

### **The World Speaks: Frost's Emblematic Imagination**

Robert Frost's very name evokes the milieu in which his poems live and breathe: chilly New England snow versed and traversed by a lone traveler stopping by woods, wood-piles, barns, tufts of flowers, birches, brooks, nests, walls, graveyards, woodchucks – the innumerable country things in and through which Frost's poetic imagination probes the meditation of nature and the nature of meditation. Far more complex than simple nature poetry, Frost's poetic project is in line with a meditative tradition in American poetry harkening back to the seventeenth-century poetic practice of meditating upon the book of nature and thereby disclosing the spiritual values implicit in the physical world. The American meditative tradition in poetry – running through Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Williams, and onwards; and in the large and small collective movements of symbolism, imagism, and modernism itself – seeks spiritual insight in a world where the direct path to spiritual certainty has turned into a hall of mirrors: poetic meditation in modernity must grope vertiginously in a vortex of oppositions confronting the mind at every turn – inner-outer, spiritual-physical, mind-matter, self-other, culture-nature, to name but a few (the post-modern attempt to deconstruct these dialectical oppositions by which the western mind thinks had yet to occur, though much modernist poetry anticipated this deconstructionist move). Somewhere between the Romantic attempt to merge with nature and the modern scientific effort to master it, poets of the meditative tradition involve themselves in examining the spiritual matrices of the human encounter with the natural world. The poetry of Robert Frost explicitly dramatizes this encounter; in the process, Frost appropriates various strands of the meditative tradition of which he is a part.

Frost's best poetry contains an elusive complexity that combines the spiritual import of Emersonian transcendentalism with the faithfulness to the physical world (the natural image or

object) that began with Thoreau and became doctrine for the Imagist poets. Samuel Coale, paraphrasing M. H. Abrams, sums up this quality of Frost's poetry: "[For Frost] ...the illuminated phenomenal object... is as opaque as the image of the Imagists and yet as significant of something beyond itself, although not transparently so, as the symbol of the Symbolists" (6). If for Williams there are "no ideas but in things," Frost's poetic aesthetic is even more straightforward: the thing *is* the idea. However, in much of Frost's poetry the search for the quiddity of a natural object occurs simultaneously with a subtle examination of the interior movements of the mind as it carries out the search; perception and reflection-on-perception occur in one and the same act poetically rendered as a precise description of the natural world. Yet unlike Romantics such as Wordsworth, who often sees a direct correspondence between mind and world (so that world gradually melts into mind/imagination), Frost maintains a separateness that makes an ecstatic mind-world union impossible. Indeed, Frost's poetry suggests that it is in the moments of encountering the physical world as insurmountably other that the human self recognizes its own reality and involvement in a world saturated with hints of a larger spiritual order. Frost thus prefers immanent mystery to explanatory transcendentalism, embodied spirit to spiritual abstraction.

The trope by which Frost himself explains what his poetry is doing is that of emblemism: "Symbolism is all too likely to clog up and kill a poem – symbolism can be as bad as an embolism. If my poetry has to have a name, I'd prefer to call it Emblemism – it's the viable emblem of things I'm after" (quoted in Coale, 5). For Frost the movement of the human mind in its unavoidable encounter with the facts of nature inheres in the natural object when it is poetically examined not symbolically but emblematically – as a worldly incarnation of mystery rather than a sign (or type) pointing to a mystery housed in another ontological realm. A close

reading of a particular Frost poem – treating the poem itself as an emblem – increases the possibility of getting a handle on these slippery propositions concerning Frost’s poetic art.

Frost’s “The Most of It” overtly dramatizes the human encounter with the natural world as a medium through which the human being attempts to uncover the mystery of self, world, and how the two fit (or do not fit) together in a larger whole. The first four lines reveal the “he” of the poem attempting a dialogue with the universe that turns into a monologue indicative of the solipsism characteristic of the Romantic approach to encountering the outside world. The *abab* rhyme scheme of these four lines helps create in the sound of the language the “mocking echo” of which the lines speak: “He thought he kept the universe alone; / For all the voice in answer he could wake / Was but the mocking echo of his own / From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.” As the following four lines make clear, this Romantic approach to self-world dialogue is unsatisfying because nothing is ultimately learned about either the voice of the world or one’s own voice (to stay with the metaphor): “Some morning from the boulder-broken beach / He would cry out on life, that what it wants / Is not its own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response” (significantly this end rhyme of the eighth line, “response,” is a change to a feminine two-syllable rhyme from the masculine “wants,” the end rhyme of the sixth line – by departing slightly from the rhyme scheme of the first four lines, the prosody of the poem itself offers an “original response” at this juncture; notice also the enjambment between the sixth and seventh lines that increases the intensity of what life “wants”). This crying out from the “boulder-broken beach” of modernity, the condemnation of the Romantic effort to overcome the anxiety of the human encounter with the natural world, brings about a complex epiphanic phenomenon with which the rest of the poem deals:

And nothing ever came of what he cried / Unless it was the embodiment that crashed / In the cliff’s talus on the other side, / And then in the far distant water splashed, / But after a

time allowed for it to swim, / Instead of proving human when it neared / And someone else additional to him, / As a great buck it powerfully appeared, / Pushing the crumpled water up ahead, / And landed pouring like a waterfall, / And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread, / And forced the underbrush – and that was all.

In an unexpected, seemingly unlooked-for response to the human agent in the poem, the world offers up an embodiment that crashes, splashes, swims, stumbles, and forces its way into human consciousness. This embodiment “... crashed / In the cliff’s talus on the other side...” The cliff, formerly “tree-hidden” and issuing forth mocking echoes, now is seen to be covered with rock debris (talus) in which the mysterious embodiment crashes (“talus” also means “the slope of the face of a work,” which evokes the slant of the book-mountain in Frost’s “Time Out”); does the emblematic imagination require a sloping, slanted vision?). The unseen mystery of the world which the Romantic voice filled up and thus obscured with its megalomania births a captivating emblem when the human encounter with nature assumes an “original response.” The captivating emblem is in this case a great buck, and Frost’s descriptive language moves to the figurative to allow the buck “powerfully” to appear in the poem: “And landed pouring like a waterfall...” With this analogy Frost’s description merges with the action, *is* the action of the poem: this is the emblematic mode, meditation as perception and perception as meditation. And when the buck stumbles through the rocks and forces the underbrush, “and that was all,” the reader feels that this is indeed “the most of it.”

As an emblem of what comes out of the human encounter with the natural world, the great buck possesses a mystery at once captivating and unsettling. Did the buck come in response to the human entreaty, the crying out? Or did the buck appear due to a rare confluence of human and non-human epiphanies? Is the buck concerned with his human interlocutor (does he even notice the human?), and if so, is this a hostile or benign interest? Another way of asking these questions is: what relationship does the “he” of the poem have with the buck, an

embodiment that as a poetic image captures all of the pulse, movement, and spectacle of the natural world?

Frost does not answer these questions any more than does the buck, for the great buck is himself an enigmatic/emblematic answer that allows the above questions (and others) to be asked, to be felt, rather than sidestepped and avoided in Romanticism or over-eager transcendentalism. Frost's emblematic imagination, his own manner of stopping in the field of American meditative poetry, urges above all an openness to the epiphanic mode – especially the non-human forms of epiphany that embody the mystery of human being-in-the-world. Furthermore, Frost has rendered this emblematic epiphany through a complex prosody that creates in the reader a meditative state that functions in the same manner as “reverie” in the conception of the philosopher of imagination Gaston Bachelard: “...through reverie, we can discover within a word the act which names” (Bachelard, 48). Frost's poetry ultimately allows the meditative reader to intuit the mystery involved in the “act which names,” an intuition that requires listening for the echoes of the more-than-human word as it sounds forth in the language of original response to the natural world. The poetic meditative voice and the natural emblem (can the two be separated?) give witness to a felt spiritual reality that only appears in impressionistic snatches.

## Work Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics of Reverie. Boston: Beacon, 1971.

Coale, Samuel. "The Emblematic Encounter of Robert Frost." Frost: Centennial Essays. Ed. Committee on the Frost Centennial of the University of Southern Mississippi (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1974. 89-107).