burdened with symbolic and political complications. And Frost chose to write in the pastoral mode at a time when almost all other modernist poets had become urban or cosmopolitan in their symbolic literary strategies. The power of pastoral poetry stems largely from the tension between the remnants of the past and our imagination of them. Faggen identifies in Frost a dramatic motif typical of pastoral literature, the motif of “escape” or “retreat” or “the desire to escape the boundaries of the corrupt or civilized world and enter or return to the world of innocence in the *locus amoenus*” (Faggen, 50). This will be in detail discussed in the following chapter, where we will see how Frost leaves the city for the village and, consequently, the village for wilderness. These represent in Frost a version of the traditional pastoral places of retreat. As Frost said in one interview, “The farm is a base of operations – a stronghold. You can withdraw yourself there” (*Interviews with Robert Frost*, 76). But, as will also be seen later, Frost had a strong sense of withdrawing from the company of men, paradoxically in order to become more social.

Although many of Frost's poems are written distinctly in the pastoral mode and he often leads a dialogue with the pastoral tradition, some critics refuse to interpret Frost's poetry as pastoral. For instance, Archibald MacLeish opposes the classification of Frost as a pastoral poet, on the grounds that:

> [Frost's poems], obviously, are not country poems in the usual sense—certainly not pastoral poems. What they have to say about country things—snow, scything, meadow flowers—turns out to be something very different: something about man, about the experience of being human, being alive, upon this little sun-struck, wind-worn planet that will also end. (MacLeish, 443)

In fact, we would dare to propose that Frost *is* inherently pastoral. Therefore, we cannot insist on his not being a pastoral poet. MacLeish's hypothesis is essentially correct but he formulates his ideas in an unfortunate way. Instead, it would be far better to regard Frost's poetry as surpassing the traditional pastoral mode of writing. At the base, it is pastoral, but it reaches farther, not horizontally but vertically, as it goes both deeper (inner weather and the inward-bound quest) and higher (outer weather and the outward-bound quest) at once. This is best exemplified in the chilling final stanza 'Desert Places' :

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places. (*CPP*, 269)

The poem is completely pastoral. Yet, as the poem progresses, the focus shifts from the individual and local to the global and, ultimately, universal – the fear of space devoid of interaction and communication, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. In other words, the focus shifts from traditional pastoral subjects and motives to themes we would normally associate with modernism and modern philosophy, particularly existentialism in this specific poem. The condition of being “with no expression” and having “nothing to express” (CPP, 269) is brought out to light again in 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' which is a God-haunted poem.

In Frost's poetry, there is really no place where one can be at rest. Nature in itself is not a means of transcendence. Rather, as Costello argues, “Nature is a space where evolution and entropy preside” (Costello, 39). Therefore, we can regard Frost more as an evolutionist, not transcendentalist. In the poem 'West-Running Brook', there is a clear evolutionist pattern, a scheme of the cycle of things:

> Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
> The brook runs down in sending up our life.
> The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
> And there is something sending up the sun.
> It is this backward motion toward the source,
> Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
> The tribute of the current to the source.
> It is from this in nature we are from
> It is most us. (*CPP*, 238)

As Mark Richardson concludes, “Frost finally entertains transcendence as an unrealizable ideal” (Richardson, 10). Frost does not lose himself in ontological queries concerning the nature of that

"something". Instead, he takes comfort in epistemological givenness – in conscious physical experience of what is, of what *is happening*. As Costello declares, "We are finally part of nature through our physical being and that is awesome. We share it with other creatures" (Costello, 35). Be it a lonely moth seen in winter looking for love, fireflies in the garden emulating real stars, or irises rendered by moonlight so watery as to seem submarine.

### *1.3 Frost and New England*

A lot of readers previously unacquainted with Frost begin reading him and assuming that he was a Yankee poet, a New Englander or whatever Frost's public image might suggest. In turn they expect him to write like a Yankee, they expect his poems to be New England poems and to be poems about the New England mind which they very well may not be at all. For one thing, Frost was a Californian, city-born and city-raised. MacLeish warns us against making an *a priori* connection between Frost and New England:

> I think that is is a mistake to look for the New England mind in Frost's work or the New England feel. It was not New England that produced Robert Frost; it was Robert Frost who chose New England And the relation of Frost to New England was not the relation of the native son, who can take his country-earth for granted, but of the stranger who falls in love with a land and makes his life in it. (MacLeish, 442)

As has been already discussed above, Frost comes to New England as the inheritor of a lost world. And while he quickly gains an established status in the New England community, the narrator of the poems slowly becomes a naturalized villager. In Frost's *oeuvre*, from *A Boy's Will*, there are clearly recognizable New England subjects. Lawrence Buell summarizes Frost's poetry as "A kind of anthology of familiar upcountry New England workways, landforms, and psychographs. Wall-building, blueberrying, apple-picking, hay-making. Reclusive bottled-up neurotic cottagers, rural poverty, strange bumpy contours" (*CCF*, 106). In all this, Frost concentrates on private experience while bringing "georgic scenes and rustic character to a new level of textured particularity relative to earlier [New England] poets" (*CCF*, 110). In contrast with other similar poets – both New England and Romantics – , he shares with them the Anglophone poetic tradition but without sacrificing local particularity. This means, we can easily identify New England environment in his poetry but we can just as easily read his poetry as if the setting were anywhere else.

There are several links through which Frost consciously connects himself to, and consequently is objectively connected to, New England. Buell accounts for five means of identification, namely 1) biographical 2) geographical 3) ideological 4) linguistic and 5) formal forms of identification. The first criterion is easily satisfied by reference to the poet's life, though his reputation quickly outgrew New England when he became an established national poet, widely and internationally recognized as an *American* poet. Geographically without doubt, as the landscape of his poems offers typical New England landmarks. However, his poems are New England poems not in a strict geographic and descriptive sense the way poems of Elizabeth Bishop, for example, are. As said above, Frost preserves the local particularities and character but he is not really a regionalist painter; his ambition lies in transcending the singular toward the universal. As for ideological identification, it is there in many poems but it is more characteristic of the narrator of the poems than of Frost himself. He was well versed in country things but was also a teacher, thinker, and a father figure to the American nation – these roles definitely reach beyond the ideology of the local New England folk. Buell sees the fourth and fifth criteria as most important. Of course, linguistic identification with New England is a very powerful and arresting element of Frost's poetry. All the “sha'n'ts,” “wa'n'ts,” “t'ain'ts,” “t'weres,” “d'yous”, distinctive idioms of the local dialects, syntax oddities and many more. Lastly, formal identification, that is, metrics, allusions to the works of his precursors, is important but has been already well analyzed in the works of Faggen, Buell, Timothy Steele and others. Besides, it is not substantial to the central subject of this thesis.

All the time it is important to bear in mind the question, “how does Frost mean that?”, not what he seems or pretends to be actually saying. He writes about, and possibly speaks for, the New England community. But are we meant to understand and accept the poems as the voice through which speaks the spirit of a remote corner of the American continent or should we construe the poet as speaking for his sole self? The final and perhaps the most astute answer to this is provided by MacLeish, the poet's friend, who argues that in Frost's poetry New England becomes “an all-including metaphor for everything” (MacLeish, 442).

# Chapter 2

### The village

I had for my evening walk--
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.
*Good Hours*

> "As traditional community interaction was interpersonal and frequent, common space is also implied in most definitions. Space and place denote common experience; and, in the traditional view, community as experience and community as place were one. The organization of the common space – the settlement form – reflects in large measure the configuration or spatial structure of the social web. The prevalent settlement form attributed to the place associated with traditional, preindustrial community is the village, or 'collection of dwelling houses and other buildings, forming a center of habitation in a country district.' Village and community, like place and community, are often considered one and the same and the terms are used interchangeably; but, in the primary definition of village, nucleation is strongly implied." (Wood, 53).

Throughout this chapter we will be using Wood's definition of a village. And it is in such a small community in New Hampshire, where Frost began his quest in New England as the inheritor of a lost world. The place where he started was in Derry Village, at a farm which Frost's grandfather had bought for his newly-wed grandson. The theme of village will be the subject of this chapter. First we will discuss the general village environment in Frost's poetry, with reference to historical research about New England villages. Then we will consider relations between the city and the country. Finally, we will contrast the village with wilderness which in Frost presents a purposeless natural phenomena opposing humanity but also, importantly, a means of escaping from it. As a theoretic-

al background for our discussion we will use Guy Debord's philosophical work *The Society of the Spectacle*. Published in 1967 in France and set in a European context, it offers a sharp criticism of Western civilization. Much of what Frost writes about in his poetry, and especially his nightmares representing the fears of New Englanders facing urbanisation, is echoed, elaborated and amplified in Debord's work.

Though profoundly critical and skeptical of the changes brought about by modern ways of life, Frost's poetry is far from being pessimistic. Frost neither fights nor joins the urban expansion. Instead, he goes again in the opposite direction, beyond the village, far away, to the ominous woods, deserted fields and frozen swamps. He passes the saddest city lane and walks out alone in winter rain. And one of his wishes is that those dark trees "Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom, / But stretched away unto the edge of doom" (*CPP*, 15).

## *2.1 Village*

As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, while much of Frost's poetry is explicitly located in the New England landscape, we should avoid reading it as the epitome of New England. However, when discussing the subject of the village in Frost's poetry, we must take into account the concept of the New England village from historical and traditional American perspective. For this, we will look into the research of Joseph S. Wood and his treatise *The New England Village*. First, Wood warns against the popular, universalized image of the typical New England village:

> The common New England village landscape is burdened by an invented tradition, both popular and scholarly, which has become universalized. In the collective American mind the New England village is a nucleated agricultural settlement encircling a green and standing for community forbearance in a period of societal discipline and economic stability — "as a city upon a hill," to use John Winthrop's oft-cited characterization of his goal for New England settlement. Towns, in short, were planted and perpetuated by compact settlement. In time, tradition asserts, such forbearance and attachment to compact settlement declined — the transition from puritan to Yankee — but the village remained. (Wood, 2)

Hence, the village has survived the transition from the idea of America as the New Jerusalem to its secularized national ethos that, eventually, emerges as the American dream, deeply rooted in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence. What is important is the fact that New England villages have maintained a specific character throughout various periods. Wood proposes that the

origin of this character goes back to the first New England settlers, “who brought with them cultural baggage that included a predisposition toward dispersed settlements on freehold farms, which they located in relationship to grasslands to support cattle” (Wood, 2). Further on, towns and villages had the function of providing land for a community and while villages did take on the meaning of community, they “were not necessarily nor commonly compact in form” (Wood, 2). All these characteristics are easily identifiable in Frost's poetry. Villages, farms and isolated cottages are all elements of the Frostian country landscape. Our focus is on the village but both in Frost and in American history, as Wood describes it, the village often takes the form of widely dispersed houses over mountain ranges and green valleys. For example, in the poem 'The Mountain', the village is but an agglomeration of “scattered farms” (*CPP*, 46).

For Frost, the village represents above all a place to retreat when he is desirous of the company of men. When he feels too winter-broken or perhaps autumn-tired, he comes to the village as in 'The Vantage Point':

> If tired of trees I seek again mankind,
> Well I know where to hie me—in the dawn,
> To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn,
> There amid lolling juniper reclined,
> Myself unseen, I see in white defined
> Far off the homes of men, and farther still,
> The graves of men on an opposing hill,
> Living or dead, whichever are to mind. (*CPP*, 26)

What is instantly noticeable about a village seen from afar is activity. Much is going on in the village. It is a place where hard physical work is performed and love is made. The heart of the village is pulsing in its own ways, radically different from that of a city's. The village is a place that is to a significant degree still subjected to the ways of nature, whereas the city, apart from calamities, snowstorms, floods, fires and plagues, is braced against – or likes to think so – the caprices of nature. In the village, there is a number of activities that are not apparent or do not exist in the city at all. Villagers are routinely engaged in various pursuits, such as wall-building, blue-berrying, apple-picking, hay-making and many more. However, these are not the only activities that could otherwise appeal to town dwellers for whom these might provide a pleasant form of exotic physical exercise. Besides, there are much less pleasant chores that the villagers must attend to. They themselves have to dig graves and bury their close ones, like the grief-ravaged couple agonizing over the death of their child in 'Home Burial'. In the village, funeral services are not always available or they

may be prevented by snow blizzards from making a journey through a mountain range to a village on the opposite side. And the force of nature shows no mercy, as “time would press / Between the death day and the funeral day” (*CPP*, 187). Further, in the village there is always room for the dead ones, which is in contrast with the ways *and* possibilities of the city. In her novel *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather specifies this difference: “When one of [the city people] dies, they scarcely know where to bury him” (*O Pioneers!*, 46). But in the Frostian world, the soil embraces all, even though – or perhaps precisely because – the people have to dig the graves with their own hand. It is also partly so because, historically, burying ground was the meeting lot for the villagers (Wood, 2).

The village is an important center in Frost's poetry. It is the starting place when he goes out for walks as well as the point of return. On his travels during the landscape, the poet frequently passes through neighboring villages. There, he talks to the local people about how village things go or, as in 'Blueberries', about the deliciously big blueberries seen in the near pasture. In the poem 'Good-Hours', the poet passes “the slumbering village street” (*CPP*, 102). In a 'A Girl's Garden', he listens to a neighbor's village tale. In other poems he does village shopping in small country stores, exchanging words of village gossip and running various village errands. Importantly, many, if not all, of the poet's dramatic narratives also take place in the village, such as 'The Death of the Hired Man', 'The Mountain', 'The Black Cottage', 'The Self-Seeker' and a number of other poems from *North of Boston*. Further, we find a lot of dramatic narratives taking place in the village in *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire* and *West-Running Brook*.

In Frost's poetry, the scenes of village life and environment are picturesque and colorful, if somewhat rustic. But ultimately, the Frostian landscape, especially the village, is full of abandoned houses, destruction and exploitation of the countryside and the very air is permeated with fear. The Frostian village is full of houses where the old-timers are living their last days. The young ones see their future in other places and they are moving away. Villages are steadfastly losing their population and the region is emptying. For example, 'The Black Cottage' which is just a little cottage “Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass” and has but “A front with just a door between two windows, / Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black” (*CPP*, 59) now seems forsaken more than ever since the lady of the house died. The father of the family “fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg, / I ought to know—it makes a difference which” (*CPP*, 59), then the two sons went out of the house and the mother remained alone. Although “[her] sons won't sell the house or the things in it. / They say they mean to come and summer here / Where they were boys. They haven't come this year. / They live so far away—one is out west— / It will be hard for them to keep their

word" (*CPP*, 59). Incidentally, Frost's father was a New Englander by birth but went westwards, to California, and Frost returns to his father's homeland like a lost son. In any case, the boys are not likely to come back to the black cottage and this reflects the large-scale migration from the village (and country in general), to the city. Yet, in the poem 'In The Home Stretch' Frost hints at the fact that in a city, country people are likely to be marginalized and probably will not feel at home there, because of the impersonal character of the urban environment. In the city one hardly knows one's neighbor and therefore one cannot expect, let alone depend on, friendly help, save support from the state or institutions. Frost's poem advocates self-reliance and shows an old-school conservatism, a belief in traditional country ways – a belief strongly influenced by Jeffersonian ideals of self-sufficiency and by the Emersonian principle of self-reliance:

> It's not so bad in the country, settled down,
> When people're getting on in life.
> […]
> "You big boys ought to find a farm,
> And make good farmers, and leave other fellows
> The city work to do. There's not enough
> For everybody as it is in there." (*CPP*, 111)

A great deal of Frost's poetry is concerned with daily farm life. And, again, behind the pastoral façade which revives and celebrates man's connection to nature, there can be felt a great anxiety as illustrated by the poem 'The Fear', with the only difference that fear in itself is a natural emotion but there is something unnatural about the fear the country folks feel; they do not know what they are facing, they have no idea what they are going into. They are subject to the side-effects of modern technology and they are unacknowledged victims of urbanism. The crisis sweeping the rural region very strongly affects the individual lives of the folks and, perhaps more importantly, their mutual relationships. For example, the poem 'The Housekeeper' presents "a complex study of several characters finding farm life and the pursuit of beautiful things anything but an harmonious existence" (*CIF*, 92). This is what lies behind the pastoral mask of Frost's poetry. Life and existence in the countryside are not idyllic at all. Apart from constantly facing challenges from nature, there arises a new threat posed by technology, eugenics in particular in 'The Housekeeper'. As a result, particles of the community – houses and farm families – are dissipating. In 'An Old Man's Winter Night', an old farmer remains alone: "A light he was to no one but himself" (*CPP*, 106). His house is covered in snow and darkness and the man is trying to make-do in the house:

> […] The log that shifted with a jolt

> Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
> And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
> One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
> A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
> It's thus he does it of a winter night. (*CPP*, 106)

The traditional fundamental unit of the New England landscape, i.e. the farm or a homestead, no longer works. A man cannot keep a house. His neighbors are gone, there is no one to help. The people are alone. The community is slowly but steadily falling apart. Frost's poetry is sensitive to all these changes in the rural culture. In New England, there comes a collapse of the farming system. The industry is moving south, where labor cost is lower. And Protestantism, traditionally strong in the New England region, is decaying. Is there hope for the country ways of old? Is there any future for the traditional village life? That is also the question in Frost's poetry. The answer in many poems lies in preserving the tradition. People must cling to age-old rituals and customs. Among these we can rank wall-building. As Faggen observes,

> The narrator of the poem and his neighbor are separated by the membrane of the wall but they are also brought together by it at the same time. The fact remains that the wall gets "repaired" annually as much as the narrator becomes "re-paired" with his antagonist. (*CIF*, 68)

The saying "Good fences make good neighbors" is true. The wall also mends differences such as when "He is all pines and I am apple orchard" (*CPP*, 39). Wall-building functions very differently in a city where it *isolates* people. Good fences cannot make good neighbors in a city. At best fences can make friends of the lawnmowers hired by neighboring families. In the village, fences and walls help maintain healthy relationships, for as Costello reminds us, "You need a separation to have a relation" (Costello, 30). The wall separates but also brings together, for example in spring when the narrator of the poems likes "to find folks getting out in spring, / Raking the dooryard, working near the house," (*CPP*, 53) or mending walls. It is important to bear in mind that the walls function symbolically as well. Walls suggest that in the Frostian village there is no place for a utopian world without boundaries. And, last but not least, it would not be Frost if there were not a degree of ambiguity about wall-building, because while for men walls serve a good purpose, nature views it differently:

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
> And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. (*CPP*, 39)

## 2.2 The city and the country

There has been a steadily growing gap between the country and the city which has culminated in separation and what Guy Debord in his work calls the creation of *pseudocountryside*: “As urbanism destroys the cities, it recreates a *pseudocountryside* devoid both of the natural relations of the traditional countryside and of the direct (and directly challenged) social relations of the historical city“ (Debord, Thesis 177). Debord further asserts that the conditions of habitation and spectacular control in today’s “planned environment” have transformed the population into artificial population, which in our case means the creation of neo-rural citizenry; a citizenry that is no longer rural by function but by location. It has also sped up the geographical dispersal, which has always been a quite extensive feature in the New England region, and has added to the spawning process of creating new cities or transforming towns into proto-urban and urban elements. In order to survive, the villages are required to change in accord with the “planned environment” policies and to satisfy modern standards. Otherwise, a village is doomed to extinction or transformation into a mere artificial spectacle; a place where tourists come to see a glimpse of history.

Just as the countryside is rapidly changing, the city also loses a great deal of its traditional characteristics. This loss is brought about by modern technologies and breakthroughs of – particularly – natural sciences. Theoretical discoveries and application in practice have preceded over the evolution of *ethics*. Western civilization has not yet found the necessary spiritual and philosophical means of handling all these new, shining advances. Most of Frost's work warns men against too much rational thinking which enfeebles, and often disables common sense completely. Frost advises against accepting mechanically various doctrines and dogmas. For example, in the poem 'The Bear' Frost satirizes modern man:

> Or if he rests from scientific tread,
> 'Tis only to sit back and sway his head
> Through ninety odd degrees of arc, it seems,
> Between two metaphysical extremes.
> [..]
> He almost looks religious but he's not,
> And back and forth he sways, from cheek to cheek,
> At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,

At the other agreeing with another Greek. (*CPP,* 247)

However, it seems to be too late. Frost's landscape is changing too fast which Faggen summarizes: “The life in the country and the village bears a *memento mori*, a remembrance of death” (*CIF*, 52). Even the names in the poem 'Ghost House' have become obscured by growth of moss. Many of Frost's poems meditate upon the fragility of home, of the village, and the poets looks both synchronically and diachronically into the lives of forgotten and abandoned rural New England. Faggen argues that Frost's focus was particularly poignant, because “New England farm populations were dwindling rapidly at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, abandoning farm life, and moving increasingly into urban areas” (*CIF*, 52). In the long run, as Debord demonstrates, the classical opposition between the city and the country, which was mutually enriching, has come to the point of nullifying both the city and the country. Debord then argues that the disappearance of city and the country does not represent a transcendence of their separation but their simultaneous collapse (Debord, Thesis 175). What can be done about this mutual erosion of the city and the country? In Frost's poetry we can trace an explicit struggle to integrate secular truths and innovations of modern science into the existing fragmented rural reality. However, truths and facts of science are of no use to the ordinary village people. What is worse, as we see in the poem 'The Housekeeper', villagers may misunderstand or misapply modern methods, as is the case of the crazy farmer so fascinated with hen breeding and eugenics which makes him ignore home duties and, ultimately, drives his housekeeper and common-law wife away. In contrast with city people, village folk are at a serious disadvantage because of their narrow-mindedness, conservative beliefs and traditional social practices which are incompatible with modern-day technologies and trends. Frost offers a solution to this problem. From the first to the last poem, the poet emphasizes flexibility and changeability. What is unable, for whatever reason, to accept change and adapt, is doomed to die. The villagers have always been very conservative folk. Not by choice but simply out of necessity, dictated by nature's cycles and seasons. They know too well that some things best remain unchanged and some rituals better be preserved. And this is what Frost is doing, preserving the rural world in a timeless frame of his poetry. He allows us to revisit, anytime, the village, get the feel of the place, savor the atmosphere, smell the blossoming backyard meadow. He promises us to show us, allow us to get a glimpse of the vanishing world. Looking is not enough, he wants us to *see*.

Importantly, Frost wants us to see how modern man is disconnected from nature and there is nothing meaningful that would fill the vacated place. The poem 'The Bear' exemplifies this condition of

frustration and malcontent:

> Such is the uncaged progress of the bear.
> The world has room to make a bear feel free;
> The universe seems cramped to you and me.
> Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage,
> That all day fights a nervous inward rage,
> His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.
> He paces back and forth and never rests. (*CPP*, 247)

In the city, the space is over-crowded, there is no nature, save an occasional tree alley artificially implanted in sidewalks. Debord vehemently opposes these spectacles of modernism and urban nightmares:

> The reigning economic system is a *vicious circle of isolation*. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system *chooses to produce* also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender "lonely crowds." With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions. (Debord, Thesis 28)

Both Debord and Frost are explicit in their *critique* of the urban environment. Frost in his poem 'The Lesson for Today' argues that "Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space" (*CPP*, 320). The city is full of lonely crowds, it is in fact overcrowded and at the same time people are not alone together as in the countryside but together alone. As Frost remarks in the same poem, "[...] the lesson for today / Is how to be unhappy yet polite" (*CPP*, 320). The superficiality of the city – and equally so of the *pseudocountryside* – is just a consequence of the unnatural environment modern man lives in. Henry Miller has put it neatly in the novel *Black Spring*: "The tragedy of it is that nobody sees the look of desperation on my face. Thousands and thousands of us, and we're passing one another without a look of recognition" (*Black Spring*, 126). And the countryside, with its villages and farmsteads, slowly but inevitably becomes infected with the evils of the city, such as in the poem 'A Roadside Stand':

> The little old house was out with a little new shed
> In front at the edge of the road where the traffic sped,
> A roadside stand that too pathetically plead,
> It would not be fair to say for a dole of bread,
> But for some of the money, the cash, whose flow supports
> The flower of cities from sinking and withering faint
> The polished traffic passed with a mind ahead,
> Or if ever aside for a moment, then out of sorts

At having the landscape marred with artless paint
Of signs that with N turned wrong and S turned wrong. (*CPP*, 260-261)

Frost shows a harsh and bitter reality. Cities are expanding and a monstrous network of highways is necessary for car travel. The country folk perhaps imagine they could have some profit from the passing drivers. But the poem pities their *naïvety*:

The thought of so much childish longing in vain,
The sadness that lurks near the open window there,
That waits all day in almost open prayer
For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car,
Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass,
Just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are.
And one did stop, but only to plow up grass
In using the yard to back and turn around;
And another to ask the way to where it was bound;
And another to ask could they sell it a gallon of gas
They couldn't (this crossly): they had none, didn't it see? (*CPP*, 261)

'A Roadside Stand' concludes that all the city did to the country was "[...] teaching them how to sleep the sleep all day, / [And] destroy their sleeping at night the ancient way" (*CPP*, 261). Debord puts the process in a less poetical but more explicit form:

The self-destruction of the urban environment is already well under way. The explosion of cities into the countryside, covering it with what Mumford calls "a formless mass of thinly spread semi-urban tissue," is directly governed by the imperatives of consumption. The dictatorship of the automobile — the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance — has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centers and promote an ever-wider dispersal. Within this process various forms of partially reconstituted urban fabric fleetingly crystallize around "distribution factories" — giant shopping centers built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots. These temples of frenetic consumption are subject to the same irresistible centrifugal momentum, which casts them aside as soon as they have engendered enough surrounding development to become overburdened secondary centers in their turn. (Debord, Thesis 174)

Where will this lead? In Debord's opinion, the general process of decomposition and separation will eventually both destroy the country and bring the city to the point of consuming itself. In the Shakespearian phrase, the city will be consumed by that which it was nourished by. And in spite of these nightmares of urbanisation, Frost maintains in his poetry preference for the old country ways. If there is one, the poet chooses the road less traveled by. A minuscule village "Still Corners" is

… so called not because
The place is silent all day long, nor yet
Because it boasts a whisky still—because
It set out once to be a city and still
Is only corners, cross-roads in a wood. (*CPP*, 156)

Hence, Frost does not close his eyes before the disappearing countryside, already infiltrated by the semi-urban tissue, but he goes searching where there is still some left. He gives up lighted city streets for country darkness (*CPP*, 109). And there, in the darkness of a wood, he finds a minuscule village. Typically of Frost, a moment of darkness always precedes illumination. Illumination is not possible without a journey into chaos, oblivion and darkness. While turning away from the city may be interpreted as a token of the poet's inner insecurity and hidden desire to actually be like the city (including the consequent failure to become so), in this poem heading away from the city allows the poet to find a cosmos, albeit a microscopic one, where nothing else but chaos was supposed to be. Consequently, Frost manages to attain the knowledge of a different and deeper reality, which we will discus in greater detail in the following section.

### *2.3 Beyond the village*

When Frost sets out and outwalks the furthest village light, what is he doing there and where is he going?

I had such company outward bound.
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my cracking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter's eve. (*CPP*, 102)

The poem 'Good Hours' shows the typical Frostian impulse to seek lostness, to lose oneself somewhere far from the village, far from the human presence. The poet retreats to nature where "the mind seeks and creates pattern in time, which struggle against the anti-landscapes of undifferentiated wilderness, the frozen swamps and desert places we cannot inhabit" (Costello, 19). There, however, exists a force, the something that also does not love a wall, and which Costello calls "wildness" rather than mere "wilderness", because it manifests itself in a discernible manner in con-

trast to the purposeless empty spaces symbolizing “stars where no human race is” (*CPP*, 269).

Perhaps oddly, in Frost's poetry forests generate a sense of fellowship. Frost is often fascinated with woods, they are an inseparable part of the landscape in his poetry. But where does this fascination come from? What is the drive behind it? Richard Poirier notices that such allure is especially strong in the winter seasonal phase during nighttime (Poirier, 181). The poet is invited to come in the wood, which best exemplifies the poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. The woods are said to be “lovely, dark and deep” (*CPP*, 207) and they are without doubt more seductive to the poet than the desert places offering nothing except “a blanker whiteness of benighted snow” (*CPP*, 269). Here we have two archetypal elements representing “wildness” and “wilderness”. The depth and darkness of the forest stands for the former. What is it that lies therein? The desire to lose oneself in the depth and darkness of a forest asks for a more detailed analysis. For John Cunningham, the woods are the ultimate representation symbolizing the purposeless natural phenomena opposing humanity (*CCF*, 269), i.e. the distant megalopolis, the local village and the presence of the poet. In Frost's poetry, nature has always two sides which are mirrored by the choice between flight or fight. Here, the woods show nature's darker face which tempts unwary passers-by. Both “the darkest evening of the year” and “the sweep of easy wind and the downy flake” (*CPP*, 207) invite the traveler to follow them, they “entice the speaker to give up his human errands and to sleep in the void of death” (*CCF*, 270). In accord with Poirier's explanation of the woods' loveliness, Cunningham admonishes us against the perfidious temptation promising in fact nothing other than death. Their depth, says Cunningham, is the depth of the final absence of death (*CCF*, 270). It is then a moment of triumph of man's will over natural forces, when he resents the impulse toward death and goes on, minding “the promises to keep” and remembering “human connotations of duty and presence” (*CCF*, 270).

The other entity representing “wilderness”, the utterly purposeless phenomena, is the deserted field. The terrifying emptiness offers a glance in the void. The endless plains are not aware what they are doing to the mesmerized traveler. As John Cunningham explains, “[Light] cannot look into the darkness; human life cannot look into death, into nothingness” (*CCF*, 272). According to the poet, this light is but “a flickering, human pathetic light maintained against the night” (*CPP*, 264) and stopping in the fields, having no expression and nothing to express can be said to represent human life at its final frontier. The forest, at least, is spatialized which means that it is defined in space. In the desert places, one loses all sense of space and time. And it is perhaps snow which is the strongest physical manifestation of the force of nature. Snow and darkness, heavy snowfall and nightfall, ob-

literate all sense of boundaries and dimension; snow is yet more powerful than the forest. In a forest the poet can satisfy his desire for "peace and lostness" (Poirier, 180) or the longing for comradeship, but snow will conquer all. However, in Frost's poetry snow ultimately functions not as a blanket for one's place of final rest but as the marker of a new beginning.

The desire to go and lose oneself in "wildness" and "wilderness", according to Judith Oster, results in a conflict "between two undiminished forces: 'promises' that would lead the speaker onward, and his desire to give in to his intoxication with the beauty and peacefulness of the woods" (*CCF*, 162). She explains the pull between those alternatives as that between "obligation" and "temptation." A generalized and more abstract parallel of this conflict is the tension between the impulses toward life and death. In Frost's poetry, this could be universally translated as the drama between stopping and going on. For the poet, to stop means literally to give up the ghost.

By and large, there is a great opposition between the village and the wilderness, just as there is an opposition between the city and the village. To some degree we can conclude that the former opposition is an inversion of the latter, because in nature there is a total absence of humanity whereas in the city there is total presence of humanity. Hence, for Frost, the village presents a compromise between the two extremes. One cannot really hope for more, as Frost is well aware. Cunningham characterizes the Frostian landscape as one where "there is no Heaven for one to crawl under, just an Earth to crawl upon" (*CCF*, 272). Frost, however, suggests that the Earth is the best place for us, right next to Heaven, or perhaps even better, as he writes in the poem 'Birches': "Earth's the right place for love; / I don't know where it's likely to go better" (*CPP*, 118). But, unfortunately, the Earth is an ever-changing place, as it is subject to Time's planetary change of style:

> To Time it never seems that he is brave
> To set himself against the peaks of snow
> To lay them level with the running wave,
> [..]
> What now is inland shall be ocean isle. (*CPP*, 304)

Nothing gold can stay. Or, at most, for about an hour or a lifetime. This is by no means a token of pessimism; it just shows Frost's realism and naturalistic outlook. Frost's imagination never crosses nature's limits but at the same time he shows us that the limits are much, much more broad than we thought. Due to the pressing force of nature, this imagination is inward-bound which dramatically contrasts with the poet's outward-bound quest. In the countryside, the man-nature divide is clearly

marked, as testifies the character of one villager in the poem 'New Hampshire':

> He knew too well for any earthly use
> The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
> And never over-stepped it save in dreams. (*CPP,* 161)

To summarize this chapter, let us return to our discussion of Frost's allegiance to pastoral poetry. In this chapter, we have seen that for Frost the village is a place of retreat when he wants to escape modernity and urbanism. Likewise, wilderness is a place of retreat when he is desirous to get away from the company of men. The poet's desire of lostness and loneliness stems from a deeply rooted psychological conflict to which the only solution is a severe retreat of the above kind. As Frost himself confessed, "I think a person has to be withdrawn into himself to gather inspiration so that he is somebody when he comes out again among folks. […] He learns that he's got to be almost wastefully alone" (*Interviews with Robert Frost*, 76). By so doing, Frost presents to us a complex version of the traditional pastoral motive of retreat. And, like great pastoral poets, Frost considers the village and the country from the perspective of one who has had some experience of the city. The tension emanating from the opposition between city and country, which has come to the point of nullifying both, is typical of the pastoral mode. With the difference, however, that Frost lived in and confronted the complexities of the post-Darwinian world. According to Darwinism, man had been created from the rest of nature and this directly challenges the concept of innocence which has always been the question often evoked by pastoral poetry. How can we attain, achieve or maintain innocence? And could the natural world, devoid of the corruptions of civilization, hold together? Would it be a better place? For Frost, the corruption is strongly associated with the city and the sophistications of the urban sector. However, the city itself is not a source of corruption, it only becomes a symbol of modern man's corrupted heart. On the other hand, Frost does not present to us an idealized garden or pasture, as these no longer exist, if indeed they have ever existed. Consequently, Frost shifts his focus elsewhere, to the level of interpersonal relationships. On this plane, Frost's poems and dramas of human existence constantly oscillate between solitude and society. The question they ultimately pose is how to be at the same time individual and social. And the answer they supply is that the village offers a good starting point for a man who wants to find out.

# Chapter 3

## Work

> Out of the mud two strangers came
> And caught me splitting wood in the yard,
> And one of them put me off my aim
> By hailing cheerily 'Hit them hard!'
> I knew pretty well why he had dropped behind
> And let the other go on a way.
> I knew pretty well what he had in mind:
> He wanted to take my job for pay.
>
> *Two Tramps in Mud Time*

Almost all Frost's poems are to a varying degree related to work. As has already been mentioned in Chapter 1, work represents for Frost a model for poetry. Often we find the poet-figure working, as shown in the above quoted poem. And there in this very poem we see again something behind the mask, behind the pastoral disguise of the poet-farmer. For in the country, with the expanding urbanisation, a crisis is creeping in the pastures, meadows, woods and fields. In this chapter, we will examine first the philosophy of work, we will see how Frost views labor and the general work condition in the countryside, in the village in particular. Second, we will take a closer look at tools and instruments with which work is done. In Frost, to work means to use a tool. And one must know how to use the tool, otherwise not only the quality of the job but the very life of the worker is at stake. Finally, we will consider the ongoing colossal process of machinery, which spreads steadily through the country like an avalanche and bears an equally devastating effect on traditional life and culture.

## *3.1 Frost's poetry of work*

Frost's poetry maps a wide spectrum of professions and types of work. They range from the collector in 'A Hundred Collars', who is a sort of double-dyed Vermont Democrat. Upon being asked “You drive around? It must be pleasant work,” he answers “It's business, but I cant' say it's not fun. / What I like best's the lay of different farms, / Coming out on them from a stretch of woods, / Or over a hill or round a sudden corner” (*CPP*, 53). The collector's errand is particularly enjoyable when he checks village families in summer time: “Later they get out further in the fields. / Everything's shut sometimes except the barn; / The family's all away in some back meadow. / There's a hay load a-coming...” (*CPP*, 53). In stark contrast with the collector's profession stands the task of the census-taker who bears testimony to the emptying countryside and vanishing life. He is on a cheerless journey through the mountains, where he comes as a witness “to the waste / To count people [there] and finds none” (*CPP*, 164). In dismay, he recollects the landscape where

> None in the hundred miles, none in the house,
> Where I came last with some hope, but not much
> After hours' overlooking from the cliffs
> An emptiness flayed to the very stone.
> I found no people that dared show themselves
> None not in hiding from the outward eye. (*CPP*, 164)

He passes a house in which no lamp is lit, nothing is on the table and the stove is cold, off the chimney and down by one side where it lacks a leg. There are neither men nor men's bones. The absence of bones suggests that the place has been deserted. In one year, the house has fallen to decay and the census-taker thinks what to do, what could be done about the house and about the people not there. The place is completely abandoned and even the cliffs around are “too far for echo” (*CPP*, 165). On the whole, the job of the census-taker is depressing, for it includes a deep melancholy; the melancholy of “having to count souls / Where they grow fewer and fewer every year / Is extreme where they shrink to none at all” (*CPP*, 165).

However, the collector's and the census-taker's are by far not common jobs among workers in Frost's poetry. In general, workers in Frost's poems do physical, mostly hard labor. And they are devoted to highly specialized types of work. In contrast with this stands – as predicted already by the Victorians in the context of Anglophone literatures – the threat of reduction of the individual man to the modern mass man, or the average person who can do a bit of everything but in total a great deal

of nothing. This goes in hand with technology which takes advantage of the labor that has been traditionally available. The research of Rosenbloom and Sundstrom shows that throughout the 19th century, "westward migration and the growth of Midwestern agriculture created a labor surplus on New England farms" (Rosenbloom, 14). In Frost's poetry, we find a culmination of this process in the form of "competition from Midwestern agricultural products [that] was undermining markets for the less efficient farms of New England" (Rosenbloom, 14). In the end, Frost's workers and New England rural work life can be characterized in the following way, as Hammer puts it:

> This move roots Frost's poetry of work in the lives of rural workers, people who have to sustain and entertain themselves, often on their own or alone. What these people have to work with are the tools that have been passed down to them, or sometimes that they have invented. The poverty of the people Frost writes about is important. It makes them materialists, too, or realists, like Frost. They are acutely conscious of the circumstances in which they live their lives. And they suffer, they rage. Their New England, importantly, is not an ideal, pastoral place. (Hammer, Lecture 3)

That the Frostian landscape is not an idyllic world has been shown in the previous chapter. The farm unit no longer works, the village cannot support itself and must open its heart to the frenetically pulsating ways of modern life. Now, we will also see that this holds true for the village work routine as well. What remains still valid and unchanged, albeit not in the economic sense, is the value of labor. As Poirier points out, Frost "like Emerson finds his miracles not in dogma or antiquities but in human actions, especially those which, through labor, reveal and help create nature" (Poirier, 300). Poirier continues to emphasize the nature of labor and what it yields:

> What is required is toil and labor, the exertion of body and mind necessary to bring anything to birth. Labor, again, is both one of the unfortunate consequences of the Fall and a way of overcoming them, of transforming them into fortunate ones. The "dream" that "labor knows" in Frost's poems of work is often "sweet" because it frequently involves images of the birth or rebirth of the self, of redemption offered to those who try to harvest reality. (Poirier, 293)

Poirier refers to the verse "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" (*CPP*, 26) from the poem 'Mowing'. What does the line mean? In the poem it suggests that labor loves and labor dreams. Daydreaming is necessary to endure the monotony of physical labor. Love of labor is vital for doing it and for doing it well. But we should be careful not to make conclusions without considering Frost's distinctive and very specific use of words such as "dream", "labor", "truth", "fact", "love, "desire" and many others. What does Frost mean by saying "Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak" (*CPP*, 26)? How could it be that a dream were *more* than truth? Frost

made a suggestive choice of words. In Frost, truth is something less than dream, because it is a reduction, a simplification. As Hammer points out, truth in Frost is life-sized and to get down to it, one has to "cut away what is not true, what is inflated, beside the point, excess, ornament" (Hammer, Lecture 2). Hence, truth is in general something we get down to. Poirier offers another clarification of Frost's idiomatic resources and claims that only labor can penetrate to the essential facts of natural life, which we could understand as universal, collectively valid truths:

> When the penetration of "facts" or of matter occurs through labor, the laborer, who may also be the poet, becomes vaguely aware that what had before seemed solid and unmalleable is also part of a collective "dream" and partakes of myth. (Poirier, 293-294)

We should remember that for Frost work is an absolutely essential type of activity and the very condition of a meaningful existence. This is especially so because Frost has not been born into the community of workers. Rather, he – much like the town-bred farmer in 'The Code' – has to work twice as hard to secure a position in the village community and earn respect. And, much in accord with Frost's status as the inheritor of a lost world, the figure of the poet often finds something left by other workers. Besides the discarded wood-pile in 'The Wood-Pile', there is a number of poems written in the same vein, which Poirier summarizes:

> Many of Frost's poems of nature are written as if by someone who suspects that someone else has been there before him working the same turf, leaving "something" for him to find. The are also, usually, the great mythological poems, like "A Tuft of Flowers," "Mowing," "Putting in the Seed," "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," or "Directive". (Poirier, 336)

Just as the poet is left with a heap of hay to make or a barrel to fill, we are left with a meaning to make. But what Frost finds are not always discarded or dysfunctional items. He finds also beauty, such as the lovely tuft of flowers. Frost comes to view the leveled scene and a bewildered butterfly leads the poet's eye to look at a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook, "A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared" (*CPP*, 31). The absence of the previous worker is not disturbing as in the case of the wood-pile. The wood-pile can be hardly understood as a gift to the next person wandering through the wood; the abandoned pile is a meaningless message. On the other hand, "The mower in the dew had loved them thus, / By leaving them to flourish" (*CPP*, 31) and this is a meaningful act connecting strongly the local workers and folks. To the poet, then, the thought of his precursor is comforting. "The message from the dawn / That made [him] hear the wakening birds around" (*CPP*, 31) and allowed him to find the flowers gives Frost the sense of not being alone, since he feels "a

spirit kindred to [his] own," so that henceforth he works no more alone (*CPP*, 31). As was suggested in the previous chapter, men in the city are together alone, while in the village they are alone together. And Frost extends this idea to work, because the gladness for the tuft of flowers makes him feel as if he works with the previous worker's aid. Hence, "Men work together. Whether they work together or apart" (*CPP*, 31). This is an important bonding element just as in the poem 'Mending Wall' or in 'The Ax-Helve'. In the latter, Baptiste is a greatly skilled craftsman of ax-helves. Faggen emphasizes the quality of Baptiste's craftsmanship: "In crafting ax-helves, Baptiste displays sensuous, if not sensual pleasure, blending love and need, work and play, craft and power" (*CIF*, 84). Again, this becomes, somewhat curiously, a uniting element between the narrator and himself, as Faggen puts it:

> Baptiste's love of the well-made helve or his anxiousness to earn his human rating has produced an erotic creation that somehow brings men mysteriously together. It becomes the focal point at which we become human […], use tools potentially as weapons as well as ways of creating order and, as Frost would say, "braving alien entanglements". (*CIF*, 85-86)

According to Faggen, Baptiste takes great pleasure in his workmanship. Utility and beauty, work and play unite in his craft. The helve is the sweetest dream Baptiste's labor knows. And for so skilled an artisan, we could use a phrase from 'The Code' which declares that "The hand that knows his business won't be told / To do work better or faster—those two things" (*CPP*, 72).

In the village, the philosophy of work has not changed in general. The comic poem 'A Girl's Garden' illustrates the villagers' relationship to work. Once one girl from the village does a childlike thing when she asks her father to give her a garden plot, so she could try planting, tending and reaping herself. The father agrees and gives her an idle bit of ground. As it turned out,

> Her crop was a miscellany
>   When all was said and done,
> A little bit of everything,
>   A great deal of none. (*CPP*, 129)

As usual, by the time Frost's focus shifts as he ends his poem, the moral message lies elsewhere, for ever since the girl never sins by telling the tale to the same person twice. However, the poem primarily shows that the villagers in Frost still value and respect good, honest work. What still counts, perhaps more than ever, is above all man's work which means a *man*'s work "from sun to sun" (*CPP*, 67). However, the suffering and enraged New Englanders in Hammer's remark above

sometimes carry their work to the extreme as exemplify the poems 'The Code' and 'Out, Out—'. The former shows a crazy villager who works terribly hard. He does not work from sun to sun but "daylight and lantern-light were one to him: / I've heard him pounding in the barn all night" (*CPP*, 72). The worker is completely consumed by a senseless work drive. For example, during mowing he keeps at other folks' heels and threatens to mow their legs off (*CPP*, 72). Of course, such a person, however hard-working, is bound to become unpopular in the community. As for the second poem, 'Out, Out—', it illustrates another antithesis to man's work. A boy is doing a man's work, though still a child at heart. Before the day is done, the young worker dies in a tragic accident, when the buzz saw leaps out of his hand. Just as an old man cannot keep a house, a child cannot attend to an adult's job. How could that happen, how could people allow the boy to perform such task, the poem does not say. Once again, we have to work out the meaning as best we can.

### 3.2 Tools and instruments

In Frost's poetry, work is done by using a tool or an instrument. A pen is the instrument of a will or the tool by which papers are signed by the man disabled in an industrial accident in 'The Self-Seeker'. A spade is used to dig a grave for the child in 'Home Burial'. There is the ladder in 'After Apple-Picking' which is symbolically pointed toward heaven and through which one can ascend and reach for fruit. There is the whispering scythe in 'Mowing'. There are the French Canadian's ax-helves which can unite or divide. There is the wicked saw in 'Out, Out—' which takes the life of a worker. There are birch trees, an instrument, a tool for play. And there is also the goblet in 'Directive', "A broken drinking goblet like the Grail / Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it" (*CPP*, 342). As the poem 'The Self-Seeker' says, all these tools and the work for which they are designed are the fabric of the country people's lives:

> 'It's our life.'
>
> 'Yes, when it's not our death.'
>
> What we live by we die by. (*CPP*, 94)

Tools are often used in making things endure and last. The poem 'Good-by and Keep Cold' expresses such wishful thinking, the desire to make something *secure against being* (*CPP*, 211). But despite our best efforts, such attempts are doomed. In 'Home Burial', the broken man concludes bit-

terly that “Three foggy mornings and one rain day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build” (*CPP*, 58). There is definitely a point in trying, however. Just as the journey counts sometimes more than the destination itself, the process matters more than the final product itself. Tools are an important part of the Frostian world. They provide a means of interaction among the community members and, besides, as Hammer explains,

> Tools mediate the worker's relation to the world. It's what the worker uses to do things and to make things. Things are not “made up” in Frost, “not made up” in the sense of imagined, called up out of thin air, like fairies and elves. Instead, things in Frost are “made” in the sense of “constructed.” They're the products of specific acts, of the acts of a worker. (Hammer, Lecture 2)

In the following paragraphs, we will look at several tools and instruments in detail. Let us begin with the scythe. In 'Mowing', we read a monologue by a mower. In the first line we learn about the total absence of sound, save for the whisper of scythe. This means, the only sound present is the sound of the tool of the worker. It is an indication that work is in progress. But the worker himself is unsure as to what his scythe is whispering. To some degree Frost's poem bears resemblance to Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper' and the mesmerized listener. With the differences, however, that it is the scythe, not a Highland lass singing, and, second, the scythe does not sing but whispers. Third, and more importantly, as Lentricchia argues, in Frost's poem there is no separation of poetic and laboring voices. Whereas Wordsworth is a third-person observer, Frost is a first-person participant. Hence, in this dialogue of literary history, “Frost's poem claims that this man who writes *is* working, he *is* the solitary reaper” (Lentricchia, 40). Further, the narrator does not know well himself what the scythe whispered. “Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, / Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound” (*CPP*, 26). That is why it whispers and does not speak. Further, we notice a mechanical activity that is emitting the sound. A scythe is used in cutting hay. And cutting is a different kind of activity than tearing, slicing or splitting. In fact, it can be understood as a kind of controlled violence. Cutting with scythe also invokes in our minds an image of time, the conqueror that will harvest all in death. Hence, the general image implied in the poem is one in which the mower is cutting hay and meanwhile time is slowly but steadily aiming for a quick swing with the scythe of death to collect the worker. Thus, while the mower is working hard to earn his living and to secure his existence – if existence can be secured – , at the same time the mower stands completely powerless in front of, and at the mercy of natural forces. The most important thing in the poem, however, is that it does not lead to a mere naturalistic description. The worker *is* in harmony with the world and himself because he accepts his subordination to the natural forces and he accepts his condition.

And the whisper of the scythe is to him a sound of comfort, that everything is all right, at least for the moment. The sound of the scythe gives meaning to the life of the worker for the time being. One cannot really hope for more in the Frostian world.

We see that such a seemingly simple poem turns out to be a good example of the typical Frostian vagueness, the deliberate uncertainty which allows for a wide range of meanings. Another poem that invites a number of different readings is 'The Ax-Helve'. In the previous section we saw how the crafting of ax-helves and love of work bring together members of the village community. Faggen presents a resourceful criticism on the poem: “Ax-helves are the tools, if not the weapons and the metaphors, for the drama of human equality” (*CIF*, 84). Specifically, in the poem this relates to the fact that Baptiste was a French Canadian. The poem, among other things, renders the drama of the naturalization of Canadian immigrant communities in New England. This has been a slow and not so easy a process. Damien-Claude Bélanger explains the motives for emigration:

> A majority of French-Canadian emigrants to the United States were from rural parishes and agricultural problems are at the root of the economic factors that stimulated emigration. However, a significant portion of emigrants were city-dwellers. Most of these emigrants left to find more stable, higher paying work in the USA. (Bélanger, “Causes of French Canadian emigration to the United States”)

From this point of view, the ax-helve becomes a symbol of culture alien to native New England villagers. It also becomes a means through which Baptiste can define himself in the new environment and secure his position in it. Faggen further argues that: “Within the drama of the poem, the helves take on different possibilities of meaning: a tool that could at any moment become a weapon, a metaphor about education, a figure of native intelligence, an instrument by which to lure and to communicate” (*CIF*, 86). 'The Ax-Helve' is a very good example of the richness of Frost's poetry. We could go on and on analyzing each of the suggestions listed by Faggen. For example, we could argue about the naturalization process which is hindered by Baptiste's unwillingness to learn English. Many of the immigrants at the turn of the 20th century preferred to leave that to their children but Baptiste goes even farther, by keeping his children from school “or doing his best to keep” (*CPP*, 174). However, most central to our thesis subject is the observation Baptiste makes immediately when he starts viewing minutely the narrator's ax-helve:

> It was the bad ax-helve someone had sold me—
> 'Made on the machine,' he said, plowing the grain
> With a thick thumbnail to show how it ran

> Across the handle's long drawn serpentine,
> Like the two strokes across a dollar sign.
> 'You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off.
> Den where's your hax-ead flying t'rough de hair?' (*CPP*, 174)

Here, Baptiste taps into what troubles most of his peers. That is, the spread of mass production and the process of automatization that has been negatively affecting the traditional craftsmanship and working techniques. Hand in hand with the dying ways of life are disappearing traditional arts and craftsmanships. Machinery and mechanization will be discussed at length in the next section. And, besides, the pun on hair/air strengthens the metaphor of the drama of human equality, because the ax can be used as a tool *or* a weapon.

Baptiste's case also shows that a worker has to know how to use his tools. As Hammer emphasizes, “these [instruments] are not something that the man controls as a simple extension of himself” (Hammer, Lecture 3). Tools in Frost are tricky. Analogously to the line where man leaves off and nature starts, and which should not be overstepped, one must know where lies the limit of the tool. As demonstrated in the terrible poem 'Out, Out—', one must know where one's hand ends and the tool begins. Somehow, tools in Frost's poetry seem to have a will of their own. In 'Mending Wall', the poet and his neighbor “have to use a spell to make [the boulders] balance: / 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'” (*CPP*, 39). And in the aforementioned poem, the boy cannot wait to “call it a day” and when his sister finally shouts “'Supper!'”, the saw “As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, / Leaped out of the boy's hand, or seemed to leap— / He must have given the hand. However it was, / Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!” (*CPP*, 31). Hammer provides an interesting insight into the will of the instruments in Frost's poetry. And in the case of 'Out, Out—', he emphasizes the sound that the saw is making and what it foreshadows:

> This saw, rather than whispering, snarls and rattles. Ultimately, it takes the life of the worker. It reminds the worker that it has the power of death, the force that the worker only accesses through the tool. Although Frost's tools give the worker a way to impose his will on the world, the tool is part of the object world and it declares here brutally and cruelly that the worker's will is limited and subject to the tools he uses. (Hammer, Lecture 3)

There are other tools in Frost that are quite metaphysical in nature. For example, the shovel in 'Home Burial' is a symbol of the man's mourning and it allows him to physically and, more importantly, symbolically vent his grief. Among less grim tools we can count birch trees which are a tool for play. Birch-tree climbing bears strong connotation of ascent toward heaven and descent to earth.

It is a tool by which one can get closer toward the former and land safely again on the latter. Hammer offers an interpretation of the whole process of birch climbing. He stresses the boy's solitude and, inevitably, in this case solitude implies absence. Who could be absent? Hammer points out that other children are absent, just as God the father is absent or invisible. And the boy, "whose only play was what he found himself, / Summer or winter" (*CPP*, 118) plays alone. By climbing birches, the boy is able to rise and transcend the limits of his own body that is subject to earth's gravity. At the same time, however, it is dangerous to get away from earth and safe ground, even if only for a moment. Too much pressure put on any tool puts it at the risk of breaking. In the case of 'Birches', this means that a branch might break and the boy crashes down to the ground. Consequently, as Hammer points out, the force of earth and gravity is a counter-weight to Frost's romantic longing. Just as with the terrible saw, tools are dangerous if not used properly or with common sense. The birches must be climbed carefully, "With the same pains you use to fill a cup / Up to the brim" (*CPP*, 118). And precisely with the same pains, we are to respond when challenged with love. As will be seen in the following chapter, love in Frost is real, realistic and life-sized. This is so because, as the poet writes in 'Birches', "Earth's the right place for love" (*CPP*, 118). Just as Frost's poems often display the image of a process or labor, instead of the final product, love in Frost is rendered dynamically, as an ongoing process, a specific daily challenge to which we each respond in individual ways. Love enables labor, love is the fuel of dreams. Love is what keeps us balancing between climbing and coming down, love is what keeps us both going and coming back, love is the tension between stopping and going. But we will talk more about the nature of love in Frost in the next chapter.

To conclude our discussion of tools we will consider the poem 'Directive'. Here, the narrator enters an abandoned house "that is no more a house" (*CPP*, 342) in a part of the country where "two village cultures faded / Into each other" (*CPP*, 342) and now both of them are lost. The poet notices "the children's house of make believe", there are just a few shattered dishes under a pine. At this moment, Frost offers one of his most tenderest and loveliest passages when upon seeing the playthings in the playhouse of children, he cannot but "Weep for what little things could make them glad" (*CPP*, 342). And the goblet that we mentioned at the beginning of this section he admits to have stolen from the children's playhouse. What good is the goblet? What kind of tool could it be? Just like the Grail, it is supposed to restore our souls and bring us to renewal. However, the goblet is broken. Hammer clarifies the scene in the following way:

> Frost returns us there to the early sources of imagination in children's play, and it

> gives us, at least imaginatively in this shared journey with him, access to a kind of primal refreshment, what he calls our "waters" and our "watering place." It's a disillusioned and self-consciously ironic promise of salvation, of wholeness. But it's still a promise, and it's a promise of the powers of imagination and of poetry, and of poetry made out of play, of a child's play. (Hammer, Lecture 3)

We are invited to drink from the well of imagination, from the ocean of our own childhood memories. We are invited to "drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (*CPP*, 342). In the essay 'The Figure a Poem Makes', Frost emphasizes the role of poetry in helping us to make sense of the world. A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom, just as love or life do – if combined with our conscious honest efforts. And poetry is itself a tool through which we access a clarification of life, "not necessarily a great clarification, but a momentary stay against confusion" (*CPP*, 777). The broken goblet is in fact but a false promise. How could you drink from a broken goblet? Yet the promise is not ill-meant, it is merely provocative and inspiring. In fact, as Lentricchia reminds us, the goblet is hidden in a ruined farmhouse in America gone urban (Lentricchia, 55). The key to drinking from the goblet lies in imagining such an act, in believing in the existence of this act, in putting our faith in it. For this, we shall be rewarded with a momentary stay against confusion.

### *3.3 Machinery at work*

In reality, love is not always the motivation for work. It may be so for the poet when he is chopping wood for exercise or to feed the stove, but in the village, and country in general, a great number of people have been doing that for their living and are now jobless, as is the case in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time'. "Nothing on either side was said" but the poet knows what is on their mind: "And all their logic would fill my head: / As I had no right to play / With what was another man's work for gain. / My right might be love but theirs was need" (*CPP*, 252). In reality, need more often than love motivates people to work.

There are not enough work positions in the country, apart from setting up one's own farm or trying to make-do running various errands in the village. The automatized industry and mass-production has robbed people – agricultural people in particular – of their professions. And those who keep their work are no longer connected to the final product they produce. Debord's critique of this process is that "The general separation of the worker and product tends to eliminate any direct personal

communication between the producers and any comprehensive sense of what they are producing" (Debord, Thesis 26). While in the city and, largely, in factories this has been a deliberate and welcome development for many, not only economic, reasons, it is a devastating blow for the village life and work. It is that which Baptiste both disdains and fears while viewing the poet's machine-made ax helve. The process of industrialization, according to Debord, has affected time itself and reduced it to what he calls *pseudocyclical* time:

> Pseudocyclical time is a time that has been *transformed by industry*. The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity, one that recombines everything that the disintegration of the old unitary societies had differentiated into private life, economic life, and political life. The entire consumable time of modern society ends up being treated as a raw material for various new products put on the market as socially controlled uses of time. (Debord, Thesis 151)

The vicious cycle of consumption is therefore governed by pseudocyclical time and brings about a stagnation. As Debord proposes, "The production process's constant innovations are not echoed in consumption, which present nothing but an expanded repetition of the past" (Debord, Thesis 156). Finally, Debord assesses that the byproduct of pseudocyclical time, whose function is above all "to promote and maintain the backwardness of everyday life" is a set of "pseudovalorizations" and its manifestation as "a succession of pseudoindividualized moments" (Debord, Thesis 149), in contrast with authentic individualized moments. By and large, Debord's theoretical attack on the gross cult of the spectacle and commodity is mirrored in Frost's poetry. In the poem 'At Woodward's Gardens', we read in the final stanza that "It's knowing what to do with things that counts" (*CPP*, 267). On the one hand, the moral of this poem appeals to the fact that people seem to know how to use things yet do not recognize their value. On the other hand, this poem also attacks the orientation on having instead of being. At the very heart of Debord's theory, we find a theorem stating that in social life being has in general degraded into having:

> The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real. (Debord, Thesis 17)

As we have seen in the previous section, a worker must know how to use a tool. A man must know what to do with a thing, not become possessed with the idea of having it. Likewise, the above poem tells the difference between having and knowing, and at the same it highlights the harmony between knowing and understanding. A boy shows his burning-glass to two monkeys in a cage. First, it brings “A look of puzzled dimness to their eyes, / That blinking could not seem to blink away” (CPP, *266*). Later, the apes snatch the boy's glass and “They bit the glass and listened for the flavor. / They broke the handle and the binding off it. / Then none the wiser, frankly gave it up” (CPP, 267). Finally, they quit and hide it in their bedding straw. This is one of Frost's many poems, such as 'The Bear', that show a satirical tone against the modern man. Basically, Frost puts poetically what Debord expresses in theory, namely the obsession with the idea of having which has replaced the status of being. But where lie the roots of this dogmatic obsession? Applying Heideggerian doctrine, we can conclude that this dogma is essentially connected to the society's value system:

> The representation of value is just as essential to the modern interpretation of that which is, as is the system. Where anything that is has become the object of representing, it first incurs in a certain manner a loss of Being. This loss is adequately perceived, if but vaguely and unclearly, and is compensated for with corresponding swiftness through the fact that we impart value to the object and to that which is, interpreted as object, and that we take the measure of whatever is, solely in keeping with the criterion of value, and make of values themselves the goal of all activity. Since the latter is understood as culture, values become cultural values, and these, in turn, become the very expression of the highest purposes of creativity, in the service of man's making himself secure as *subiectum* [Think of the above mentioned poem 'Good-by and Keep Cold']. From here it is only a step to making values into object themselves. Value is the objectification of needs as goals, wrought by a representing self-establishing withing the world as picture. Value appears to be the expression of the fact that we, in our position of relationship to it, act to advance just that which is itself most valuable; and yet that very value is impotent and threadbare disguise of the objectivity of whatever is, an objectivity that has become flat and devoid of background. (Heidegger, 142; insertion mine)

The values Heidegger is speaking about turn into pseudovalues and in Frost we find this apparition of the 20th century spectacle submerging into the New England landscape and accommodating itself in the village. How exactly does this apparition affect the traditional village life apart from work will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Most importantly, in relation to our discussion of the machinery at work in Frost's countryside, Debord blames consumer society for the destruction of nature and creating pseudo-nature:

> Pseudocyclical time is associated with the consumption of modern economic survival — the augmented survival in which everyday experience is cut off from decision making and subjected no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudo-nature created by alienated labor. It is thus quite natural that it echoes the old cyclical rhythm that governed survival in preindustrial societies, incorporating the natural vestiges of cyclical time while generating new variants: day and night, work and weekend, periodic vacations. [But] while the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real labor of those societies, the pseudocyclical consumption of developed economies contradicts the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the really lived time of unchanging illusions. Spectacular time is the illusorily lived time of a constantly changing reality. (Debord, Theses 150-155)

Labor is not real anymore (note that this does not imply labor is not hard or difficult anymore); the process gets increasingly virtual which has culminated in the computerized work and Internet-based industry of today. The creation of pseudo-nature is connected to our relationship to nature, to our understanding of it, to the planned environment that was mentioned in the previous chapter, and also to the disturbance of natural cycles in which we may or may not have had a hand. A closer discussion of these phenomena is well beyond the scope of this thesis, so we will adhere strictly to Frost's poetry. The fact that real labor used to be in harmony with the traditional agricultural cyclical time, i.e. the four-season cycle, is unquestionable. Emphasis on cyclical time is clearly noticeable in Frost's poems. To this, Poirier adds that in some sense we have invented time and given it character. But we are by no means responsible for its power, we are merely responsible for any *measure* of its power (Poirier, 176). Further, Costello claims that the measure of time in Frost's poems are seasons and agricultural cycles, thus generating time that best be called rural (Costello, 39). A good example of cyclical time in Frost is in the poem 'A Prayer in Spring' which is both a wistful wish and a lament on the turning of the season:

> Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
> And give us not to think so far away
> As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
> All simply in the springing of the year. (*CPP*, 21)

While time in Frost is unquestionably rural, there is no doubt that Frost has adapted himself to the landscape of modernity and its time-space, even though it is too tight for his taste. As Costello explains, "[Frost's] poems bear witness to the near-disappearance of the way of life they depict—the inevitable exposure of rural life to the forces of history" (Costello, 39). We already mentioned in the first chapter that the Frostian world is a place where evolution and entropy rule. In accord with this,

Costello argues that "If pastoral time ties human life to turns of the harvest, the principle of entropy shifts attention to nature's and culture's creative and degenerative processes" (Costello, 39).

In the following concluding debate we will look at two examples of machinery in Frost's poems. The first poem, 'Mill City', written in 1905, that is, eight years before the publication of *A Boy's Will*, reveals the presence of the poet-figure in an untypical scene:

> It was in a drear city by a stream
> And all its denizens were sad to me,—
> I could not fathom what their life could be—
> Their passage in the morning like a dream
> In the arc-light's unnatural bluish beam,
> Then back, at night, like drowned men from the sea,
> Up from the mills and river hurriedly,
> In weeds of labor, to the shriek of stream. (*CPP*, 509)

For Frost a quite unusually dark and bleak poem, it shows tough factory labor. Here, no work that could be called a man's work from sun to sun is done. Instead, we are led to imagine a machine's 24/7 work from the light of one electric lamp to the light of another electric lamp. That means, the kind of work where one does not encounter exposed nests as during hay-making, or butterflies as in 'My Butterfly'. A type of work where one does not have the luxury of a wonderful work environ-ment or of an ear-pleasing bird's tune. The 'Mill City', Frost's hint at the debilitating machinery and labor of the neon future, also echoes the historical development of New England. Bélanger clarifies the historical context and the introduction of machinery to the New England landscape:

> The French Canadian emigrant to New England was a factory worker, particularly in the huge cotton mills that dotted the area. In this respect, the French Canadian immigrants played a significant role in the industrial expansion of the New England area in the last half of the 19th century. Some of these textile mills had as many as 10,000 workers and employment was often readily available, as upwardly mobile English and Scots moved out of the area and were replaced by the Irish, French Canadians, Southern and Eastern Europeans. In these factories, wages were low, although higher than in Quebec, and work related accidents were frequent. The heat created by the machines, and the proper lack of ventilation, was stiffening; the noise of dozens of machines all working at the same time was deafening and could be heard hundreds of meters away from the factories; cotton dust was everywhere and coated the workers' lungs. Working hours were long, from 10-12 hours a day, up to six days a week, and much of it was spent standing while keeping an eye on several machines. (Bélanger, "Distribution of Franco-Americans in New England, 1900-1930")

Work conditions in factories were certainly hellish. And as for injuries and accidents, we can refer to another example of machinery in Frost's poetry, the already discussed 'The Self-Seeker' which tells the tale of a disabled man. The poem is based on Frost's friend, Carl Burell, whose legs were severely injured in a box factory accident (*CIF*, 86). The Broken One, also an amateur botanist who keeps a rich and rare collection of orchids (note that "the *Cyprepedium regina* is not reported so far *north*") in the surrounding land, could testify to the above mentioned adage "What we live by, we die by." In summary, his tale exemplifies how the machinery presses people into service. And what does it mean to be pressed into service? In the poem 'The Self-Seeker' it means to be pressed out of shape, literally. And besides the beautiful flora, the Broken One owns a mill which he now has to sell. As Faggen explains,

> When the Broken One describes his accident, he concedes to the power of the mill's machinery, particularly the wheel belt, which takes on the symbolic figure of the ouroboros, or the snake with its tail in its mouth, a symbol of the reconciliation of opposites and eternity. For the Broken One, the mill's buzzing machinery means both life and death. (*CIF*, 86)

Thus, in 'The Self-Seeker' we find echoes of the 'Mill City' and the endless, almost diabolical routine Bélanger describes. We can also trace a similarity between the ouroboros and the handle's long drawn serpentine in 'The Ax-Helve' which Baptiste instantly recognizes as machine-made. Those symbols seem in Frost to be powerfully and explicitly connected with machinery. Finally, just as Earth is the right place for love, we can affirm that in Frost Earth is the right place for work as well. Love is scarcely, if ever, ideal of perfect. So is work but Frost is right when he says "I don't know where it's likely to go better" (*CPP*, 118).

# Chapter 4

### Community

> Life is not so sinister-grave
> Matter of fact has made them brave.
> He is husband, she is wife.
> She fears not him, they fear not life.
> *On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind*

In this chapter we will explore the village community in Frost's poetry. Wood defines community as “a social web”, or more explicitly, “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds.” Further, the community is dependent upon a common purpose, shared understanding and values, a sense of obligation and reciprocity, and collective action (Wood, 53). We have already mapped some of these communal bonds, namely shared understanding in the section about tools, the sense of obligation eminent in the poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' and many more. In general, the poet's *oeuvre* abounds in the give and take of human relationships. Some times we are allowed to check closely on the inner weather of the narrator or other figures, at other times we look into the lives from afar:

> This I saw when waking late,
> Going by at a railroad rate,
> Looking through wreaths of engine and smoke
> Far into the lives of other folk. (*CPP*, 265)

Frost bears the witness of the lives of local folk but in a broader sense these figures become universal prototypes and sweep through a vast range of human characters. In the first section, we will look at country people in the context of New England; Vermont and New Hampshire in particular. In

contrast with these tough country folk stand visitors and summer residents who do not know what is it like to winter in the cottages and village houses and feed the stove from autumn to spring. The communities are usually small in number and spread over a wide area. The land does not abound in raw materials and commodities, there is just enough to meet the needs of its denizens. According to the poet, for example, New Hampshire has "a touch of gold. New Hampshire gold— / You may have heard of it […] But not gold in commercial quantities, / Just enough gold to make the engagement rings / And marriage rings of those who owned the farm. / What gold more innocent could one have asked for?" (*CPP*, 154). The communities are largely self-reliant and independent in the old American way. Next, we will examine Frost's people apart from their status as New Englanders. We will see that there are several fundamental things through which the community holds together. Finally, the last section will focus on communication which is an essential area of human interest and which in Frost occurs in varied forms and at different levels. Of particular interest to us will be the telephone and telegraph, great innovations of the 19th century that became updated and wide-spread in early 20th century. We will discuss in what ways these media affect natural communication in Frost's poetry.

## *4.1 "New Hampshire Specimen"*

> Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,
> One each of everything, as in a show-case
> Which she naturally doesn't care to sell. (*CPP*, 152)

Some of the specimens are truly weird, for example "the one I don't know what to call him, / Who comes from Philadelphia every year / With a great flock of chickens of rare breeds" (*CPP*, 152). This reminds us of the crazy farmer, hen-breeder in 'The Housekeeper'. And when Frost says New Hampshire has a specimen of everything, he is serious, because we can find in his poetry even such an exotic specimen as a witch. That is to say, an *old style* witch who lives in Colebrook and has a gift for reading letters locked in boxes. The poet asks "Why was it so much greater when the boxes / Were metal than it was when they were wooden?" and concludes that "[This] made the world seem so mysterious" (*CPP*, 154). In contrast with this old style New England witch stands the modern, new-style witch from the poem 'Provide, Provide': "The witch that came (the withered hag) / To wash the steps with pail and rag, / Was once the beauty Abishag, / The picture pride of Hollywood" (*CPP*, 280). Further, there is the lady of the house in 'The Black Cottage' and a great deal of bigotry, when the poet comments "White was the only race she knew" (*CPP*, 60). But could this be

an example of village narrow-mindedness, to which we referred in Chapter 2, rather than an anti-black bias? It may very well be that the woman in question has never in her life seen an African-American or any other colored people for that matter. On the whole, both the poem 'New Hampshire' and Frost's *oeuvre* in general offer an encyclopedia of New England population. Frost's poetry sweeps through all social groups, through all age groups, through all types of characters, the mad, the noble, the good and the wicked alike. Yet, Frost seems to somewhat ignore the female part of the community. Buell accuses the poet of writing in a predictably male vein: “Frost stresses solitude more than sociality and portrays female community not at all; but—possibly through osmotic absorption of the female local colorists—he is also more critical than not of male harshness or failure of understanding of women and sympathetic to female impatience with male stolidity and narcissism” (*CCF*, 106). This is in part true, when we think of the closing stanza in 'Home Burial', where the man threatens to use force on his wife who wants to go away:

> 'You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
> The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up.
> Amy! There's someone coming down the road!'
>
> '*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
> Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—'
>
> 'If—you—do!' She was opening the door wider.
> 'Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
> I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will*!—' (*CPP*, 58)

This illustrates Buell's point well. Yet, the fact that Frost does not at all portray the female community is doubtful. Great care must be taken here, because Frost shows and reveals, he leaves us to make what we can. On close reading, the female characters are there, all types of them, just think of the specimen already accounted for in this thesis. And, after all, what makes one think or assume that the “I”, the narrator of the poems, the poet-figure is of the male sex?

In the following paragraphs we will look at the characteristics of Vermonters and before we begin, let the poet have his say about New Hampshire:

> [New Hampshire] is one of the two best states in the Union.
> Vermont's the other. And the two have been
> Yoke-fellows in the sap-yoke from of old
> In many Marches. And they lie like wedges,
> Thick end to thin end and thin end to thick end,
> And are a figure of the way the strong

> Of mind and strong of arm should fit together,
> One thick where one is thin and vice versa. (*CPP*, 156)

Most importantly, according to the poet anything that can be said about New Hampshire will serve almost as well about Vermont, excepting the difference in their mountains: “The Vermont mountains stretch extended straight, New Hampshire mountains curl up in a coil” (*CPP*, 156). Thus, when we discuss Vermonters, it roughly corresponds to what could be said about New Hampshire people and, on the whole, about Frost's people in general.

Dorothy Fisher makes a crucial observation of the Vermont life-style: “The Vermont scheme of life is fine for able-bodied, hard-working people sound in wind and limb and with good headpieces, but it is very hard on the sick, the old, the helplessly dependent and tragically hard on the subnormal” (*Vermont*, 113). The region actually has a high suicide rate (*Vermont*, 116). Rightfully then, this puts the Vermont legend – and similarly Frost's poetry – under some suspicion. But while Fisher's remark about Vermont is easily applicable to other districts and regions world-wide, it substantively applies to Frost's poetry in the socio-geographical sense. And yes, Frost's world *is* hard on the sick, lonely and subnormal. Next, when we think of Vermonters as different from the rest of Americans, then how come Vermonters became so in the first place? Fisher's explanation runs as follows: “Much of what we call 'Vermontism' is nothing but old 'Americanism' surviving in an out-of-the-main-current community, which has not been so beaten upon as communities elsewhere by the storms of modern life. For good and not so good it has kept its character, just because it has not been driven to become different by industrial prosperity” (*Vermont*, 42). In Chapter 2, we saw that the Vermont way of life is changing or dying out, with the submersion of megalopolis. Hand in hand with this, “The nature of the Vermonters themselves, their recognizable characteristics, appear to have undergone even greater, perhaps irrevocable changes than their surroundings” (*Vermont*, 41). What changes in character are being implied here? As literary historian Bruce Tucker puts it, “Whatever else New England was, it was a story, a creation of mind that each generation of ministers retold in order to connect New England to a central purpose that transcended their own time and place” (Wood, 169). In other words, Puritans had employed town and village to create an English garden from an imagined New England wilderness. And the story of the New England mind is discontinued as it collides with the opportunities and ways of modern life that come sweeping in from the outside and leave their mark in the nature of the locals. In 'Escape to Vermont', Hard is seriously concerned with the influx of population to the countryside and the danger it poses for its denizens:

> Well before the Civil War Summer visitors had begun arriving in the remote Green Mountains by train, to partake of the curative waters at pioneering mineral spring resorts. By the turn of the century, Vermont hill farm homes, which took in summer broader refugees from the baking cities, were finding it provided a fairly healthy boost to farm income. […] But the great flood of city visitors, now with new cars, new cash and the leisure to employ both, grew apace beyond most natives' wildest hopes (or fears) when World War II ended. Year by year more and more of them became part-time residents or determined transplants. […] These new Vermonters brought with them new concepts of living, and new economic and political tenets which were alien to the older residents. (*Vermont*, 77)

Hard's essay was written roughly 30 years after the publication of Frost's poem 'A Roadside Stand' and reveals where has modernity progressed since. What Frost puts poetically, Debord defines theoretically and Hard witnesses in reality. What happens to Vermont with these new "human transplants" and part-time residents? It appears that not the machinery but especially people are threating Vermont. Hard criticizes harshly the newcomers:

> Most of the farms have gone to professional people and the middle class. None of them has any real contact with the local people. None of them knows what it is like to live all winter in a house heated by wood stoves, all are distrusted in greater or less degree by their native neighbors, who make what they can out of them. […] "Not only are the summer owners increasing each year, but the big corporations are happily moving in. The young executives delight in fixing up old houses for their homes. But they have no real stake in the community." […] Reporting later on conditions at Huntington, juxtaposed to now-burgeoning Burlington, Don Wakefield wrote in *The Nation*: "The town like so many others, will be eventually over--run by the spreading Megalopolis. Now it simply waits for the neon future, while its farms turn into real estate and its residents turn into commuters." (*Vermont*, 78)

How is that in Frost's poetry we do not encounter more of these disturbing phenomena? For one thing, as shown in Chapter 2, Frost chooses to go beyond the village and seek wilderness, rather than confrontation with the evils of modern age. Second, as pointed out in Chapter 1, Frost also refuses to dwell on the past, he resists the temptation of nostalgia, he will not worship nostalgically the ancient ways. Instead, Frost's poetry seems to be telling us that life goes on, life used to be better in some respects and it was worse in other respects. And, third, most of Frost's poems were written before World War II whereas Hard writes from the post-war point of view. The neon future alluded to by Hard was much closer in his day than in Frost's. Yet, Frost in his poetry warns before the same thing. When Hard speaks about the towns, we may recall Frost's poem in which the little town Still Corners is about to fall victim to urbanization.

On September 23, 1929, Sinclair Lewis gave a speech to the Rutland, Vermont Rotary. He himself settled to live in Vermont which, in his case, is remarkable: “I have traveled through thirty-six states and have lived in eight or ten, in addition to visiting eighteen foreign countries, but Vermont is the first place I have seen where I really wanted to have my home - a place to spend the rest of my life“ (Lewis). Lewis then goes on to list various reasons for doing so:

> I like Vermont because it is quiet, because you have a population that is solid and not driven mad by the American mania - that mania which considers a town of four thousand as twice as good as a town of two thousand, or a city of one hundred thousand, fifty times as good as a town of two thousand. Following that reasoning, one would get the charming paradox that Chicago would be ten times better than the entire state of Vermont; but I have been in Chicago, and have not found it so. […] I have found in Vermont precisely the opposite to the peculiar thing, pointed out and boasted of as 'very American'; the desire for terrific speed and the desire to make things grow. (Lewis)

This powerfully resonates with Frost's poetry, particularly with the poem 'The Literate Farmer' published in the collection *A Witness Tree* in 1942. In the poem, an old man argues that “science cheapened speed” (*CPP*, 337). A friend of that old man claims “[he] knows the old man and nobody's so deep / In incandescent lamps and ending sleep” (*CPP*, 337). What is now needed is “A good cheap anti-dark”, because it can “Give us a good cheap twenty-four-hour day, / No part of which we'd have to waste” (*CPP*, 337). These are echoes of the routine in 'Mill City' and a foreboding of the neon future as alluded to by Hard above. The poem then accounts for the ideology of the 20th century when it tells: “And who knows where we can't get! Wasting time / In sleep or slowness is a deadly crime” (*CPP*, 337). Here emerges the terrific tempo of the modern age, the thing that puts the country community at a loss. It brutally attacks and opposes the country wisdom, the belief that things take time to mature, the conviction that all will be in due time. These sentiments are challenged by the modern American lifestyle, as Lewis puts it:

> It is hard in this day, in which the American tempo is so speeded up, to sit back and be satisfied with what you have. It requires education and culture to appreciate a quiet place, but any fool can appreciate noise. Florida was ruined by that mania. It must not happen in Vermont. You have priceless heritages - old houses that must not be torn down, beauty that must not be defiled, roads that must not be cluttered with billboards and hot dog stands. (Lewis)

Lewis then goes to explain what he cannot understand; those new trends and the unifying, normalizing tendency of the modern times which leads to the globalized city and village:

> In Chatham one would even find a night club, which, however, as yet has not re-

> ceived great support, the inhabitants still desiring to sleep. The day will come when it will be patronized, and the patrons will get a fiftieth rate imitation of New York. Why one should want more than one New York is more than I can understand. […] I can visualize the development in Rutland when the syndicate buys up all available property and builds magnificent Spanish gardens and Czechoslovakian beerless beer gardens to clutter up the landscape. (Lewis)

In these words we can trace the unmistakable Debordian criticism of the creation of pseudocountry. On the other side of the line, the people and capital governing the urban expansion cannot – could not – comprehend, let alone recognize or value the beauty of the traditional Vermont character. In 1949, Dorothy Fisher defended the "old-maidish neatness" of Vermont villages, as peopled by a "classless society." She reminds us that "Through a century and a half Vermont has remained classless and also passionately, fanatically anti-totalitarian. Perhaps because it never had any aristocrats or capitalists to liquidate" (*Vermont*, 42). For the newcomers and city-bred human transplants, the "old-maidish neatness" of the country is something beyond their ability to apprehend or appreciate. However, this special feature of Vermont is to be preserved, if not revered. As observed in 1950 Ralph Nading Hill,

> Some people think of the Twentieth Century Vermont as an old lady sitting by the window watching the rest of the world go by. It is true, perhaps, that she is somewhat *sot* in her ways, but these are ways that she has tested and not found wanting—hard work, thrift, simple living, plainness of manner and speech. She is not going to join the crowd outside of the window just because everybody else has. (*Vermont*, 42)

Which is precisely what Frost is doing in his poetry, when he takes the less traveled-by road and goes north of Boston. But even there modern life and advances of science have taken their toll on the villagers. As the poem 'The Literate Farmer' tells us, they have taken away "the precious dark" of the night. The poet argues that:

> We need the interruption of the night
> To ease attention off when overtight,
> To break our logic in too long a flight
> And ask us if our premises are right. (*CPP*, 337)

In Frost, illumination and revelation is always preceded by an interlude of darkness. In a sense, darkness and confusion are a precondition for clarification and enlightenment. Hence, the momentary stay against confusion is not an escape from chaos and confusion but a consequence of it. Those who still want guidance can have it but they must be able to see it. In 'The Literate Farmer', the option is to look up to the stars that "character the skies" and *see* that "they are more divine than any

bulb or arc, / because their purpose is to flash and spark" (*CPP*, 337), hence they will not take away the night, thus allowing the person to get beyond confusion by going through it. In order to become acquainted with the day, one must become acquainted with the night. Following this logic, in Frost to be acquainted with country life (and to be able to appreciate it), one must be acquainted with the city and its ways, to the full extent of Lewis's and Debord's criticism. For Frost, a lot of the innovations of modern life are not a symbol of advancement but rather of regression.

Having presented a number of opinions and thoughts concerning the disappearance and transformation of the countryside, we can now summarize the effect and explicate the cause as Debord sees it:

> Urbanism is the modern method for solving the ongoing problem of safeguarding class power by atomizing the workers who have been dangerously brought together by the conditions of urban production. The constant struggle that has had to be waged against anything that might lead to such coming together has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. The efforts of all the established powers since the French Revolution to increase the means of maintaining law and order in the streets have finally culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Describing what he terms "a one-way system," Lewis Mumford points out that "with the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control" (The City in History). But the general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together as isolated individuals. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the family cell, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images — images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation. (Debord, Thesis 172)

Here, Debord enumerates many phenomena that we have been dealing with throughout this thesis so far. The opposition between the city and the country and the transformation of the latter to pseudocountry, the tendency of the modern age toward isolation, the effect modern technologies have on labor, and in general the disastrous consequence of crazy production and consumption drive. Finally, Debord hints at the creation of *pseudocommunity* which inhabits the pseudocountry. Debord further argues that these modern phenomena give rise to an interesting effect: "While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation" (Debord, Thesis 167). This is what Lewis calls the speeded-up American tempo and what in Frost's poetry is the speed cheapened by science. Consequently,

> Tourism — human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the cir-

> culation of commodities — is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their *equivalence*. The modernization that has eliminated the time involved in travel has simultaneously eliminated any real space from it. (Debord, Thesis 168)

Hence, the process of the creation of pseudocountryside is crowned by its *banalization*. And, unfortunately, as the Vermont defenders demonstrate, this process, the banalization of Vermont and of the countryside, has been under way for some time.

To conclude this section, let us give word to the poet who claims he does not wear an illusion in his hand-bag about the people "being better there than those he left behind" (*CPP*, 158). And, finally, we can cite the self-ironic closing stanza of 'New Hampshire' which summarizes our discussion of New Englanders and reflects the typical Frostian doubleness as well:

> I chose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
> With an income in cash of say a thousand
> (From say a publisher in New York City).
> It's restful to arrive at a decision,
> And restful just to think about New Hampshire.
> At present I am living in Vermont. (*CPP*, 162)

This excerpt best tells the difference between Lewis's criticism and Frost's *oeuvre*. While Lewis explains what he likes about New England and criticizes the rest of America, we do not find such an explicit method in Frost. Frost, instead, leads the existence of a poet – a poet whose promised land is the New England region but who, at the same time, is well aware that both his literary and personal existences depend on the income from sources located and fed by the mania which Debord opposes in theory and Lewis in his tried-out-and-tested reasonings. Although contemporaries, Frost and Lewis treat the same subject differently and in different types of texts. Once again, we can conclude that Frost avoids direct confrontation with American reality and takes refuge in his poetic world where he occasionally exercises the power of satire. The poem 'New Hampshire' is in fact a brilliant satire about the community. Most importantly, Frost's greatness lies in his ability to satirize himself as shown in the final stanza.

## 4.2 Frost's people and the community

In this section we will take a closer look at Frost's people apart from their status as New Englanders. This means looking at them apart from the local particularities and characteristics

pointed out in the previous section. As has already been mentioned, Frost presents in his poetry a wide range of figures whose mutual relationships and characters represent realistically the universal human experience which will be the subject of this section. Before we begin, we should yet comment briefly on an important narrative technique Frost uses when rendering the lives and characters of the community members. For one thing, the "I" of the poems, the narrator, employs a style that allows the reader to have a sense of immediacy with the action going on in the poems. It is almost as if the "I" were "you" and you yourself were talking to the people, hearing what they say and trying to make out what they mean. Frost's narrative technique also abounds in direct speech, such as when he addresses the reader in sentences like "You come too," "I'll show you," "Come with me" and many more. These utterances create an interesting effect – an illusion that we have first-hand experience with what is going on in Frost's world and with Frost's people. At times, however, the closeness is somewhat disturbing, particularly in darker poems such as 'Out, Out—' or 'Home Burial'. As Hammer points out, "Frost creates a kind of uncomfortable intimacy for us with his characters where we're challenged by them, we're brought up close to them" (Hammer, Lecture 3). This may reminds us of Elizabeth Bishop whose intimacy with the reader is equally potent, yet largely comfortable. Further on, Hammer hints at another characteristic feature of Frost's narrative strategy: "[He] frames his people's words minimally, with little narrative information. He just sort of plunges you into their speech, into their lives, and you have to, in a sense, work to get into their character to be able to keep track of who is speaking" (Hammer, Lecture 3). Lastly, concerning Frost's narrative technique, the poet makes great use of perspective, as was pointed out already in Chapter 1, which helps in conveying the characters' points of view. Just think of the stairwell in 'Home Burial', the brook and the couple in 'West-Running Brook', or the encounter in 'Two Look at Two'. Hammer argues that the information where and how Frost's people stand in relation to each other as they speak is important (Hammer, Lecture 3).

In general, Frost's poetry is charged with the give and take of human relations, with the challenges and assets they yield. And, in particular, Frost's poetic universe illuminates the desirability of maintaining boundaries as well as "our ultimate inability to maintain [them]," as Faggen remarks (*CIF*, 65). This has been already discussed several times with emphasis on the poem 'Mending Wall' and others. But what lies inside of the boundaries? Is there something at the base of human relationships in Frost's poetry? Yes, definitely, and the poet is keenly interested in what the community has in common. Among other commonalties, Frost's people all have their inner weather, just as the narrator of the poems does and frequently mentions. This inner weather is a phrase the poet uses when speaking about human feelings, mood and state of mind. And this inner weather is governed by the

same forces and phenomena, despite the differences of our inner climates. We will now list some of the common denominators of human relationships in Frost's poetry.

At the core of human experience in Frost lies death. In addition to death, a common condition is aloneness which sometimes takes the form of loneliness and which is often with death associated, in direct or indirect way. There are not many poems that deal explicitly with death, apart from the above mentioned darker poems, but death is ever-present in Frost's poetry; at times we near death as we approach the final frontier of our existence in poems 'Desert Places' or 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', or when we look at the marble gravestone with mocking rhymes in 'In a Disused Graveyard'. In these poems, death is closely connected to aloneness. And for Frost's people, death is a natural part, in fact the *most* natural part of our lives. Frost the poet deals with death without ornaments. Besides, there are no *memento mori*. What use or good would they be? One farmer in the poem 'The Times Table' voices a simple definition of the multiplication table of life:

> A sigh for every so many breath,
> And for every so many sigh a death.
> That's what I always tell my wife
> Is the multiplication table of life. (*CPP*, 241)

Yet another farmer, the grieving man in 'Home Burial', speaks about death in a different tone when he insists that even the nearest friends cannot go with anyone to death:

> No, from the time when one is sick to death,
> One is alone, and he dies more alone.
> Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
> But before one is in it, their minds are turned
> And making the best of their way back to life
> And living people, and things they understand. (*CPP*, 58)

This is echoed in 'Out, Out—' where people are gathered around the dying boy. The doctor puts him in the dark of ether and then:

> — the watcher at his pulse took fright.
> No one believed. They listened at his heart.
> Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (*CPP*, 131)

Death is here a plain fact without a trace of pathos. After all, "Life is not so sinister-grave" (*CPP*, 265) and matter-of-factness is what makes Frost's people so tough, or at least so tough looking. For

example, matter of fact has made the husband and wife from the quote in the head of this chapter brave (*CPP*, 265). But, of course, Frost's people are neither robots nor are they emotionally limited. They surely have strong feelings about the dying boy, for example, and this is – once again – left for us to make, to imagine. On the one hand, Frost seems to be asking: and how would *you* feel? On the other hand, Frost suggests the conclusion that there is nothing he, you or anyone else can do about the boy's death. In the poem – as in 'Home Burial' and many other poems – there is not a trace of pathos, because being pathetic about the death will not help anything.

Interestingly, in *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord proposes that the social absence of life coincides with the social absence of death (Debord, Thesis 160). Debord's thesis can be reversed, which in Frost's case implies that where death is acknowledged and understood as a natural fulfillment of our existence, there is also life. We cannot know if life would be worth living if there were no death but we can be fairly sure that death gives life meaning. Further, Debord discusses the society of the spectacle which is the exact opposite of Frost's people:

> The spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfillment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living he can no longer acknowledge his own death. Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system following the resultant economic loss, while the promoters of the "American way of death" stress his capacity to preserve most of the *appearances* of life in his post-mortem state. On all the other fronts of advertising bombardment it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Everybody is urged to economize on their "youth-capital," though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of economic capital. (Debord, Thesis 160)

In contrast with modern American lifestyle and what Debord calls "the American way of death", for Frost's people aging and death are not haunting processes, they are inevitable natural facts. Life spells a death sentence and there is no going around it. Besides, there is too much work to waste time philosophizing about death. In any case, Frost's people seem to be occupied more with the following thoughts than with death. First, in 'The Lesson for Today', we are informed that "Earth's a place in which it's hard to save your soul" (*CPP*, 320). This makes sense, because so far we have seen that Earth was the right place for love and work and now we learn that through these we can save our souls, even though it is not likely to be an easy thing to do. Second, what are we, *who* are we? Earlier in Chapter 1 the answer was: "We must be something." At this moment, we can specify this further. As the poem 'Two Witches' tells us, we are but "a decent product of life's ironing out" (*CPP*, 187). Indeed, Frost's people are put up to trials by existence, trials by nature, seasons,

snowstorms. They are always in the middle of something, as the dialogue in the poem 'In the Home Stretch' illustrates: “Ends and beginnings—there are no such things. / There are only middles” (*CPP*, 113). In the same dialogue, the people express a wish to know, whatever that knowledge may yield. One speaker says he does not want to find out what cannot be known to which the other speaker replies: “You're searching, Joe, / For things that don't exist” (*CPP*, 113). This is a likely answer most Frost's folks would supply to metaphysical questions. We must distinguish here between Frost's people and the figure of the narrator, as the poet sometimes projects in the narrator's mind a different way of thinking, a counterpoise of village thinking. This is evident for example in the poem 'Mending Wall' where the narrator and his neighbor lead a dialogue concerning metaphysical matters. On the one hand, the villager holds to his ancestors's age-old belief that good fences make good neighbors. On the other hand, the narrator wants to revise this idea. He ponders why, in the first place, do fences make good neighbors. And before setting up a fence, he is led to ask what would he be walling in or walling out. However, there seems to be a general metaphysical question that troubles both the narrator as well as the villagers. This issue is investigated and dealt with in the poem '*A Question*'. The poet is asking whether “all the soul-and-body scars / Were not too much to pay for birth” (*CPP*, 329), which reminds us of the same Yeatsian dilemma in 'Among School Children', that is, the question whether the son with sixty or more winters on his head is enough of a compensation for the pang of birth. With one difference, however, that Frost's people would not think about the concept of honey of generation betrayed, as there is no place for such train of thought in the Frostian world. Frost's poetry, rather than emphasizing the act of creation, tends to work more with the concept of discovery. Hence, rather than created, truth, life and beauty are discovered; they are discoverable variabilities and impermanences. Hence, the concept of honey of generation betrayed is not an issue. Consequently, there is no ultimate answer to Frost's poem '*A Question*'. At best it can only be responded to subjectively.

Besides death there is another uniting element, namely love which is an equally strong lowest common denominator. In the poem 'Bond and Free', the poet proposes that “Love has Earth to which she clings” (*CPP*, 116). This means, love has people on Earth to whom she clings. In the previous chapters we discussed the nature of love in Frost's poetry and concluded that love in Frost is real and realistic because it is life-sized. Further, in 'Build Soil', the poet proposes a concise definition of love:

> There is no love.
> There's only love of men and women, love

Of children, love of friends, of men, of God.
Divine love, human love, parental love. (*CPP*, 290)

Hence, love is not an abstract thing in Frost; it is strongly localized and concretized. In other words, the poet claims that love exists only in the specific, though highly individualized, forms of interpersonal relationships. And there are different kinds of love, just as there are different types of relations. Now, what does love mean and in what ways is it challenging for Frost's people? In general, Frost's people seem to regard the ability (or should we say the gift?) to love as a condition of sanity. Sigmund Freud once emphasized the importance of being able to work and love in order to be considered sane. Absence or deformity of either leads to exclusion and rejection from the community. For example, the lazy worker in 'The Death of the Hired Man' who scorns work when, in haying time, “any help is scarce” (*CPP*, 41), is unanimously resented by the locals. Concerning love, there are two poems that are worth mentioning. The first one, 'The Generations of Men', discloses a warning story about a person with an unhealthy relationship to himself: “D'you now a person so related to herself / Is supposed to be mad” (*CPP*, 77). This again reminds us of the hen breeder in 'The Housekeeper'. Analogously, such self-obsession and, possibly, unrestrained self-love prevents a person from maintaining healthy relationships with other community members. The second poem, 'A Servant to Servants', shows another form of immoderate emotional expression. Here, one man was kept locked up for years back up at one old farm. The State Asylum is not considered an option by Frost's people:

I wouldn't have sent anyone of mine there;
You know the old idea—the only asylum
Was the poorhouse, and those who could afford,
Rather than send their folks to such a place,
Kept them at home; and it does seem more human. (*CPP*, 67)

The poem continues by disclosing in detail the fate of one disordered mind:

I've heard too much of the old fashioned-way.
My father's brother, he went mad quite young.
Some thought he had been bitten by a dog,
Because his violence took on the form
Of carrying his pillow in his teeth;
But it's more likely he was crossed in love,
Or so the story goes. It was some girl.
Anyway all he talked about was love.
They soon saw he would do someone a mischief
If he wa'n't kept strict watch of, and it ended
In father's building him a sort of cage

> Or room within a room, of hickory poles,
> Like stanchions in the barn, from floor to ceiling,—
> A narrow passage all the way around.
> Anything they put in for furniture
> He'd tear to pieces, even a bed to lie on.
> So they made the place comfortable with straw,
> Like a beast's stall, to ease their consciences.
> Of course they had to feed him without dishes.
> They tried to keep him clothed, but he paraded
> With his clothes on his arm—all of his clothes.
> Cruel—it sounds. I 'spose they did the best
> They knew. And just when he was at the height,
> Father and mother married, and mother came,
> A bride, to help take care of such a creature,
> And accommodate her young life to his.
> That was what marrying father meant to her.
> She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful
> By his shouts in the night. He'd shout and shout
> Until the strength was shouted out of him,
> And his voice died down slowly from exhaustion.
> He'd pull his bars apart like bow and bow-string,
> And let them go and make them twang until
> His hands had worn them smooth as any ox-bow.
> And then he'd crow as if he thought that child's play—
> The only fun he had. I've heard them say, though,
> They found a way to put a stop to it. (*CPP*, 68-69)

Just what way they found we can only guess. This lengthy excerpt of the poem suggests two important conclusions. First, Frost's people are at a loss as how to cope with non-standard phenomena, particularly social ones. Frost's world *is* hard on the subnormal. After all, Frost's poetry takes after the survival-of-the-fittest paradigm which is in itself cruel. And, second, the poem shows that love is absolutely essential not only for Frost's people but in Frost's *oeuvre* in general which another poem 'Devotion' illustrates well:

> The heart can think of no devotion
> Greater than being shore to the ocean—
> Holding the curves of one position,
> Counting an endless repetition. (*CPP*, 226)

Love, in all its forms, is but ceaseless husbanding, nurturing and caring. At the same time it is also a daily necessity and a challenge to be met; one that keeps us going and coming back, moving heavenward and back earthward. As can be clearly seen in the above poem 'A Servant to Servants', love can have such a strong pull as to cause one to be driven from the community. On the whole, in Frost's poetry we frequently witness a tension emanating from the effort to preserve one's individu-

ality while retaining a secure position in the community. Hence, there is a ceaseless motion not only toward heaven and back earthward, but also a horizontal movement on the plane of interpersonal relations. The figure of the narrator again stands in contrast with other villagers, because of their natural propensity to fit into their society whereas the narrator represents a strictly self-reliant person in the Emersonian tradition.

Apart from death and love, the greatest bond between humans is communication and will be dealt with in the next section. Most of Frost's poems emphasize the importance of the people's understanding one another. The way through which this process occurs is not only language but includes objects, instruments and tools as discussed already in Chapter 3. As Faggen observes, “[Frost's people]'s ability to understand things – a tuft of flowers, a wall, a cellar hole, an ax-helve, a grindstone, a brook, or a house or home itself – becomes inextricably bound to their ability to understand one another” (*CIF*, 65). Faggen continues further to generalize things to *meaning*: “The poems penetrate to the limits of individuality and the demands of community in the creation of meaning” (*CIF*, 65). The creation of meaning is vitally tied to shared experience and age-old traditions. For example, in the poem 'The Bonfire', a group of children sets out to make a fire out of a pile of brush. Undoubtedly, they want to imitate the Fourth-of-July tradition. The bonfire serves the purpose of tightening the community, because it allows them to “have [their] fire and laugh and be afraid” (*CPP*, 127). On the whole, despite the expanding urbanization and modernization there is still a tendency in the country toward ritualization. Although in the city they too have bonfires, there is a key difference that while in the city a bonfire is likely to attract people previously unacquainted with each other, in the village they supposedly are all neighbors. And this is not only a privilege of the village ways of life but a requirement as well. The occasion on which a bonfire is held is not only a time for chat and laugh but also a test one takes in order to show how one meets the community expectations. Ultimately, Frost shows that these precious customs, which have now been for more than a century dying out, should be – must be – preserved.

Finally, there is a group of people in Frost that are not part of the community. They are outside of the traditional village population. These are modern men, perhaps come to summer in the countryside or see what has already been banalized. In the poem 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep', Frost describes people on a shore. They are looking out to sea, they are watching for something. But as Hammer argues, is there anything to watch for? Is there anything coming? No, it does not appear so (Hammer, Lecture 3). In 'Once by the Pacific', the poet himself makes out of the scene a causal pattern, a logical sequence:

> Great waves looked over others coming in,
> And thought of doing something to the shore
> That water never did to land before.
> […]
> The shore was lucky in being backed by a cliff,
> The cliff being backed by continent. (*CPP*, 229)

There immediately arises a question of who or what will back up the continent? Perhaps the people inhabiting it? Let us take a closer look at them. In 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep', Frost observes the people:

> The people along the sand
> All turn and look one way.
> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day. (*CPP*, 274)

Seemingly, it does not occur to them that “a night of dark intent / Was coming, and not only a night, [but] an age” (*CPP*, 229, insertion mine). What troubles them more is the emptiness they behold and feel in themselves. Because “They cannot look out far” and “They cannot look out deep” (*CPP*, 274), they may be compelled to use various devices, such as:

> The telescope at one end of [his] beat,
> And at the other end the microscope,
> Two instruments of nearly equal hope. (*CPP*, 247)

However, neither can be of use to these people, because the emptiness originates in their lack of imagination. Without imagination, these people have little or no access to understanding the world. Certainly the continent can hardly be backed by such people. How could these people stand their ground or stand for their continent when they turn their backs on it and gaze mindlessly at the sea? Therefore, in Frost, imagination is a must if we are to discover, understand and appreciate ways of the world we live in which gets us back to where we left off in Chapter 3, with the broken goblet enabling us to drink and live to our fullest. As pointed out therein, the problem lies in the degradation of being into having. It is the condition of having full hands and empty soul. Here, the telescope is an instrument of enlightenment but it will yield no useful knowledge to those lacking imagination. Again, as emphasized in Frost's poetry, it is not having but knowing what to do with things. Yet, even with an imagining mind looking, there are boundaries and things unknowable and unaccessible to man. Both our experience and knowledge are limited. As the poem 'The Star-Split-

ter' shows, a man can point a telescope (or microscope, for that matter) wherever he wants, look in any way he desires but still he will not know any better where *he* is:

> We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
> Do we know any better where we are? (*CPP*, 168)

Of course, in Frost's poems we are in New England, in America, on the Earth, in our Universe. But what does this mean? To this, each must supply an answer alone. 'The Star-Splitter' maps the collision of the cosmic and the local that so often recurs in Frost's poetry. This poem is a brilliant meditation on the intersection of infinity with the community. It shows the effort to satisfy "a life-long curiosity / About our place among the infinities" (*CPP*, 166). Faggen argues that in this poem, "Frost distinguishes himself from most modernist poets in not taking the view the world was somehow worse at the dawn of the twentieth century than it ever had been. If anything, the discoveries of science had humiliated mankind like religion had done in centuries before, in reminding him of his mortality and his relatively small, uncertain position in the scheme of things" (*CIF*, 153). 'The Star-Splitter' explicates the limits of our knowledge. Our knowledge of the evolution of the universe, of the tiny seed of life on our small planet, of being itself. It reports on our inherent ultimate inability to comprehend everything. It also comforts us that there is really no need for an absolute knowledge.

### *4.3 Communication*

So far we have been speaking about various changes occurring in people's characters, in the landscape, in the lifestyle. But perhaps the greatest of all the changes that modern age has brought about is in the ways of communication. As emphasized throughout the previous chapters and sections, Frost's poems abound with communication. A lot of the poems are centered around dialogues and human interaction, though not always verbal. The communication is sometimes even subhuman or inter-species. The importance of communication, and the dread of its absence, is emphasized by Justin Quinn who examines the condition of being without expression and having nothing to express in 'Desert Places':

> "With no expression, nothing to express." This is the real chill of the poem, a state of affairs that is completely void of communication. At this point the speaker is undergoing a crisis, a moment of deep fear as he feels that his own human utterance will be lost in the spreading "loneliness" and "blanker whiteness". It is a fear of

> one's own extinction as well as a vision of the world without communication. (*Lectures on American Literature*, 182)

The question now is in what ways has communication changed and what are the consequences. Debord asserts that modern technologies are answerable for the rapidly changing nature of communication:

> If the social needs of the age in which such technologies are developed can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of this society and all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially unilateral. (Debord, Thesis 24)

By these means of instantaneous means of communication Debord means a variety of new media types which include the telephone, the telegraph, the TV and cinema. The unilaterality of the TV and cinema is obvious but so is, to a degree, the unilaterality of the former modes of communication. The telephone, for example, is a one-dimensional means of communication which, of course, presents both new possibilities as well as problems. In the poem 'The Line-Gang' Frost specifies how the community responds to these new phenomena:

> Here come the line-gang pioneering by.
> They throw a forest down less cut than broken.
> They plant dead trees for living, and the dead
> They string together with a living thread.
> They string the instrument against the sky
> Wherein words whether beaten or spoken
> Will run as hushed as when they were a thought
> […]
> They bring the telephone and telegraph. (*CPP*, 135)

This is something unfathomable to the country people. For ages they were used to local gossip. If they wanted to communicate, they left their home and went for a visit. As in the poem 'A Time to Talk', there is always time to chat: "When a friend calls to me from the road / And slows his horse to a meaning walk, / I don't stand still and look around / […] I go up to the stone wall / For a friendly visit" (*CPP*, 120). Surely the telephone is an ideal form of communication in the city, due to its impersonal nature, and precisely because of this it is inconvenient for use in traditional communities. Buell recognizes in Frost's people "an old-timer's hostility to creeping commercialism, even to basic technology like telephone and telegraph" (*CCF*, 108). We must bear in mind that it is not Frost who condemns modern technology; the poet merely *shows* what is it doing to the people and how they regard it. In 'An Encounter', the poet leaves a road he knew and:

> And since there was no other way to look,
> Looked up to heaven, and there against the blue,
> Stood over me a resurrected tree,
> A tree that had been down and raised again—
> A barkless specter. (*CPP*, 121).

The poet goes on figuring where the messages, that "something in it from men to men", are being carried, to Montreal, perhaps? (*CPP*, 121). This says two things. First, the poet is able and willing to *appreciate* modern technology; he is keen to look and see its hidden beauty, if there is some. We can even say Frost is fascinated with technologies but at the same time he is well aware that no technology, however sophisticated, can put an end to human misery and suffering. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* emphasizes the poet's doubt that science can assure the survival of the human race (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 1125). As Frost himself discloses in his essay 'The Future of Man',

> I am in danger of making all this sound as if science were all. It is not all. But it is much. 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; in which last respect it may be likened unto pure poetry and mysticism. 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. [cf. the poem 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' above] Still it is not a law unto itself. It comes under the king. There never was a scientist king and there never will be. […] Science is a property. It belongs to us under the king. And the best description of us is the humanities from of old, the book of the worthies and unworthies. The passing science of the moment may contribute its psychological bit to the book like one of the fleeting elements recently added to the chemical list. (*CPP*, 870-71)

And second, on the contrary, the village community unanimously resents these new technologies because they have no tradition and the villagers have not yet created meaning for the new instruments.

In 'That's How It Was', Murray Hoyt, who used to summer in Vermont as a boy, recounts his memories of the traditional ways of life in the country. In one passage, he mentions the telephone and what it meant:

> There was one meat cart which came around once each week. If you phoned them the day before, they'd bring along groceries you wanted them to bring. But since we had to walk up and meet the cart at the road, and also because telephoning was

> such an emotional experience, we used this service sparingly.
> Telephoning; now there was something. You walked up to the nearest farmhouse that had a phone and you picked up the receiver from a hook on the side of the wooden-box on the wall. The mouthpiece stuck out at you on a metal arm. You heard all sorts of ghost voices; it was nearly impossible to tell whether one set of voices was loud enough to mean your line was being used.
> If you thought it wasn't, you held down the receiver and cranked the crank on the side of the box the requisite number of longs and shorts to get the party you were after. Then there was a lot of shouting. The voice you heard wasn't much louder than the other ghost voices, and there was much, "What? What? Louder; I can't hear you." Usually you were able to get your message across; sometimes you weren't and the farmer's wife graciously agreed to call later and relay the message when the telephone was less noisy. Or when less people were listening-in and cutting down the volume. "Listening-in" every time the phone rang was a way of life in the country. (*Vermont*, 67)

Hoyt describes a time when the striking novelty of the technologies has worn off and the folks have gotten used to them a little. However, as indicated in the excerpt, communication via telephone presents several problems which will be listed in the following paragraphs.

For one thing, the telephone and telegraph threaten the usual and deeply-rooted dimensions of communication. Hammer emphasizes the characteristics of natural speech, unmediated by technology:

> Frost's "sound of sense," the abstract vitality of our speech. It has to do exactly with how people say what they say. These are dimensions of communication that [Hammer has] been identifying in 'Mowing' with the whisper of the scythe, that is, a tone of meaning or a way of meaning. "The sound of sense." It represents common and vernacular elements of speech. The sounds of sense are all part of language in use, which people are using to do things with. (Hammer, Lecture 2)

Although the telephone is capable of displaying changes in tone, the speakers have to make-do without visual, bodily and other gestures which are essential aspects of communication and help us making clear *how* do we mean *what* we are saying. We will now look at two poems that exemplify lacks and defects in telephone communication. Frost's poem 'The Telephone' illustrates the collective need to share and to understand things, as mentioned in the previous section. Here, the poet figure leans with his head against a flower and hears his lover talk:

> Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say—
> You spoke from that flower on the window sill—
> Do you remember what it was you said? (*CPP*, 114)

As Oster explains, the poet hears the message the other person had only *thought* by facing the

flower on her window sill (*CCF*, 167). Hence, communication in Frost is tightly bound to sharing imagination and, of course, love makes it easier to share (or should we say love allows sharing?). Besides, the poem does not present a criticism of modern technology nor is it a record of its bad influence. Principally, there is *wit* in the comparison of a flower to telephone. The early telephones were built into heavy boxes and phoning entailed leaning over to speak into them. But the comparison is not only visual. And there is another set of associations to which the poem alludes. It invites a reading that recalls erotic images and sensuality. At the same time, it allows an interpretation that suggests 'The Telephone' represents miscommunication. In this case, the narrator walks out and distances himself against his partner, presumably after a quarrel, but only to realize – when far enough – their mutual feelings. Yet another interpretation is that the flower is a metaphor for unspoken thoughts, an example of unilateral mode of communication.

Another poem, 'Snow', narrates a story in which the telephone plays a crucial role. We will see how the medium actually *fails* to convey information along with the intended emotional charge. A preacher is out on a harsh night: absolute darkness and cold and snowstorm outside. Halfway, he meets the Coles in their house. Still sleepy, they let him in and he wishes to contact his wife:

> 'I think I'll just call up my wife and tell her
> I'm here—so far—and starting on again.
> I'll call her softly so that if she's wise
> And gone to sleep, she needn't wake to answer."
> Three times he barely stirred the bell, then listened.
> "Why, Lett, still up? Lett, I'm at Cole's. I'm late.
> I called you up to say Good-night from here
> Before I went to say Good-morning there.—
> I thought I would.— I know, but, Lett—I know—
> I could, but what's the sense? The rest won't be
> So bad.— Give me an hour for it.— Ho, ho,
> Three hours to here! But that was all up hill;
> The rest is down.— Why no, no, not a wallow:
> They kept their heads and took their time to it
> Like darlings, both of them. They're in the barn.—
> My dear, I'm coming just the same. I didn't
> Call you to ask you to invite me home.—"
> He lingered for some word she wouldn't say,
> Said it at last himself, "Good-night," and then,
> Getting no answer, closed the telephone. (*CPP*, 137)

Frost gives a realistic description of the telephone conversation. In fact, the narration comprises from bits of words and phrases. To the Coles and to the reader, the conversation seems unilateral in the way Debord suggested above. The telephone renders the Coles and the reader as passive parti-

cipants in the action. Further, after a pause Mrs. Cole comments that "You can judge better after seeing" (*CPP*, 137). Later, as Meserve is setting out, they plead him to disclose what his wife said:

> Won't you please me? Please! If I say please?
> Mr. Meserve, I'll leave it to *your* wife.
> What *did* your wife say on the telephone? (*CPP*, 141)

But Meserve heeds nothing save the call of the darkness of night which reminds us of the desire of lostness. His reasoning leads him to think: "Well, there's—the storm. That says I must go on. / That wants me as a war might if it came. Ask any man" (*CPP*, 141). Meserve's inconsiderate decision leaves the Coles restless in the midst of the night. They will hardly sleep until they know he has safely arrived home. First they begin blaming one another for letting Meserve go. But that leads nowhere and can in no way help Meserve. Then after a while Meserve's wife calls:

> Cole had been telephoning in the dark.
> Mrs. Cole's voice came from an inner room:
> "Did she call you or you call her?"
>
> "She me.
> You'd better dress: you won't go back to bed.
> We must have been asleep: it's three and after."
>
> "Had she been ringing long? I'll get my wrapper.
> I want to speak to her."
>
> "All she said was,
> He hadn't come and had he really started."
>
> "She knew he had, poor thing, two hours ago."
>
> "He had the shovel. He'll have made a fight."
>
> "Why did I ever let him leave this house!"
>
> "Don't begin that. You did the best you could
> To keep him—though perhaps you didn't quite
> Conceal a wish to see him show the spunk
> To disobey you. Much his wife'll thank you."
>
> "Fred, after all I said! You shan't make out
> That it was any way but what it was.
> Did she let on by any word she said
> She didn't thank me?"
>
> "When I told her 'Gone,'
> 'Well then,' she said, and 'Well then'—like a threat.

And then her voice came scraping slow: 'Oh, you,
Why did you let him go'?"

"Asked why we let him?" (*CPP*, 146)

Finally, Mrs. Cole decides to call up Meserve's wife herself. A problem arises, namely what to tell her if she asks why they let Meserve go? To this, Mrs. Cole retorts she will ask her why *she* had let him:

You let me there. I'll ask her why she let him.
She didn't dare to speak when he was here.

Their number's—twenty-one? The thing won't work.
Someone's receiver's down. The handle stumbles.

The stubborn thing, the way it jars your arm!
It's theirs. She's dropped it from her hand and gone."

"Try speaking. Say 'Hello'!"

"Hello. Hello."

"What do you hear?"

"I hear an empty room—
You know—it sounds that way. And yes, I hear—
I think I hear a clock—and windows rattling.
No step though. If she's there she's sitting down."

"Shout, she may hear you."

"Shouting is no good."

"Keep speaking then."

"Hello. Hello. Hello.
You don't suppose—? She wouldn't go out doors?"

"I'm half afraid that's just what she might do."

"And leave the children?"

"Wait and call again.
You can't hear whether she has left the door
Wide open and the wind's blown out the lamp
And the fire's died and the room's dark and cold?"

"One of two things, either she's gone to bed
Or gone out doors."

"In which case both are lost.
Do you know what she's like? Have you ever met her?
It's strange she doesn't want to speak to us."

"Fred, see if you can hear what I hear. Come."

"A clock maybe."

"Don't you hear something else?"

"Not talking."
"No."

"Why, yes, I hear—what is it?"

"What do you say it is?"

"A baby's crying!
Frantic it sounds, though muffled and far off."

"Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that,
Not if she's there."

"What do you make of it?"

"There's only one thing possible to make,
That is, assuming—that she has gone out.
Of course she hasn't though." They both sat down
Helpless. "There's nothing we can do till morning." (*CPP*, 147-148)

A lot is going on in there. Frost is, as usual, in full control of the situation and lets both the reader and the Coles make the meaning from little bits of knowledge. However, the telephone is tricky, in contrast with other methods of communication. It is highly unreliable, not only due to ghost voices. It is a bit like listening to gossip, because one must figure a lot, even *make up* a lot on one's own. For these reasons, telephone communication is prone to misunderstanding and encourages a great deal of speculation. The poem hints at the problems which new instantaneous means of communication entail. It allows communication to take place in types of situations where it was not previously possible. However, partial knowledge – a certain amount of information obtained through a medium – that the telephone allows one to gain results in the desire to know more, which is also the common condition in Frost's poetry as a whole. As Mrs. Cole remarked above, there is really nothing wrong with the telephone but one can judge better after seeing. By and large, the telephone itself does not leave the Coles wide awake all night. What leaves the Coles awake and wanting to know more is the potential of the medium to yield information. Yet, it only gives room to speculation. Were there

no telephone available, the Coles would have had no way of obtaining information about Meserve's safe arrival. Finally, after some time, right out of the blue, there's noise on the end of the line:

> "Hold on." The double bell began to chirp.
> They started up. Fred took the telephone.
> "Hello, Meserve. You're there, then!—And your wife?
>
> Good! Why I asked—she didn't seem to answer.
> He says she went to let him in the barn.—
> We're glad. Oh, say no more about it, man.
> Drop in and see us when you're passing." (*CPP*, 148)

Thus, the message about Meserve's safe arrival is mediated and received at last. The Coles show, obviously, mild irritation with their having spent the night without sleep:

> "The whole to-do seems to have been for nothing.
> What spoiled our night was to him just his fun.
> What did he come in for?—To talk and visit?
> Thought he'd just call to tell us it was snowing.
> If he thinks he is going to make our house
> A halfway coffee house 'twixt town and nowhere—" (*CPP*, 149)

Throughout the whole poem two actions are emphasized. First, as Mrs. Cole remarked, one can judge better after seeing. Mrs. Cole's interest lies in the practical aspect of seeing. And MacLeish generalizes the preference for *seeing* over *looking* in the following way:

> See! (Not *Look*, but *See*.) Anything can make us look, any chance movement in a room, the wind in poplar leaves, a paper bag uncrumpling in the sun. Only art can make us see. Henry Thoreau put the distinction as simply as it can be put: "There is no power to see in the eye itself, any more than in any other jelly. […] We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads,—and then we can hardly see anything else." (MacLeish, 444)

The second, implicitly emphasized activity is believing which we usually have to stick to when we cannot know, see, touch or hear. Here it may be a kind of pun on Frost's part that the inconsiderate man was a preacher, spreading the Word and teaching people to *believe*. Believing in Frost is closely related to truth or, in other words, believing what is true. Modern technology offers us instantaneous means of communication, it removes any spatial or temporal restrictions of our communication but the price paid is that the communication gets virtual. In short, Frost's poem show that technology enhances communication as far as formal and technical issues are concerned. But it cannot help to mediate meaning. In fact, it often hinders it. In virtual communication, truth gets distor-

ted, inflated or warped. This brings us to the concept of truth in Frost with which we will deal in the closing paragraph of this chapter.

Until now we have been dealing with many abstract items in Frost's poetry, such "dream", "love", "labor". Now, what is truth? Should we actually say *a* truth or *the* truth? And is it not the definite article that makes the truth be the truth, as Hammer points out (Hammer, Lecture 2)? Otherwise it would be merely a truth, perhaps something less than the truth? In the poem 'The Mountain', the narrator questions extensively a local settler who, while supplying answers at his best, admits to never having been to the mountain top himself. This sounds somewhat strange, given that upon being asked how long has he lived here, replies: "Ever since Hor / Was no bigger than a—" (*CPP*, 49) The narrator, missing the last indistinct word, is left – as is the general case in Frost's poetry – in between the truth and make believe, between the fact and the desire to know. Similarly, the poem 'The Telephone' leaves the narrator in the same condition:

> Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
> I leaned my head,
> And holding the stalk,
> I listened and thought I caught the word—
> What was it? Did you call me by my name?
> Or did you say—
> *Someone* said "Come" —I heard it as I bowed. (*CPP*, 114-115)

In 'The Mountain', we are told that "All the fun's in how you say a thing" (*CPP*, 48). In the latter poem, the flower is a way how to address a message which only the knowing or sharing mind, i.e. the lover, can decipher. In both poems, Frost often uses a technique of concealing the truth by hiding facts from us. This puts the reader in the same position as the narrator vs. the villager or the flower listener vs. the lover. The truth is not handed down to us, it is left for us to make. These poems also show typical Frostian relentless pragmatism. As a result we are left with a conscious choice whether "to make it or not" (here in particular, to climb or not, and to decode the message or not), depending on our will whether we *will* do it or we *will* not. The narrator in Frost's poem is going to have a hard time figuring out whether the journey and the climbing is worth it. For the villager, "'T wouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it'" (*CPP*, 48). Thus, for Frost, the question of truth is closely related to will, to the will to get down to – or up to, sometimes – the truth. Frost's concept of truth also reflects his typical doubleness and duality; if something is true, then all the rest is a lie. In 'The Self-Seeker', one character is accused of withholding knowledge: "Anne, I'm troubled; have you told me all? / You're hiding something. That's as bad as lying" (*CPP*, 97). Truth is important for

the community. Returning to the subject of Chapter 3, we can conclude that in Frost's poetry communication is a tool for mediating truth. Frost's people want to get down to the facts but the problem is that truth sometimes cannot be reduced to facts. At other times truth ceases to be truth when it is reduced too much. In order to make a conclusion, we need to characterize the nature of truth in Frost. For this purpose, we will look into in the poem 'The Black Cottage':

> Dear me, why abandon a belief?
> Merely because it ceases to be true.
> Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
> It will turn true again, for so it goes.
> Most of the change we think we see in life
> Is due to truths being in and out of favor. (*CPP*, 61)

In other words, the speaker expresses a belief that there are truths we keep coming back and back to. Does this mean we are rediscovering the same truths all the time? Not necessarily. It rather seems that we are endlessly oscillating between the truth and make-believe and at times we are closer to the latter and at other times we get back near to the former. This may provide the key for giving the ultimate answer to the Frostian doubleness. Just as the poet holds that two eyes make one in sight (*CPP*, 252), from the blend of fact and fiction emerge our subjective realities. Costello concludes that “Frost invents landscapes that sustain a double vision, in which truth and make-believe unite in making believe what is so” (Costello, 52). Such a unification is necessary, because it allows the marriage of imagination and reality, of the inner and outer weather as the poet writes in '*Carpe Diem*':

> But bid life seize the present?
> It lives less in the present
> Than in the future always,
> And less in both together
> Than in the past. The present
> Is too much for the senses,
> Too crowding, too confusing—
> Too present to imagine. (*CPP*, 305)

# Conclusion

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

I consider myself lucky. Almost all my life I have lived in a part of Prague, the heart of Europe, which abounds in greens, gardens, low colorful houses and even a richly forested hilly terrain. In the numerous gardens surrounding my home, I frequently catch a glimpse of various animals. Skylarks, swallows, bluetits, squirrels, cats, magpies, ravens, crows, hedgehogs, dogs – each season has its own species. When I have friends come visit me, they all say they feel as though they are in the country here, like in some far-way village. For this I am very grateful, to be so fortunate to live in a place where nature has not yet been imprisoned by the modern life.

Once when I was in the midst of writing this thesis, on a January night of the year 2010, snow was falling fast and the gardens were full of benighted snow. Winter that year was especially rich on snowfalls and blizzards. Every morning I had to shovel huge amounts of snow from my terrace. I would like to add here that I am perfectly aware it is not common for a text that has the ambition to offer literary criticism to include private experiences but I believe that disclosing what happened to me on that strange evening will justify my doing so. I was out in the terrace, having a midnight coffee and a cigarette. Although I usually do not do so, that time I had turned on the lantern light on the terrace. After a brief moment, I caught the glimpse of something silvery-brown-grey. I first thought

it was an odd, huge snowflake, but this object was moving upwards and toward me, toward the light above me. On a closer look I recognized it was a moth. A weary moth, just like the moth in Frost's poem 'To a Moth Seen in Winter':

> Here's first a gloveless hand warm from my pocket,
> A perch and resting place 'twixt wood and wood,
> Bright-black-eyed silvery creature, brushed with brown,
> The wings not folded in repose, but spread.
> (Who would you be, I wonder, by those marks
> If I had moths to friend as I have flowers?)
> And now pray tell what lured you with false hope
> To make the venture of eternity
> And seek the love of kind in wintertime?
> But stay and hear me out. I surely think
> You make a labor of flight for one so airy,
> Spending yourself too much in self-support.
> Nor will you find love either, nor love you.
> And what I pity in you is something human,
> The old incurable untimeliness,
> Only better of all ills that are.
> But go. You are right. My pity cannot help.
> Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched.
> You must be made more simply wise than I
> To know the hand I stretch impulsively
> Across the gulf of well-nigh everything
> May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate.
> I cannot touch your life, much less can save,
> Who am tasked to save my own a little while. (*CPP*, 323)

What strikes me most is how true is the description of the moth, “Bright-black-eyed silvery creature, brushed with brown, / The wings not folded in repose, but spread”. It glittered in the darkness surrounding the lamp. I did not have the heart to leave it outside to freeze. I took it gently in my palm and carried it to the attic in our house. I am telling all this to declare that Frost's work is not dead, it is alive and kicking, perhaps today more than ever. Whoever is willing to *see* can roam freely in Frost's world. The episode with the moth was not the only one in my life that somehow strongly resonates with Frost's poetry. Twice in the past five years the closing stanza of 'Reluctance' was of comfort to me when nothing else could. Frost's *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* traveled with me in many countries. I have been reading and rereading it. In total I finished it maybe six times. I have not read it in the comfort of a study room or at home. I have always read it on the go, in trains, airplanes, when stopping on my long walks and the like. I have become acquainted with Frost's *oeuvre* to the extent that I can recite a lot of his poems from the top of my head, which I do at times, when friends or someone is willing to listen. I love it when people are skeptical at first. Po-

etry? Well, huh, go on. When I tell one poem, they want more. And when I finish, their eyes shine with delight and great thirst for knowing.

There is another interesting thing about my involvement with Frost. An American friend of mine, Anne Morris, currently living in Prague, spent a considerable part of her life in Vermont. As a child, she had seen Frost once and told me what impression the poet had made on her. Further, Anne Morris has talked to me a lot about the Vermont ways of life. It was fun to hear the accent and all the "a-yups", "ay-ehs", "'Twa'n'ts", "'Tain'ts" and the like. Anne also told me that later she had moved from Vermont because her house stood in the way of a highway. This trend was something Sinclair Lewis had so vehemently criticized:

> Not one hundred miles from Rutland (Vt.), a short time ago, there stood a beautiful old house, rich in memories and associations of a hundred years ago. It was torn down to build a bank. Now a bank is a necessary thing for a community and a helpful thing, but it was not necessary to tear down that priceless old house. That sort of thing is what Vermont must stop. (Lewis)

But enough said. We will now turn to a general conclusion of this thesis.

What can Frost's poetry do in the 21st century? As it always has, it offers to us a momentary stay against confusion. In Faggen's words, a Frost's poem is something facing the nothing. His poetry is a continual dialogue between control and chaos (*CCF*, 4). Both principles are equally validated in Frost's poetry. At times, he resists order, social order threatening the individual will. He seems to be almost fond of chaos and blank spaces. At other times Frost depicts the vision of chaos and human being at its margin. The figure of man whose mind and heart are desperately trying to *will* some order into his existence. The man's meager attempt at accommodating himself in the universe. The man's feeble effort to illuminate the chaos around him with the human pathetic light which cannot look into nothingness. Despite this – or perhaps precisely because of this – Frost's poems allow us to get a glimpse of the void while standing on a safe ground.

Although in certain respects Frost's poetry is a travelogue of New England and portrays the New England community inhabiting the unique New England villages, his poetry is rather a travelogue of man on Earth. In Chapter 4 we discussed how is Vermont affected by urbanism and modernism. The country must rise above its historical conservatism which means to rise also above its traditional individualism. In Frost's poetry, this in general applies for man. According to the poet, man

should live somewhere between “self-approval” and “the approval of society” (*CPP*, 779). As Richardson comments, Frost values neither change and rebellion nor permanence and conservation absolutely. This means that man should adopt sometimes the strategy of “intransigence” and at another times the strategy of “conformity” (Richardson, 3-4). In the poem 'Build Soil”, Frost also hints that we need not wait for a general revolution, as the only revolution that is ever likely to come is a one-man revolution (*CPP*, 296). For the occurrence of this revolution, we need to separate. Because, as pointed out in Chapter 2, we need separation to have a relation. For Frost, this means going home (or to the wilderness) from the company of men and coming to our senses (*CPP*, 297).

In general, Frost finds illumination in everyday experience but it is not his starting point. On the contrary, he goes out and faces the wilderness of human existence. As Poirier concludes, Frost counters “the worst” and finds relief in ordinariness (*Poirier*, 317). Hence, a great part of Frost's poetry is concerned with practicality. Unlike Wallace Stevens who in 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' lets be be the finale of seem, in 'Acceptance' Frost lets what will be, be; no matter if the night is too dark to see into the future (*CPP*, 228). And it is seeing that Frost's poetry allows us, because above all, Frost *shows*. As MacLeish points out, Frost shows the water clearing in a spring, a falling leaf, a life. These and other miracles. Frost shows them so that “the mind may confront it and the heart contain it” (MacLeish, 444). And this is the most difficult labor on earth – the labor of art. Hence, that Frost's poems show is a wonder. And we see because of them. Not the New England, but “the landscape of our hearts” (MacLeish, 444). Finally, MacLeish emphasizes the key role of irony in Frost's poetry, since irony is a way of *saying* so that one may *see*. See what? “A reflection, a refraction, of the light that makes the too-familiar visible” (MacLeish, 444).

Frost once remarked that “In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on” (MacLeish, 440). This formula can be used to characterize his poetry. In this thesis we saw the complex relationship between man and nature that lies at the core of Frost's poetry. The poet's *oeuvre* basically allows us to transcend technology and get back to nature. No matter if it is only a tree grove in a city park, a mountain range, or clumps of first-green grass growing alongside a railroad track. We saw in Chapter 4 the natural uniting element in the Frostian world. As Costello concludes, “Our love for earth is validated in a universal principle. But that principle may be death” (Costello, 37). Indeed, besides love, death is the uniting element. And as Costello further adds, “Frost may want [his characteristic] doubling to remind us that the earth we love is necessarily an earth we have brought into relation with ourselves through language and imagination” (Costello,

38). To earth we keep coming back to, as in Frost's poetry all our life is in fact a backward motion toward the source. We have have an idea of what is behind us and we like to think we see what we are going into. Yet, as shown in the last poem in Chapter 4, in '*Carpe Diem*', it is only an illusion grown from our inability to imagine the present due to its being too unbearable for the senses.

Throughout this thesis we have frequently hinted at the absence of God in Frost. In poems such as 'Out, Out—' or 'Birches', we feel that God does not exist or is absent. Debord offers a theoretical explanation of this condition:

> Philosophy — the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power — was never by itself able to supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispersed the religious mists into which human beings had projected their own alienated powers, it has merely brought those mists down to earth, to the point that even the most mundane aspects of life have become impenetrable and unbreathable. The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a "world beyond"; the culmination of humanity's *internal* separation. (Debord, Thesis 20)

The absence of religion and God in Frost's poetry – by which we do not at all wish to imply that Frost is disinterested in theological questions – goes in hand with the ghost of modern life and the society of the spectacle invading that which at first appeared to be a rural paradise. As we saw in the poem 'Directive', something is broken, just like the goblet is broken. But Frost handed down to us a model way for re-accessing the lost world. He left us a key that unlocks this world. However, we must find the path alone. Perhaps then we will be able to once again see to see through the mists and look into matters impenetrable and unbreathable. Hammer emphasizes the importance of work in this process, and – more importantly – the thirst for knowledge that fuels the work drive:

> [Frost's poetry] is about the limits of work, the inability of the worker to bring a knowable world, a safe world, into being. There is in Frost no God, no transcendental source of guidance or consolation, nothing out there in the world but the material conditions of our circumstances....you see the poet himself, wanting to know; and wanting to know means pressing towards some revelation, towards some sense of the meaning of things. (Hammer, Lecture 3)

In Chapter 3 we witnessed the hopeless struggle to make things secure against being, and even an attempt to make our own existence more secure. All such efforts are doomed to be proven futile. Is

there something worth trying? The answer is a strong, positive yes. Because in contrast with other modernists, such as Eliot or Pound, Frost offers us a real hope. Hammer argues that the central motifs and myths that permeate Eliot's poetry are, however, for Eliot "only available through literary allusion", they are fascinating but are ultimately "unavailable as actual experience." Likewise, that which stands out in Pound is available only as translation (Hammer, Lecture 25). This is a major point of difference between Frost and others. Frost is full of lostness, full of losses, abandonments, even agony and misery. But where is it likely to go better? Costello summarizes the key triumph of Frost's poetry in the following way: "The achievement of Frost's lyrics is to make this lostness in duration seem like a place in which we can dwell" (Costello, 52).

And what does all of this have to do with a New England village, whose main interest lies in survival and prosperity? It may be that the secularized version of the American dream does not work for New England, as it may not work for America in the long run. New England has always preserved its character, different from others States in the federation. And probably because for a long time it remained classless, anti-totalitarian and it never had any aristocrats or capitalists to liquidate, the influx of modern life has proved to be so devastating for the region and its traditions. Frost in his poetry managed to portray this tradition and keep it alive by transforming the local into the universal. Here we can apply Debord's hope that the world will one day set itself free of consumerism and spectacular products of economy-driven evolution. Debord proposes that the world already dreams of such a time and in order to actually live it, it "only needs to become fully conscious of it" (Debord, Thesis 164). Frost had a dream, he was conscious of this dream, and he transmuted this dream into a poetic world. Frost's world has the right amount of imperfectness and incompleteness. It is brilliant, both terrible and brilliant. Terrible in that there is death and irretrievable loss and brilliant because there is beauty and life in it.

## Résumé

Předložená práce se zabývá básnickým dílem Roberta Frosta (1874-1963), významného amerického básníka a uznávané ikony amerického národa. Frost byl básník natolik výjimečný, že se mu dostalo vzácné výsady, a sice že podobně jako William Shakespeare, který byl básníkem nejen Anglie, ale i samotného anglického jazyka, rovněž Frostovo dílo přesahuje hranice Ameriky a lze jej po právu považovat za básníka jazyka anglického. Frost mistrně zachází s hovorovým jazykem a novoanglickými dialekty. Po zvukové a formální stránce pak zachovává úroveň takřka nedostižnou. Takto se Frostovi podařilo propůjčit jazyk obdivovaných anglických básníků obyčejnému novoanglickému lidu. Přestože velkou část života strávil na farmách a ve venkovských regionech, čímž jej lze zařadit po bok pastorálních básníků-farmářů, jejichž tradice sahá k Publiu Vergiliu Marovi, Frost sám z venkova nepocházel. Narodil se v San Francisku v Kalifornii a vyrůstal ve městě, tudíž jeho příběh je spíše příběhem cizince, kterému Nová Anglie učarovala natolik, že se v ní rozhodl zůstat, což jej řadí po bok mnoha předních amerických literátů a myslitelů. Frost však zůstává bytostným modernistou, neboť patřil k prvním zástupcům tohoto nového literárního hnutí, jež prolomilo konvence literárních směrů všech předešlých epoch. A zrovna tak lze hovořit o podobnostech Frostova díla s poezií a ideály romantismu, k nimž se hlásí a s nimiž vede historický dialog, třebaže volí odlišné výrazové prostředky a hlásí se k jiným myšlenkovým proudům.

Ačkoliv příroda prostupuje napříč celým Frostovým dílem, jeho ústředním motivem je člověk. Příroda tak tvoří plátno, na něž Frost vykresluje podobiznu moderního člověka ve všech odstínech a barvách, od satirických přes patetické až po imaginativní, od tónů tak vzácné první zeleně přes modř nebe a oceánů až po čerň smrti a bezbarvost beznaděje. Ve své poezii Frost dramatizuje vztah člověka k přírodě, přičemž klíčovým prvkem je uvědomování si vzájemnosti tohoto vztahu a obou-

stranně fungující zpětné vazby. Ve Frostově díle nedochází k pošetilému pokusu o dominanci člověka a techniky nad přírodou, ani k poníženému stavu bezmoci člověka vydaného napospas přírodním silám. Frost se pohybuje na úzké hranici, kdy člověk je s přírodou v harmonii, která je založena na respektu a s ohledem na skutečnost, že člověk a příroda jsou částmi téhož celku a tudíž jsou vzájemně propojeni. Vyjadřuje-li se Frost o krajině a tváři přírody, zrcadlí se vždy v jeho verši portrét člověka a naopak.

Frost ve svém básnickém díle předkládá dynamický způsob poznávání a zakoušení světa kolem nás. Pro tento způsob je příznačná myšlenková pružnost, vášnivé avšak velké a citlivé srdce, a především stav neustálého pohybu. Pro Frosta velmi typické chození a kráčení je vlastně typem přemýšlení a vedení úvah: „vy byste řekli, že přemýšlím, ale já jdu" (*CPP*, 298). V tomto se Frost liší jak od romantiků a jejich představ o meditaci, a zároveň od modernistů, z nichž někteří jako např. Ezra Pound se snaží zmrazit poetický okamžik ve věčnosti a jiní jako např. Wallace Stevens rozjímají nad sklenicí položenou na kopci. Takový způsob konání a uvažování není a nemůže být náplní Frostových veršů, neboť v nich běží především o přežití, tak jako je tomu v přírodě samotné. Frostova básnická metoda velmi silně ovlivňuje způsob vnímání i všímání a jejím důsledkem je mj. fakt, že se nemůžeme ve Frostově poezii setkat s nazíráním na scénu nebo okolnosti z různých úhlů a perspektiv, což je technika jinak naprosto typická pro modernismus. Frost respektuje zákon přírody, jenž nabádá k útěku či k boji. A tak i optika Frostovy poezie čítá toliko dvě čočky, jimiž můžeme nahlédnout pod povrch básníkových veršů. Dvojakost, rozdvojení a spojování navzájem komplementárních částí je charakteristickým znamením Frostova díla. A jak básník sám podotýká, tato rozpolcenost, párovost a dvojité vidění nám umožňuje postihnout celek, podobně „jako dvě oči tvoří jeden zrak" (*CPP*, 252). Musí to však být dvě oči téže bytosti, což opět ukazuje Frostův odklon od modernismu a jeho mnohdy až kaleidoskopického vidění skutečnosti včetně narativních technik často připomínajících koláž. Ve Frostově díle se setkáváme s až nápadnou přímočarostí. Ač je ve své podstatě příroda téměř nekonečně rozmanitá, pro poutníka Frostovým světem vede cesta vždy buď vzhůru, dolů nebo po rovině. Bylo by však chybou a dokladem povrchního čtení pomyslit si, že tato přímočarost nic neskrývá. Jak dobře známo, hloubka se musí skrýt. A kde jinde ji skrýt nežli na povrchu?

Frost ve svém díle předkládá možnosti, jak vidět svět a chápat dění, samozřejmě v rámci neodstranitelných omezení daných našimi smysly a nikoliv nekonečnou velikostí lidského ducha. Ve Frostově díle se absolutně nesetkáme se situací, kdy by básně zabraly místo hor či náboženství. Frostovy verše nemají snahu předkládat velké pravdy o životě a být prostředkem osvícení. Má-li ně-

která z Frostových básní vůbec nějaké ambice, pak si jistě neklade za cíl více než vnést paprsek světla do tmy a chaosu kolem nás a umožnit nám, byť na kratičký okamžik, „chvilkovou úlevu od oblouzení“ (*CPP*, 777). Toto oblouzení – zastření smyslů, stav vnitřní zmatenosti pramenící snad z pocitu o vnější neuspořádanosti světa – je důsledkem a vrcholnou kulminací vývoje západního myšlení, jehož slabou a stinnou stránkou je přílišná fixace na materiální hodnoty. Tento názorový proud patrný ve Frostových básních neobvykle silně rezonuje s teoretickou a kritickou tvorbou francouzského filozofa Guyho Deborda (1931-1994). Navzdory odlišným kulturním, časovým i historickým kontextům se Debord i Frost shodují v kritice západní společnosti i v odpovědi na otázku, jak je možno se od dominantní ideologie odklonit. V předložené práci se opíráme o teoretický aparát Debordova díla *La Société du Spectacle* (*Společnost spektáklu*, 1967) a tvrdíme, že explicitní kritika Deborda vyvěrá ze stejného pramene úvah jako sociálně a kulturně-politická kritika implicitně obsažená v díle Frostově. V Debordově díle nacházíme nepřímou ozvěnu a pojmenování obav novoanglických vesničanů a obyčejných lidí, kteří čelí nočním můrám a přízrakům urbanizace a masovým procesům moderní doby; neonovými nápisy počínaje, potíráním individuality člověka a odosobněním s odcizením konče.

Vedle Debordova díla coby stěžejního kritického aparátu jsme zvolili dvě monografie zkoumající historii, kulturu a vyhlídky Nové Anglie. Z kánonu literární kritiky jsme vybrali klasická pojednání o Frostově díle z pera Marka Richardsona a Richarda Poiriera. Často se stává, jak se kritikové shodují, že při čtení Frosta nevyvstává otázka „co tím chtěl básník říci“, ale spíše záludnější otázka „jak to vlastně myslí?“ A proto jsem zahrnuli do výčtu kritiků i Archibalda MacLeishe, jehož pohled na Frosta pomáhá zodpovědět právě tuto otázku. Dále jsme pracovali s novější kritikou, již zastupují např. Robert Faggen, Bonnie Costellová, Langdon Hammer, Frank Lentricchia, Edna Longleyová aj. Jako k doplňkovým zdrojům jsme přihlédli k *Princetonské encyklopedii poezie a poetiky*, mluvenému projevu Sinclaira Lewise (Frostova současníka a rovněž novoanglického usedlíka) z roku 1929, a několika studiím mapujícím historicko-ekonomické okolnosti vývoje Nové Anglie. Konečně, stran primárních zdrojů, jsme analyzovali kompletní Frostovo dílo, čítající veškeré dosud publikované básně, dramata, eseje a vybranou korespondenci. Z těchto textů jsme upřednostnili básně dosud málo či vůbec nezkoumané v literárních kritikách o Frostovi. Příkladem takových básní jsou např. drobné básně předcházející první sbírce a také básně do sbírek dosud nezařazené.

V první kapitole je přiblížena Frostova poezie v kontextu literárních směrů a hnutí. Jak bylo již naznačeno, Frostův status v kánonu anglofonních literatur a kultur je přinejmenším nejednoznačný. V prvé řadě je diskutována Frostova příslušnost k modernistickému hnutí. Přestože lze Frosta označit

za jednoho z prvních stoupenců tohoto směru, pohybuje se Frost spíše na jeho okraji než v ohnisku konfliktů, kterým modernismus čelil a které sám vyvolával. Frostova druhá sbírka poezie se jmenuje *Na sever od Bostonu* a už sám její název o mnohém vypovídá. Básník se v něm geograficky vymezuje a definuje své působení mimo epicentra modernismu, jimiž byla kulturní metropole, sama v té době zažívající obrovský rozmach. S geografickým vymezením souvisí i vymezení kulturní a literárně-estetické. Zatímco pro většinu modernistických děl jsou typické urbanistické výjevy a scény odehrávající se na multi-kulturních a multi-lingvních křižovatkách, Frost utíká pryč od ruchu civilizace, do přírody a novoanglických vesnic. Jak sám naznačuje v básni 'Nezvolená cesta', vybral si „tu méně ušlapanou cestu“ (*CPP*, 103) a ohlíží se zpět beze stopy po toužebné nostalgii, pro kterou ostatně není ve Frostově poezii místo, vzhledem k neustálým nárokům na přežití. Zatímco tedy např. T. S. Eliot taví kultury a jazyky v jednom kotli ve své *Pusté zemi*, Pound oživuje mrtvé texty a staré civilizace a Hart Crane pěje hrdinské ódy na Brooklynský most, Frost si všímá kousíčku zabláceného sněhu se štěrkem, který z povzdálí připomíná promočené noviny s tlejícími písmenky a nutí básníka k úvaze o pomíjivosti starých novinek. Frost dále nachází opuštěné farmy, odloženou hromadu dříví v lese a další střípky rozpadajícího se venkovského světa. Oproti Eliotovi, jehož svět je rozpolcen a nenávratně roztříštěn, Frost sbírá rezavějící kousíčky ponuré krajiny a skládá je v naději. Frostova poezie je mimořádná ve své fyzičnosti, neboť básník *fyzicky* naráží na *fyzickou* zkázu. Takto je čtenáři předán zážitek z první ruky.

Zcela typický pro Frostovu dvojí tvář je fakt, že na jednu stranu měl ambice oslovit stoupence modernismu, ale také chtěl promlouvat k většinovému čtenářstvu konvenční literatury. Zároveň je Frost bytostným modernistou ve smyslu jistého internacionalismu, neboť stejně tak jako Pound, Eliot a další, i on započal svou kariéru po jejich boku v evropském kulturním centru modernismu. Na rozdíl od nich však navazuje na pastorální poezii, zastoupenou především Thomasem Hardym. Ovšem Frost coby farmář a literát má nesporně blíže k literatuře než k farmaření a pastorální prvky tak jsou v jeho poezii spíše předivem, ze kterého tká něco docela jiného. S pastorální poezií sdílí snahu o jednoduchý výraz, kterým důmyslně maskuje hloubku a komplexitu, což dokládá bohatá přítomnost satirických a politických úvah. V jeho díle tedy sice je pastorální poezie inherentně obsažena, ale Frost ji výrazně přesahuje, a to nikoliv do šíře, nýbrž do výšky; současně ji převyšuje i proniká hlouběji do nitra člověka. V jeho díle se zrcadlí motiv vnitřního počasí a vnitřního klimatu s motivem vnějšího počasí a vnějšího klimatu. Na jedné straně máme kultivované lidství a ušlechtilost, jež vychází z moudrosti a těžce zaplacených zkušeností, jež jsou zdaněny oněmi nezvolenými cestami. Na straně druhé leží úplná absence humanismu, prázdnota a vakuum mezihvězdného prostoru. Právě mezi těmito dvěma póly Frost ve svém díle neustále osciluje.

Frost do určité míry navazuje na romantismus a vede s romantickými básníky historický dialog. Vzhlíží k přírodě a obdivuje ji stejně jako oni, třebaže více očima evolučního biologa a stoupence Darwinismu, a proto také přírodu nestaví na piedestal, nýbrž je v ní neustále fyzicky přítomen, čímž zdůrazňuje pouto mezi člověkem a přírodou. Frost také ze zřejmých důvodů uznává i entropii a tudíž jsme často svědky dechberoucího básnického líčení zázračného přírodního výjevu, což může být zcela obyčejné pozorování kosatců v měsíčním svitu nebo pouhý trs trávy prorůstající skrze vlakové koleje. Vzápětí pak podobné básnické scény vyústí v obraz úplné zkázy a zániku, bez jakýchkoliv povzdechů a pocitu zmaru. Celkem vzato je tak Frost romantismu vzdálen podobně jako obyčejný farmář. Kromě toho, jak tvrdí Richardson, Frost dochází k závěru, že představa o možnosti transcendence, tak typická pro americké romantické transcendentalisty, zůstane navždy nesplnitelným snem (Richardson, 10).

Nejeden čtenář Frosta automaticky spojuje s Novou Anglií, k čemuž se váže mnoho dalších asociací. Očekávají pak od něj poezii, jejíž ústředním motivem je daný region a předpokládají, že Frost bude psát jako typický Yankee, tj. novoanglický rodák. Užití severovýchodního dialektu americké angličtiny je bezesporu poznávacím znamením Frostovy poezie. A jsou zde další okolnosti, na jejichž základě lze Frosta označit jako novoanglického básníka. Mezi tyto patří souvislosti 1) biografické 2) geografické 3) ideologické 4) lingvistické a 5) formální. Pro Frostovu tvorbu je nejnápadnější a nejdůležitější regionální identifikace zvláště skrze poslední dva zmíněné body. Přesto je však, jak dokládá MacLeish, Nová Anglie pouze výchozím bodem, konkrétním rámcem, který je přetaven v rámec univerzální. Přesahem od lokálního ke globálnímu se tak Nová Anglie ve Frostově díle stává „všezahrnující metaforou pro všechno“ (MacLeish, 442).

Druhá kapitola se zabývá tématem vesnice v básníkově díle. V prvním přiblížení je diskutován pojem vesnice ve vztahu jak k Americe, tak k Nové Anglii a jejím specifikům. Mezi taková specifika patří mj. tendence k individualismu a konzervatismu, jež jsou kulturně-historicky podmíněny a sahají až ke kořenům období kolonializace a rozmachu puritanismu. Ačkoliv došlo v průběhu staletí k významným změnám a k posunu od původní vize o Americe coby „Novém Jeruzalémě“ k její sekularizaci, z níž se mj. zrodil i onen pověstný „americký sen“, novoanglická vesnice si uchovala svou nezaměnitelnou tvář. Přesvědčili jsme se, že ve Frostově díle je vyobrazení novoanglické vesnice ve shodě s reálnými poměry oné doby. Básníkovy verše navíc vykazují přesah a pronikavý pohled do budoucnosti, jež není vesnickému regionu zvláště příznivě nakloněna. Farmy a usedlosti coby tradiční prvky novoanglické vesnice, pro něž je typické nepříliš husté rozložení, začínají se-

lhávat. Jeden člověk sám není schopen udržet chod domu. Mladí odcházejí do měst. Tradičně silný protestantismus slábne. Průmysl se přesouvá na jih, kde je levnější pracovní síla. Produkci farem a vesnic válcují továrny a industriální molochy z jiných regionů. Vesnický život rezaví a spolu se stárnoucí generací ztrácí své zvyky a tradice. Debord ve své monografii ostře kritizuje kult konzumu a materialismus západní společnosti, který potírá bytí a nahrazuje jej máním, což vede k nepřímo žitému životu a k reprezentaci života namísto života samotného. Debord tvrdí, že rozdíl mezi městem a venkovem, jenž v dřívějších dobách vedl k vzájemnému obohacení, nyní vyústil v jejich úplné odloučení a ke vzniku toho, co Debord nazývá *pseudovenkovem*. Klasická opozice mezi městem a venkovem je tak setřena; jak město, tak venkov se stávají prázdnými pojmy a namísto obou pokrývá zemi polo-urbanistická tkáň. Toto vše je ve shodě s Frostovým dílem, kde jsou patrné obavy o budoucnost novoanglického kraje. Možnosti technologie a moderního života prokazují kraji medvědí službu. Frost dále satirizuje právě moderního člověka zavřeného ve své buňce ve městě, které je přelidněno, a ačkoliv je na světě dost místa pro všechny, „pro tebe a pro mě je vesmír trochu těsný“ (*CPP*, 247). Zatímco na vesnici jsou lidé ve své samotě spolu, ve městě jsou spolu a přece je každý sám a tvoří tak osamocené hloučky osamělých. Na rozdíl od Deborda ovšem Frost ukazuje konkrétní cestu a dává naději. Namísto konfrontace s městem a moderním životem volí cestu z vesnice do divočiny. A zde je patrný další charakteristický rys Frostova díla. Tak jako básník vertikálně osciluje mezi lidským nitrem a vesmírem, horizontálně osciluje mezi vesnicí, městem a přírodou. Prvně zmíněné pro něj představuje kompromis mezi společností a samotou. A jestliže město reprezentuje totální přítomnost člověka, příroda nabízí naopak totální absenci člověka a humanismu. Vydává-li se Frost za vesnici, míří do lesa a opuštěných plání. Zvláště v zimním období za hlubokých nocí, kdy les je zaplněný tmou a sněhem a zmrzlé pole skýtá pohled do nicoty, čelí Frost silám, které stojí v opozici s lidským rodem a životem celkově. Pohled na nekonečné pláně a ohromující prázdnotu Frosta fascinuje a zároveň pro něj představuje obrovské pokušení. Pozdrží-li se příliš dlouho a vystaví-li se příliš na odiv oněm přírodním silám, riskuje zánik a smrt. Okamžik, kdy se rozhodne dostát svým slibům a vrátit se k lidské společnosti, je proto velkým triumfem lidské vůle a ducha nad živly zániku, které od samého počátku stojí proti životu a principu bytí.

Kapitola třetí zkoumá podstatu a účel práce ve Frostově díle. Do novoanglických vesnic proniká současně s urbanismem i velký převrat v pracovním životě vesničanů. Zejména mašinérie a postupná leč nevyhnutelná mechanizace pracovních postupů spolu s industrializací ohrožují tradiční řemesla. Přímo tak narušují nejzákladnější principy vesnické komunity, které se zakládají právě na znalosti a udržování těchto zavedených tradicích a s jejichž zánikem přicházejí vesničané nejen o pracovní příležitosti, ale i schopnost dorozumět se navzájem. Toto vede, jak je ukázáno později, k

nedorozuměním i tragickým událostem. Práce je pro Frosta modelem pro poezii a častou inspirací. Dále pak v básníkově díle pracovat znamená používat nástroje a náčiní. Zabývali jsme se analýzou využití náčiní ve Frostově díle. Z básní je patrné ztotožnění osoby vykonávající práci a vypravěče. Zde se Frost opět liší od romantiků, např. od Williama Wordswortha, jenž zaujímá stanovisko pozorovatele zvenčí. Frost je však aktivním účastníkem práce, jíž je povětšinou míněna těžká fyzická dřina. Z mnoha nástrojů zmiňme např. lopatu, se kterou musí muž vykopat hrob pro své zemřelé děcko. Dále pak žebřík, který umožňuje natrhat plody ze stromů, ale zároveň poukazuje na pošetilost úvah o dosažení nebeské výše. Tyto úvahy jsou podrobněji rozvedeny v básni 'Břízy' a dokládají Frostovo hluboké přesvědčení, že člověk je doma na zemi a těžko tomu bude někdy jinak. Z hlíny vychází a do ní se vrací a vlastně neexistuje důvod k úvahám, které by člověku připisovaly jiné zaslíbené místo než zde. Zajímavým náčiním jsou dále sekery. Básník dlouze líčí franko-amerického usedlíka, kanadského emigranta, jenž je mistrem řemesla ve vyrábění topůrek. Pohrdá sériově vyráběnými topůrky, avšak mimoděk tak prozrazuje svůj strach. Je zřejmé, že nemůže obstát v nerovném boji s mechanizovanou konkurencí. Báseň 'Topůrko sekery' také naznačuje, že sekera je nástrojem, jenž může sjednocovat, nebo naopak rozdělovat – obrazně i doslova. V kontextu novoanglických vesnic lze tuto báseň rovněž číst jako svědectví asimilace kanadských emigrantů. Další z Frostových básní 'Pryč, pryč—', jedna z jeho nejtemnějších básní vůbec, ukazuje, že nástroje mají svou vůli, resp. že ač by si lidská vůle přála podrobit si mnoho z jejího okolí, není to možné. Mladý hoch, vykonávající mužskou práci s dětským srdcem, řeže dřevo na cirkulárce. Že nástroj není prodloužením lidské ruky, se dozvídáme velmi rychle a báseň končí chlapcovou smrtí, bez sebemenšího náznaku patosu, jenž by jen ztížil vstřebání již tak dost těžké rány. Méně pochmurným závěrem končí báseň, ve které básník v opuštěné stodole nachází dětský koutek s omšelými hračkami, potlačuje slzu při pomyšlení na to, „jak málo dokázalo děti učinit šťastnými“ (*CPP*, 342), a posléze objevuje číši, která vyvolává záměrnou představu o Svatém Grálu. Číše je však rozbitá a nelze se z ní napít. Lze si takový úkon jen představit, ponořit se do vzpomínek a na chvíli si odpočinout od oblouzení. Není to mnoho, ale kdo žádá více, nemůže dosáhnout opravdového štěstí a moudrosti.

Poslední kapitola zkoumá vesnickou komunitu, mezilidské vztahy a komunikaci v básníkově díle. Začali jsme sledováním rysů příznačných pro novoanglickou vesnici. Mezi specifika daného regionu patří sice úchvatná příroda a nezaměnitelné ráz krajiny, na stranu druhou je však život ve zdejším regionu velmi náročný. Předpokládá silně vyvinutý Emersonovský princip *self-reliance*, neboli spolehnutí se na sebe sama, a také individualismus. Pro osoby chatrného zdraví, slabého ducha a mdlé mysli je život v Nové Anglii extrémně náročný, leckdy až tragicky krutý. Pro nejednoho čtenáře Frosta pak bude překvapením, že např. Vermont, předobraz mnoha idylických výjevů v jeho

básních, je ve skutečnosti regionem s velmi vysokým počtem sebevražd. Tak jako Frost na své cestě na sever od Bostonu nenachází ve vesnici ráj, není ani místní komunita ideálním společenstvím. Lyrické ztvárnění života farmářů dává tušit, že jejich existence a společné soužití je všechno, jen ne harmonickým úkazem. Stejně tak jako Debord kritizuje novodobý venkov a nazývá jej *pseudovenkovem*, můžeme hovořit o *pseudokomunitě*, která tento *pseudovenkov* obývá. V této *pseudokomunitě* jsou výrazně narušeny vztahy, dochází k mezigeneračnímu odstupu a houfnému odchodu mladých do měst. Opačným směrem míří lidé z měst, pořizují si v Nové Anglii letní sídla a celkově roste zájem o tento region. Stává se středem pozornosti turistického ruchu, který ovšem nevede k ničemu jinému než k *banalizaci* fenoménu Nové Anglie, jak plyne z Debordových teoretických úvah. Především je však v komunitě narušena komunikace. Jak podotýká Justin Quinn, při konfrontaci přírodních sil v pustých pláních básník čelí stavu totální absence komunikace. Jakýkoliv pokus o sebevyjádření by se ihned ztratil v záplavě samoty a v bělobě sněhu. Quinn pak dochází k závěru, že básník předkládá strach z vlastního zániku a obavy ze světa prostého komunikace (*Lectures on American Literature*, 182). V komunitě je pak komunikace ovlivněna příchodem nových technologií – telegrafu a telefonu. Debord varuje před těmito typy instantních komunikačních prostředků a předpovídá, že se lidský kontakt na těchto stane závislým a spolu s tím ubude přirozené, přímé komunikace. Technické možnosti nových komunikačních prostředků bourají hranice prostorové i časové, což vyústilo v dnešní úroveň technologie, jež je schopna v praxi spojit kohokoliv s kýmkoliv kdekoliv. Jestliže technologie obohacují formální možnosti komunikace, stejnou měrou jí také ubírají po stránce obsahové. V práci jsou rozebírány básně, které poukazují na nedostatky těchto výrazových prostředků. Mezi ně patří náchylnost k nedorozumění, omezená kapacita pro přenos informace a nepoměr mezi kvantitou a kvalitou přenášených informací. Toto vše neomylně vede ke spekulacím a zejména pak k častému dilematu, které se prolíná napříč celým Frostovým dílem, totiž otázka nejen „co je řečeno“, ale „jak je to míněno.“ Konečně, komunikace ve Frostově díle slouží jako nástroj ke sdělování pravdy. Narážíme přitom na problém, co pravdou je a jak pravdu vyjádřit. Náročné podmínky života v Nové Anglii tlačí k ekonomickému vyjadřování a setkáváme se s problémem, jak zredukovat pravdu na fakta, s čímž souvisí otázka, zda-li může vůbec být pravda na fakta redukována. Dostáváme se tak zároveň k odpovědi na básníkovu rozpolcenost, která jej svírá mezi dvěma extrémními póly, a sice mezi představou a skutečností. Podobně jako pár očí tvoří zrak, právě oba tyto póly skrze nás konvergují a utvářejí naší subjektivní realitu.

V práci jsme postupovali po trajektorii vedoucí z vnějšku, tedy z kontextu Frostova díla, přes prostorové vymezení v rámci jeho díla, tj. prvků vesnice a přírody, dále pak přes filozofii práce a leckdy symbolickému užití pracovních nástrojů, až do vnitřku, do samého srdce Frostovy poezie, ke

komunitě a mezilidským vztahům. Ačkoliv je básníkovo dílo zobrazením krajiny a ducha Nové Anglie, v celé své šíři i hloubce tyto přesahuje a zdá se být univerzálním cestopisem člověka zde na zemi, od prvního nádechu k poslednímu výdechu. Frostova poezie je vlastně současně úchvatná a úděsná. Úděsná v tom, že je v ní smrt a příliš mnoho nenávratných ztrát. A je úchvatná, neboť je plná krás a života. Jak praví Debord, společenská nepřítomnost života významně souvisí se společenskou nepřítomností smrti. Právě nepatetickým a smířeným přijetím zániku a smrti jako naprosto přirozené součásti koloběhu věcí vdechuje Frost svým básním život a propůjčuje jim nadčasovost. Život v nich bude na věky plynout dál, tak jako vždy plynul.

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