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Robert Frost's
"Second-Highest Heaven"

by DARREL ABEL

Since earth is earth, perhaps, not heaven (as yet)—

ONE OF Robert Frost's distinctions as a philosophical poet is that he dealt resourcefully with the predicament of modern man uttered poignantly by Pascal: how to give value to man's existence when he has lost his conviction of having a dignified place in an absolute cosmic order. Pascal confessed himself "terrified" at "the blindness and misery of man" in "the whole silent world, . . . without light, abandoned to himself, lost, as it were, in this corner of the universe, without knowing who has placed him there, for what purpose." "When I consider the short duration of my life, an eternity that stretches behind and before, and the little space which I fill and even see, engulfed in the immensity of spaces I know not and which know not me, I am frightened and astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then." Pascal was appalled by the sense of not knowing where he was in a system of universal order. He felt that there was "infinite distance between body and mind," and his mind felt lost in a world that, in the seventeenth century, when astronomy threatened to batter God out of his throne, suddenly appeared to be all immense body and empty space. "The eternal silence of the infinite spaces appalls me," Pascal wrote.

Pascal's terror is the existential anxiety of modern man. In a world that has lost faith in the Absolute, Cartesian self-consciousness fears annihilation in "vortices." Descartes and Leibniz derived the concept of vortices from ancient philosophy. In his Paris Notes, published in 1676, Leibniz described the concept of mind surrounded by a vortex: "Every mind is of unbounded duration. Every mind also is implanted indissolubly in matter. This matter is of definite magnitude. Every mind has a vortex around it." To Leibniz, God, being perfect mind, was both Absolute center and circumference. "There seems to be a certain center to the whole universe, and an infinite general vortex, and a most perfect mind, or God. And this mind is a whole in the whole body of the world; to it is due also the existence of the world. It is itself its own cause."
The "geode" universe of Frost's poem "All Revelation," in which "A head thrusts in as for the view," and in which "Eyes seeking the response of eyes / Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers," makes of surrounding reality a "strange apparition of the mind." Nevertheless, this is not a solipsistic world (Frost denies that he is a solipsist in "For Once, Then, Something"), for it requires what William James called "a reality ejective to the mind," what Emerson in Nature called a "Not-Me." It is a reduction of the vortical world of Leibniz and Descartes by the elimination of "perfect mind," so that only individual minds remain.

This is the culmination of a trend that developed in American literature throughout the nineteenth century. Emerson like Pascal was impressed by the situation of man in being unable to see out far or in deep. In "Experience" he wrote, "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight." But Emerson still held to a firm conviction of a Leibnizian "Absolute center" in "the whole body of the world"; and his "self-trust" enabled him to occupy that center, to "sit at home with the cause." Therefore, he wrote in "Self-Reliance," a true or self-reliant man is "the centre of things." His essay "Circles" begins: "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere."

Thoreau's conviction of an Absolute center is more tenuous than Augustine's or Leibniz's or Emerson's, although he frequently asserted that an individual mind is the center of a vortex of perception. He wrote in his journal: "I am always struck by the centrality of the observer's position. He always stands fronting the middle of the arch."

The universe is a sphere whose centre is wherever there is intelligence. The sun is not so central as a man. Upon an isolated hilltop, in an open country, we seem to ourselves to be standing upon the boss of an immense shield. . . . Let us wander where we will, the universe is built round about us, and we are central still. If we look into the heavens they are concave, and if we were to look into a gulf as bottomless, it would be concave also. The sky is curved downward to the earth, because we stand on the plain.3


4. For discussion of differences between Emerson's idealistic premises and Frost's existential premises, and the consequences to Frost's poetry, see my essay "Emerson's 'Apparition of God' and Frost's 'Apparition of the Mind,' " in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, XLVIII (October 1978), 41-52.

Whitman, too, frequently and almost compulsively used such conceptions of mind and vortex, but like Thoreau and unlike Emerson, emphasized the vastness of the surrounding more than its God-centered wholeness. Thus, in "To the Man-of-War-Bird," he speaks of "Myself a speck, a point on the world's floating vast"; in "Sparkles from the Wheel," the group of children he describes as intent upon and giving momentary envisagement to one event or Whiteheadian "prehension" of reality are "an unminded point set in a vast surrounding." Perhaps his most familiar figure for this concept is the "noiseless, patient spider" standing isolated on a little promontory, "surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space," launching filament after filament out of itself, "seeking the spheres to connect them." But it was Melville who, characteristically, pushed this apprehension of mind, increasingly uncertain that the surrounding vastness had an Absolute center, to its extreme of disorientation. The fear of Ishmael, in the chapter "The Mast Head" in *Moby-Dick*, that he will lose his identity in "Descartian vortices" is an explicit statement of modern existential anxiety.

Twentieth-century man feels lost in the infinite spaces because, while he still retains the consciousness of individual mind surrounded by definite vortex, he has lost belief in Leibniz's perfect mind that is a whole in the whole body of the world. Perhaps the only possible accommodation of existentialism to faith in some kind of Absolute is that propounded by Paul Tillich:

> Ever since the opening of the universe by modern science, and the reduction of the great earth to a small planet in an ocean of heavenly bodies, man has felt real vertigo in relation to infinite space. He has felt as though he had been pushed out of the center of the universe into an insignificant corner of it, and has asked anxiously—what about the high destiny claimed by man in past ages? . . . What remains, in our present view of reality, of the importance of the earth and the glory of man? . . .

> These questions are not merely theoretical. They are critical to every man's understanding of himself as a human being placed upon this star, in an unimaginably vast universe of stars. And they are disturbing not only to people who feel grasped by the Christian message, but also to those who reject it but who share with Christianity a belief in the meaning of history and the ultimate significance of human life.

> Because Tillich felt "grasped by the Christian message," he was able to identify his "ultimate concern" with a divine "ground of being": "The center of our being, the innermost self that is the ground of our aloneness, is elevated to the divine center and taken into it. Therein we can rest without losing ourselves."

Frost was unable to find such a "divine center" in any of his numerous poems which deal with the theme of man's lostness in space. "The Star-Splitter" tells of a New England farmer who

> burned his house down for the fire insurance
> And spent the proceeds on a telescope

To satisfy a lifelong curiosity
About our place among the infinities.

After long looking at the stars, the farmer and his friend the poet-narrator found them as indifferent to man as the stars in the poem "Stars," as "wholly taciturn" as the star in "Take Something Like a Star." The only additional knowledge the telescope gave was that it would "split" a star into two or three—that is, would separate star-clusters.

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are?

If Frost cannot attain Tillich's rest in a divine center, there is nevertheless a difference of tone between his sense of being lost in the universe and Pascal's. Pascal is terrified; Frost, merely curious. Modern man has grown accustomed to cosmic lostness, and has managed a self-possession to take the place of the God-possession he once relied on. Frost once wrote to Louis Untermeyer:

[I] am not so dispiriting a spirit
As to believe a people must be lost
Who don't know where they are.

Job no doubt speaks for Frost, in A Masque of Reason, when he suspects that God's "obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing," and tells God:

We don't know where we are and who we are.
We don't know one another; don't know you;
Don't know what time it is. We don't know, don't we?
Who says we don't? Who got up these misgivings?
Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with.
I mean we seem to know enough to act on.

The pragmatic sufficiency of knowing enough to act on is developed in one of Frost's last poems, "A Cabin in the Clearing." A dialogue between Mist (the "guardian wraith" of mankind's "garden ground"—his social happiness) and Smoke (the spirit of mankind's "starlit smoke"—his aspiration toward the absolute), the poem defines man's "where" existentially. Men are sleepers in a house in a temporary clearing in nature, where they have pushed the woods back to provide space for a house and a path. Mist and Smoke agree that these people don't know where they are; the path is maintained merely "for the comfort of visiting with the equally bewildered." Nevertheless, Smoke "will not have their happiness despaired of," nor will Mist "give them up for lost merely because they don't know where they are." Mist and Smoke between them canvass all the futile ways men have of trying to find out where they are: asking the aborigines, asking the philosophers, seeking truth through "accumulated fact"—that is, anthropology, philosophy, and science. "They will ask anyone there is to ask." But no one can tell them.
The difficulty is that man is "too sudden to be credible."

Although the focus of the problem has shifted from locating man in a cosmic order to defining him as an existential who, ultimately the two terms of man's lostness are the same for Frost as for Pascal, who found himself suspended between "two abysses of infinity and nothingness," a spot of self-consciousness in an "infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." If either the whatness of man or his whereness in the universe can be known as absolute, man's problem of self-identification is solved. If man can know where he is in the universe, he can know what he is; or if he can know what he is, he can order his surroundings in relation to his own being, and thus know where he is.

Twentieth-century man, having grown accustomed to the eternal silence of the infinite spaces, no longer tries to find meaning for his existence by asking where God is, but asks what man is. But the problem of locating or realizing mind in space remains the same. In "The Lesson for Today," Frost wrote,

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Space ails us moderns: we are sick of space.
Its contemplation makes us out as small
As a brief epidemic of microbes.
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The only difference between the badness of modern times and the badness of the "dark ages" (both of which share a sense of woeful belittlement into "vilest worms") is, he says, a difference of figure:

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We both are the belittled human race,
One as compared with God and one with space.
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Therefore, the lesson for today is "how to be unhappy yet polite."

The empty spaces which Frost confronts as a modern man are no longer those of the macrocosm which appalled Pascal, but of the microcosm man. He has abandoned the search for God's Truth, and must find and assert his own trueness. In the poem "Desert Places," the poet, looking around at a blank lonely winter world "with no expression, nothing to express," declares himself unaffrighted by the silence round him:

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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.
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ALTHOUGH what man can see is "scarce enough to call a view," as Frost wrote in "In the Home Stretch," "we know well enough to go ahead with," as Job tells God in A Masque of Reason. While Frost, like Henri Bergson and William James, relinquished as futile the search into beginnings and endings, declaring that "there are only middles," and denied the possibility of attaining knowledge of the All, he equally rejected the notion of nihility or meaninglessness in the universe.

Bergson wrote that "to deny always consists in setting aside a possible affirmation. Negation is only an attitude taken by the mind toward an eventual affirmation." Consequently, if we "analyse this idea of Nothing, we find that it is, at bottom the idea of Everything." "The idea of the nought," he said, "is a pseudo-idea" for the terms "disorder" and "nothingness" really designate "a presence—the presence of a thing or an order which does not interest us." He said that "every human action has its starting point in a dissatisfaction, and thereby in a feeling of absence." That is, something the mind wants does not yet exist, although its possibility exists: "we seek a thing because we feel the lack of it. Our action thus proceeds from 'nothing' to 'something,' and its very essence is to embroider 'something' on the canvas of 'nothing' " (CE, p. 297).

William James, like Bergson, supposed that our idea of nothing is really an idea of something in a form that doesn't interest us, for "we at every moment continue to believe in an existing beyond" (p. 213). "Better face the enemy than the eternal Void!" (p. 329). But James stopped short of saying as Bergson did that the absence of an order that interests us is only the presence of some other order. He said that "there is really no inherent order, but it is we who project order into the world by selecting objects and tracing relations so as to gratify our intellectual interests. We carve out order by leaving the disorderly parts out." This approximates Bergson's saying, "The bodies we perceive are, so to speak, cut out of the stuff of nature by our perception" (p. 485).

Frost, like Bergson and James, postulated material or "stuff" on which mind imposes meaningful form. "A Never Naught Song," in the group of poems entitled "Cluster of Faith" in In the Clearing, begins

There was never naught,
There was always thought.

"Poetry is the place where wildness lives"; and "I thank the Lord for
crudeity, which is rawness, which is raw material, which is the part of life not yet worked up into form, or at least not worked all the way up.”

“There is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form.” “The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?”

A poem which immediately follows “A Never Naught Song” in In the Clearing, called “Version,” makes the same point in the figure of a divine “Archer” who shot an arrow “On a New Departure”:

... The game He hunted
Was the non-existence,
And His shaft got blunted
On its non-resistance.

But this “version” is really an ironic inversion: the blunting of the shaft shows that Frost’s realities are thought—intelligent will—and resistant matter. But the initial presence of matter for mind to develop by “force of thought” is liable to go unnoticed, for

... this gist of all
Is so infra-small
As to blind our eyes
To its every guise
And so render nil
The whole Yggdrasil.

III

“I owe more to Emerson than anyone else for troubled thoughts about freedom,” Frost said. And he offered his definition of freedom: “freedom is nothing but departure—setting forth—leaving things behind, brave origination of the courage to be new.” “Freedom is one jump ahead of formal laws” (SP, p. 115).

There are ambiguities in both terms of the expression “freedom of action” so often extolled by pragmatists. “Whatever acts is free insofar as it acts,” according to Leibniz, but he meant by this only that any movement unimpeded by external hindrance is free. “The essence of body consists in motion,” he said, and if it can move, it is “free.”

This is a conception with which even Jonathan Edwards could have agreed; but it does not give the scope to praxis which pragmatists insist upon. The considerations it omits are: first, freedom in the sense of

13. Philosophical Papers, I, 229, 323.
recognized alternatives of action, and, second, power in the agent to control his own disposition toward a particular determination—rather than mere obedience to what Emerson called "an irresistible dictation" directing him. Emerson qualified this, however, by declaring that man "is himself the creator in the finite."

Although the Leibnizian definition of freedom would have satisfied neither Emerson nor Frost, Emerson would have objected only to the first exclusion, the elimination of alternative possibilities of action, and he would have expected these to exist only in the details of realizing a general providential design. Whatever freedom of origination Emerson conceded to human agency was not primary, and it had to do only with the complexion and not with the character of realizations.

Frost, however, although he did not believe in an unchartered liberty, meant by his "brave origination of the courage to be new" something larger than Emerson's freedom. He agreed with Bergson's premise that "consciousness seems proportionate to the living being's power of choice. It lights up the zone of potentialities that surrounds the act. It fills the interval between what is done and what might be done" (CE, p. 179).

With regard to the question of determinism, there are three possible positions: utter chaos, total determinacy, or partial determinacy. Frost distinguished three states or degrees of order in materials: a "far out" and "in deep" state of "black and utter chaos"; "shading away" into this a "background" of "hugeness and confusion" (SP, p. 107) intermediate between the human position and chaos, in which man discerns possibilities of form—an inchoate realm; and the "realms" Frost claimed for his own, "realms of democracy and realms of the spirit," within which the poet, as "sensibilitist, and otherwise an environmentalist," can realize things by imagination—project "against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration" (SP, p. 107).

This explains Frost's repeated assertion that he was "not a Platonist." Empirical thinkers consistently reject what William James called the supposition of "the tender-minded party" that "reality stands complete and ready-made from all eternity" that "the world we find ourselves born into" is backed "by 'another and better' world" (p. 459). James called this supposition perversive abstraction-worship. "Empiricist philosophy," he said, "renounces the pretension to an all inclusive vision" (p. 253). That is to say, the empirical position simply reverses the direction of order in the world: order does not descend from on high to grace human perception, but rather springs from man's

15. For a comprehensive discussion of this matter, see my essay "Frost's 'True Make-Believe,' " Texas Studies in Literature and Language, XX, 552-578.
imagination and extends outward through the background of hugeness and confusion as far as it can penetrate into black and utter chaos. The Jamesian rejection of an eternal ready-made world is confirmed by Bergson: Creative evolution, he said, "transcends finality, if we understand by finality the realization of an idea conceived or conceivable in advance" (CE, p. 224). Such an ideal world, either existent or prefigured, would for empiricists be not only incredible, but undesirable. James said, "Freedom in a world already perfect could only mean freedom to be worse, and who could be so insane as to wish that?" (p. 403). Such considerations explain Frost's often-declared preference for "unfinished business" and his pragmatic prayer: "Let me be the one / To do what is done."

"I'm very much in favor of unfinished business,"'17 Frost said. By this he meant that, although he did not consider the world a chaos, neither did he take it to be a kosmos. Although, in regard to order, chaos and kosmos are opposite terms, in two respects important to empiricists they are alike: they both assume reality external to the mind, and neither provides conditions in which human imagination can "make a difference." There could be no action in the highest heaven or kosmos. The only option would be to say yea or nay to the absolute. This would not be a choice of affirmations, since only one affirmation would be possible, and the only alternative would be not-doing or not-being. Since any significant choice is choice among possible affirmations, the highest heaven would deprive one of freedom as much as nihility itself. As William James said, "regarded as a stable finality, every outward good becomes a mere weariness to the flesh" (p. 601). Likewise, chaos would be void of alternatives of choice; for it would present no distinctly indicated concatenations of possibility for human preference to consider, select among, and realize.

The condition intermediate between chaos and kosmos which gives human intelligence work to do explains Emerson's paradox in "Fate": "Freedom is necessary." Frost wrote of one of the essays in Emerson's Representative Men: "In the essay on the mystic Swedenborg says that in the highest heaven nothing is arrived at by dispute. Everybody votes in heaven but everybody votes the same way, as in Russia today. It is only in the second-highest heaven that things get parliamentary; we get the two-party system or the hydra-headed, as in France" (SP, p. 112). Frost thought that "whatever great thinkers may say against the earth, I notice that no one is anxious to leave it for either Heaven or Hell. Heaven may be better than Heil as reported, but it is not as good as earth."'18 The reason it is not as good as earth is that it is a place of inertia, stasis, which does not exercise man's imagination and creative energy. "Earth's the right place for love."

In "The American Scholar" Emerson wrote, "As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it." William James said, "The world has shown itself, to a great extent, plastic to this demand of ours for rationality" (p. 588). "The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands" (p. 456). James postulated "a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities uncontrollable in advance" (p. 269). Bergson wrote, "Before the evolution of life . . . the portals remain wide open" (CE, pp. 104-105). For Frost, too, what he called in "Kitty Hawk" nature's "vague design" is not predetermined in detail.

The significant question is, to what extent is the world "plastic"? The realm to which pragmatists direct most attention is the intermediate "background of hugeness and confusion" against which man makes his figures "of order and concentration." Frost's acknowledgment of a debt to Emerson for "troubled thoughts about freedom" meant a limited freedom confronted by partial determination—such ideas as he found, not so much in Emerson's overconfident assertiveness in "Self-Reliance" as in the essays "Experience" and "Fate." In "Fate" Emerson recognized "an irresistible dictation" which we must obey as "Fate, or the laws of the world." "The book of Nature is the book of Fate." "The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation."

Modern empiricists likewise recognize "limitation." James said, "There are innumerable paths of practical continuity among things. Lines of influence can be traced by which they hang together" (p. 407). "The future movements of the stars or the facts of past history are determined now once and for all, whether I like them or not" (p. 337). But the limitation recognized by pragmatists is significantly different from that recognized by idealists: it is not the "irresistible dictation" of "some god" as it was for Emerson, but only a degree of immalleability and consistency in nature, and an accommodation to historically enacted reality that pragmatists must negotiate with—the movements of the stars and the facts of past history. These provide "resisting factors in every actual experience of truthmaking, of which the new-made special truth must take account, and with which it perforce has to 'agree' " (p. 451). "[T]he world resists some lines of attack on our part and opens herself to others, so that we must go with the grain of her willingness" (p. 449).

Bergson likewise remarked that, in cutting bodies out of "the stuff of nature" by perception, "the scissors follow, in some way, the marking of lines along which action might be taken" (CE, p. 12). "[T]he impetus of life . . . cannot create absolutely, because it is confronted with matter, that is to say with the movement that is the inverse of its own. But it seizes upon this matter, which is necessity itself, and strives to
introduce into it the largest possible amount of indetermination and liberty” (CE, p. 265).

IV

Frost's "second-highest heaven" is such a world of indetermination confined by necessity. He said, "I'm more interested in the liberties I take than in the big thing you call freedom or liberty: the little liberties socially, in poetry, art, and little trespasses and excesses and things like that."19 His poetry continually dwells on what he describes in "Kitty Hawk" as the human disposition to "trespass and encroach on successive spheres." "The big thing you call freedom or liberty" would be as disabling a condition to the pragmatist as a "ready-made world," for realizations would be as impossible in a world where human imagination had everything to do as in a world where it had nothing to do.

What is assumed, then, by the pragmatist is a world in which there is something to do and something that is already done and must be heeded; and an energy in man which can originate designs which will incorporate and fulfill human ideas with regard to the "unfinished" reality. Man does not work with the black and utter chaos of material, but with the inchoate intermediate realm, which, as fast as he fixes his designs upon it encroaches further upon the black and utter chaos, "trespasses" on "successive spheres." William James postulated "a world of additive constitution" "eternally incomplete, and at all times subject to addition or liable to loss" (p. 418), a world "growing piecemeal by the contributions of its several parts" (p. 468). Bergson supposed a world in which something has grown, something has developed by a series of additions which have been so many creations." Bergson explained this growth as "an uninterrupted continuity of unforeseeable novelty" (CM, p. 39). James too affirmed additions of novelty: "Free-will pragmatically means novelties in the world, the right to expect that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past" (p. 403). Frost develops the same theme in calling attention to mankind's "ever breaking newness" in "The Courage to Be New."

Emerson, having defined Nature as "Fate, or the laws of the world" which constitute "limitation," then pointed to its positive corollary: "Nature is what you may do." "Fate has its lord; limitation has its limits. . . . For though Fate is immense, so is Power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits Power, Power attends and antagonizes Fate. . . . Man is not an order of nature, . . . nor any ignominious baggage; but a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the universe." "We are sure

that, though we know not how, necessity does comport with liberty, the individual with the world, my polarity with the spirit of the times." It is man as "a stupendous antagonism" that states the pragmatism in Emerson that was so attractive to James and Frost. Emerson wrote, "A man's power is hooped in by a necessity which, by many experiments, he touches on every side until he learns its arc." By such experiments man has learned that "where was power was not devil, but was God: that it must be availed of." Thought "can make weapons and wings of these passions and retarding forces," and "every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us is convertible by the intellect into wholesome force." Man's "sound relation to these facts is to use and command, not to cringe to them." If "limitation is power that shall be, if calamities, oppositions, and weights are wings and means,—we are reconciled." In "Nature" Emerson wrote, "[T]his feeble human being has penetrated the vast masses of nature with an informing soul"; and in "The American Scholar" he declared that "the one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul."

William James, who said, "We learn all our possibilities by way of experience" (p. 685), echoed Emerson's opinion that we learn the limits natural necessity sets to our powers by many experiments; and he doubtless had such passages as these in mind when he praised Emerson for "the faultless tact with which he kept his safe limits while he so dauntlessly asserted himself within them." James said, "The matchless eloquence with which Emerson proclaimed the sovereignty of the living individual electrified and emancipated his generation, and this bugleblast will doubtless be regarded by future generations as the soul of his message" (p. 583).

Learning the arc of necessity by many experiments in which one tries his powers against nature's resistances is pragmatism. James said, "Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to make ourselves and grow, are the parts of the world to which we are closest, the parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete" (p. 467). "Being grows under all sorts of resistances in this world of the many, and, from compromise to compromise, only gets organized gradually into what may be called secondarily rational shape" (p. 468). He said that "in this actual world of ours, as it is given, a part at least of the activity comes with definite direction; it comes with desire and sense of goal; it comes complicated with resistances which it overcomes or succumbs to, and with the efforts which the feeling of resistance so often provokes; and it is in complex experiences like these that the notions of distinct agents, and of passivity as opposed to activity arise. Here also the notion of causal efficacy comes to birth" (p. 467).

As Frost wrote in "At Woodward's Gardens," "It's knowing what to do with things that counts." Man accomplishes his designs by both using and opposing nature, but what he understands of nature is only a
small part of her reality. Even the parts he finds useful have unnoticed and unappreciated aspects, like the unapprehended unused aspects of the star built into a wall in “A Star in a Stone-Boat.” Frost thought that “prudential, non-utilitarian respect is our safest, most rewarding attitude toward what we cannot understand.” But what we can understand and make serve our designs gives us our freedoms. How “little” these are compared to the unimaginable full possibilities of nature as “what you may do” are indicated in “A Star in a Stone-Boat.”

Even though a star should fall from the celestial blue into the local green—that is, should fall from its position within the mere reach of speculation to tangibility within the range of human action—its starry nature would remain unknown to man and unconvertible to earthly uses. It would, however, have some earthly use. A farmer might deal with it as a stone, load it roughly on a stone-boat with an iron bar, and build it into a wall. But a star’s use is not a stone’s use, and the poet is disturbed by imagination of the “wrong” done to stars when used only for “building stone.”

Whether, as in “At Woodward’s Gardens,” it is the monkey using the burning-glass for something less than man designed it for, or whether it is the farmer using the fallen star in his wall for something less than God or Nature designed it for, “it’s knowing what to do with things that counts”—knowing, that is, how to use them in one’s own designs. Bergson says that “every living being, perhaps every organ, every tissue of a living being generalizes, . . . since it knows how to gather, in the environment in which it lies, from the most widely differing substances and objects the parts or elements which can satisfy this or that one of its needs” (CM, p. 62). Although man may not understand what part some piece of reality plays in the cosmic order, he can fit it so to speak into his own ever-enlarging but ever-disintegrating designs—in effect, borrow it for his temporary use, although it inevitably goes on playing its part in a larger, more elemental order of reality.

Lisbon Falls, Maine