

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 17
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1981

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Darrel Abel

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 17, no.4, December 1981, p.201-210

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"Unfriendly Nature" in the Poetry of Robert Frost

by DARREL ABEL

Great Pan is dead.

Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum*

All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms are not equal to the lowest mind; for the latter knows them all and itself, whereas they know nothing.

Pascal, *Pensées*

[W]e have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman. . . . This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. . . . Man was not made to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of. . . . There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. . . . Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*

As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.

Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. / A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irre-

ducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. / [T]his mind and this world straining against each other without being able to embrace each other.

Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

*He would cry out on life that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried.*

Frost, "The Most of It"

ROBERT FROST once said that nature is "infinitely unfriendly" to man.¹ He meant by this that nature acts according to its own principles without regard to human purposes. He had no belief in "Nature's holy plan," no conviction that nature linked his human soul to her fair works. He did not "lie in the lap of immense intelligence" with Emerson or "in Abraham's bosom all the year" with Wordsworth's children of nature. Neither, however, did he agree with Matthew Arnold's assertion, in "In Harmony With Nature," that "Nature is cruel." Both terms of the phrase "infinitely unfriendly" are precise. Nature is not *hostile* to man, for hostility would imply in nature a consciousness of specifically human concerns. But nature does not oppose man's purposes; it simply enacts its own tendencies: it is *not friendly* to man. Its unfriendliness is infinite, for it extends through all the circumstances that environ man. It is true as much of the creature neighbors of man, such as the phoebes in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," whose song sounds "as if" they sympathize with human desires and sorrows, as it is of the remote stars in the early poem "Stars," that look down "as if with keenness for our fate."

The unfriendliness of nature is a theme of Frost's early poem "The Demiurge." The "I" of this poem, running on the trail of the Demon "far in the sameness of the wood"—that is, in undifferentiated terrestrial nature—although he "knew what [he] hunted was no true god," was suddenly and mortifyingly "checked" by the mocking laugh of the Demon, the laugh of "one who utterly couldn't care."

Despite the check which they get when they look for friendly response from nature, human beings persistently wish for sympathetic intelligence in their surroundings and hopefully construe ambiguities that may be taken for signs of it. This is the theme of "Two Look at Two," a complex poem that represents mountains as the home of wildness. The human "Two" 's ascent of the mountain is a figure for the advance of man into nature to the point where human nature encounters something alien and "unfriendly." The two lovers climbing the mountain are halted by darkness coming on, by the roughness and unsafeness of the

1. Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 62. Hereafter referred to as Mertins.

path, and by the obstruction of "a tumbled wall with barbed-wire binding." These physical hindrances which halt them, although "love and forgetting might have carried them a little further up the mountainside" if they had not met such obstruction, are really more significant as figures for the spiritual limits of man's incursion into nature than as physical restraints. It is at this boundary that they encounter what must be understood as the embodiment of the spirit or intelligence of nature, "across the wall as near the wall as they." The doe and antlered buck who gaze at them with apparent curiosity have approached as near to *their* limit on the wild side as the lovers on the human side. The doe looks at the lovers from "round a spruce": "She saw them in their field, they her in hers." The poet imagines what effort of comprehension is in the mind of the doe:

The difficulty of seeing what stood still,
Like some up-ended boulder split in two,
Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.

The poet suggests an effort of comprehension and sympathy reciprocated: "Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from." Still, the separation marked by the wall is finally an impassable one. The human lovers are exhilarated by the sense of nature's sympathy, but their experience has furnished them, after all, only an *as if*,² a figure for expressing their wish, not a confirmation:

"This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

The lovers' sense that earth returned their love is not evidence of "counter-love, original response," but only the wave of their affection for each other projected; so it seems to them a wave of sympathy from beyond the wall that divides the human from the animal. One needs to be versed in country things not to believe that nature sympathizes with man.

When a solitary human being looks at a solitary brute creature there is less seeming of the earth's returning human love, for there is then no "wave" of affection between a human two that can be projected as cordiality among nature's people. When the poet "kept the universe alone" in "The Most of It," he got a more dusty answer to his cry for sympathy:

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.

2. "The extravagance lies in 'it sometimes seems as if.' . . . Or it says, 'if you only knew.'"—*Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 449. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry and Prose*. "All virtue in an 'as if.'"—*Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Collier, 1968), p. 114. Hereafter referred to as *Selected Prose*.

“Nothing ever came of what he cried” except a mocking manifestation of nature’s brutal indifference: the “embodiment” that caused a distant splashing across the lake proved to be only a great buck, powerfully breasting the water, which

landed, pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

It was the conviction of his loneliness in an unfriendly universe that furnished the substance of Frost’s “nature” poetry. He objected to being classed as a “nature poet.” “I’m not a nature poet. There’s always something else in my poetry.”³ “All but a very few have a person in them.”⁴ “Men are the important factors to remember. They are the soil which brings forth the fruit” (*Poetry and Prose*, p. 293). “There must be a human foreground to supplement this background of nature” (*Interviews*, p. 34).

Frost’s poem “Lucretius Versus the Lake Poets” questions whether to Epicurus and Lucretius nature was merely “Pretty Scenery.” He endorses the opinion he attributes to them that nature means “the Whole Goddam Machinery.” That is, he takes nature to be an absolute system, not merely a spume that plays upon a ghostly paradigm of things, as it is taken to be by “Platonists” from whom he consistently dissociated himself.⁵ He shared Lucretius’ idea of nature as an everlasting flux, and added to it the Bergsonian idea that human beings exist and define themselves by resistance to “the stream of everything that runs away,” by “staying.”⁶

Water, the immemorial symbol of life, figures in Frost’s poetry as “immortal force” operating in nature within man’s range of action, which can be channeled to accomplish human purposes or can overwhelm by its exuberance. The poet’s invitation to his readers to join him in “going out to clean the pasture spring” in “The Pasture,” which he settled on as epigraph to his collected verse, is invitation to join him in a return to the fountains, a rite of purification. It is a “spring” poem in

3. *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 26. Hereafter referred to as *Interviews*.

4. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 26.

5. “I am not a Platonist. . . . By Platonist I mean one who believes what we have here is an imperfect copy of what is in Heaven.”—*Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 462. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*. “I’m more of an Aristotelian. I think there’s probably nothing ‘up there’ but a stockpile of nature observations that came from earth.”—Sergeant, p. 309. For extended discussion of this matter see my essay “Two Philosophical Poets: Frost, Emerson, and Pragmatism,” *ESQ*, XXV (3rd Quarter 1979), 121–125.

6. *Stay* is a significant word in Frost’s lexicon. He defined a poem as “a stay against confusion” (*Selected Prose*, p. 18). An address delivered at Dartmouth College in his eightieth year was published under the title “Don’t get converted. Stay.” He considered it a merit in a poet to accept his native conditions and to stay with them: he praised Robinson Jeffers because he “stayed on in the west and succeeded” (Mertins, p. 261). The poem “The Investment” opens with a line naming the trait of hardy endurance that Frost admired most of all his “New England things”: “Over back where they speak of life as staying.” “An Empty Threat” begins with the abrupt declaration: “I stay.”

two ways, referring to both the source of life and the season of renewal. Such poems as "Mowing" assert a similar joy in simple things, in the mere sensation of returning life after a subsidence into grief and morbid thought. Another poem in *A Boy's Will*, "Going for Water," which tells of the journey of married lovers to a brook in the fields when their domestic well has run dry, is a symbolic visit of renewal to the source of life.

The most appropriate figure for the source is some high mountain pass like those in "The Times Table" and "Directive," where water is "as yet so near its source" that it is "too lofty and original to rage," and has not been controlled to serve human use. When it flows down into men's clearings in nature, and is tamed to minister to human worths and designs, men may even forget that it is an immortal force that can overwhelm.

Although men may baffle such force for a time, or cover it over and ignore it, they cannot finally annihilate it or dispense with it. "A Brook in the City" alludes to three conditions of men's dealing with this immortal force, represented by wild nature, the farm, and the city. Its roll-rock rush through wild nature is the most unrestrained of its three appearances. Its tranquil channeled flow among farms always prompts awareness that men live on the edge of wildness and that human order is continually being contested by nature, which will ultimately resume its ineluctable process in the fields that men have cleared. But in the city men have succeeded in hiding the brook and covering up all appearance of wildness, so they may act as if nature has been obliterated. Just as the farm retains traces of wild nature, so does the city retain traces of the humanized country of farms: in the city "the farm-house lingers," although its appearance is at odds with the urban scene; the meadow, however, is "cemented down" "under pavements"; the apple-trees have been cut down and burned in household fires; but the brook, "an immortal force," cannot be either civilized or destroyed. Men can kill the living things that water creates, can burn the apple-trees, and cement pavement over the grass, but they cannot kill the brooks that give life to trees and grass and men; they can only cover them up.

The brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run—

The poet asks a deeply ironic question:

How else dispose of an immortal force
No longer needed?

Although "no-one would know except from ancient maps" that such a brook still exists and runs in the old channel, and although it no longer glideth at its own sweet will, its immortal force is as irrepressible as the

ooze of oil. Like Hawthorne's Indian spring in "A Rill from the Town-Pump," it may be covered over as a disguised feature of human arrangements, but it is still recognizable by the imagination of the poet, who is reminded by it, as much as by encroaching woods, a loose mountain, or a lowering storm, that nature will not abate its ancient brutal claim. The poet tests the brook's force before it enters the "fetid darkness" of the city sewer by making it leap his knuckle, and tries its "impulse" by tossing a flower into its current. He suggests that, if men forget such an immortal force and take their artificial human arrangements for enduring realities that efface it, it will gather to a greatness and overwhelm them:

I wonder
If from its being kept forever under
The thoughts may not have reason that so keep
The new-built city from both work and sleep.

Where human life is densest and most artificial, immortal force is most likely to be lost sight of and to become a hidden threat rather than an open strength to men. But a failure of nature's immortal force would be more fatal to man than any overwhelming by it; drought is more to be feared than flood. Therefore Frost says, in "Two Tramps in Mud-time," "Be glad of water"; in "In Time of Cloudburst," "Let the downpour roil and toil"; and in "The Wind and the Rain," "Give me water heavy on the head." The Lone Striker, in the poem of that title, turns away from the town and factory, where his life is dictated by convention and machinery, to return to a place in nature—to trees whose "breathing mingled with his breathing," to "a path that wanted walking," and to "a spring that wanted drinking"; that is, to the immortal source of life such as the spring in "Directive," where one might "drink and be whole again beyond confusion."

Just as Frost's immortal force is regularly figured in his poetry as a stream descending from a height, so is the resistant element through which it works its way, what he called "the rock part of creation" (*Letters*, p. 244), regularly figured as mountain or rock mass. The opening image of the poem "The Mountain" establishes a topography in which The Mountain that represents this part of nature is the central fact in the horizon. Although men have been able to cultivate fields at the foot of the mountain, it overshadows the distant town and cuts off the sight of stars in the west. This town (township) has "no village—only scattered farms," a chance-met farmer explains. The farmer has "worked around the foot" of the mountain all his life but has never climbed it, for he recognizes that what he would find at the summit could have no commodity in the Emersonian sense for him, commodity being all that a farmer looks for in nature—and it's knowing what to do with things that counts. The farmer is at a loss to know how he could deal with nature unamenable to such terms:

“What would I do? Go in my overalls,
 With a big stick, the same as when the cows
 Haven’t come down to the bars at milking time?
 Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
 ’Twouldn’t seem real to climb for climbing it.”

The summit of the mountain therefore remains semi-mythic to the farmer. And the myth is enhanced by the report of an original and lofty spring, “almost like a fountain,” right on the top. Also, there is perhaps in the practical farmer’s disposition to find reasons *not* to climb the mountain a hint of some need to respect a mystery, a “Yarrow Unvisited” sentiment:

We have a vision of our own:
 Ah, why should we undo it?

For Frost’s mountain is essential Mountain, not a particular mountain. He said of it, “That wasn’t one, but several mountains” (Mertins, p. 72). A rocky mountaintop represented to Frost the very home of wildness, from which streams flow, boulders fracture and tumble down, to be pulverized gradually into friable soil. The mountaintop is difficult of access to man, and growth there is scanty and slow. The top of the mountain is a place of origins, the primeval quarry of man and human things and all that’s comfortable to our mortalities. In “Directive” the pilgrim who climbs the mountain is returning to all his origins, going up a road “that should have been a quarry” to drink from a brook “cold as a spring as yet so near its source.”

The rock part of creation is the elemental stage of a process by which nature is gradually reduced here and there to serve human commodity. A passage of “The Gum-Gatherer” summarizes this process:

He came from higher up in the pass
 Where the grist of the new-beginning brooks
 Is blocks split off from the mountain-mass—
 And hopeless grist enough it looks
 Ever to grind to soil for grass.⁷

The poem “In Time of Cloudburst” suggests that there is a further stage in the process from mountain-mass to “soil fine as flour.” Each downpour carries some garden soil a little nearer the sea, so the water that makes things grow also exacts “for a present gain a little of future harm,” until “all that was rotted rich shall be in the end scoured poor.” Then, however,

Some force has but to apply,
 And summits shall be immersed,

7. Cf.: “The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, . . . with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth.”—Thoreau, *The Illustrated Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 62.

The bottom of seas raised dry—
The slope of the earth reversed.

Then all I need is to run
To the other end of the slope,
And on tracts new laid to the sun,
Begin all over to hope.

Man must “want life to go on living,” as Frost says in “The Census-Taker,” and “nature altogether . . . must be a little more in favor of man,” as he says in “Our Hold on the Planet.” The cooperation of the two wills makes human life possible. This is a somewhat more hopeful view of the human foothold in the natural scheme than is described in the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Job, which Frost apparently had in mind:

And surely the mountain falling cometh to naught, and the rock is removed out of his place.

The waters wear away the stones; thou wastest away the things which grow *out* of the dust of the earth; and thou destroyest the hope of man.

Thou prevailest forever against him, and he passeth; thou changest his countenance, and sendest him away.

Mountainous New England with its rocky farms and headlong brooks was to Frost the quarry of New England character. There, among the boulders of New England pastures, he had a sense of being nearer to origins than he could be in the fertile fields of Iowa, where the farmer tends to forget the rock part of creation and the lofty and original source of life, hence to forget his origins and thus in a sense to lose connection. The poet offers to send stones from his rocky New England pasture “where the boulders lie as touching as a basket full of eggs” to his midwestern farmer friend,

out where you live
In wind-soil to a depth of thirty feet,
And every acre good enough to eat,
As fine as flour put through a baker’s sieve.

Such a gift would be a reminder of the farmer’s origins, for his midwestern farm is a part of the country’s process of “realizing westward” from New England’s rock-ribbed hills. The poet offers to

ship a smooth one you could slap and chafe,
And set up like a statue in your yard,
An eolith palladium to guard
The west and keep the old tradition safe.⁸

Such a palladium would remind the midwestern farmer of his ancestry.

8. The eolith as memorial of man’s ancient origins also appears in “To an Ancient”:

Coming on such an ancient human trace
Seems as expressive of the human race
As meeting someone living face to face.

He could answer any "quizzical inquiry" about it with the statement that the eolith is

'The portrait of the soul of my grandsir Ira,
It came from where he came from anyway.'

The meaning of this is that such a process of realizing westward is not an abandonment of "trueness," of "staying"—it is rather merely a process of extending the trueness of a tradition by "encroaching on successive spheres." "Staying" might mean fixity of location, but it need not be geographical stationariness, only "stubborn clinging to meaning." "Thoreau was the chief advocate since the Old Testament of making the most of the home town and township. Make of the stones of the place a pillow for your head if you hope to see angels ascending and descending. The opposite doctrine is to desert your country because you do not seem to be accepted in it as a prophet" (*Interviews*, p. 143). But it is also possible for persons realizing westward to carry with them their trueness if they take pains to "keep the old tradition safe."

Although the rock part of creation is commodious to man only by dint of human tenacity, the Mountain's very obduracy and resistance to the erosion of forces working on it is finally man's security. It guarantees immortal material just as the lofty and original source guarantees immortal force.

However much the Mountain looms before man as the obdurate element not entirely subduable to human designs, Frost does not take it for the ultimate reality. The immortal force of "the stream of everything that runs away" is a grander reality than the mountain-mass that overshadows the town. Frost disagrees with the opinion reported in the opening lines of "Too Anxious for Rivers":

Look down the long valley and there stands a mountain
That someone has said is the end of the world.

He counters this supposition of the mountain as the end of the world with the query:

Then what of this river that having arisen
Must find where to pour itself into and empty?

The long valley is man's vista of earthly reality; what he sees at the end of it marks merely the range of his vision, not the ultimate bound of possibility.

The poet's confidence that the mountain is not the end of the world, and that the stream of life can more and more penetrate matter and carry it along to organization, is such that in some of his poems, most notably in "Kitty Hawk," there is a tone of cockiness. This tone is also

9. The Thoreau passage evidently alludes to Jacob's dream at Luz, described in the 28th chapter of Genesis.

pronounced in the poem "A Loose Mountain." The loose mountain descried through a telescope appears to be an even greater threat to human enterprise than the terrestrial Mountain, for it is not merely obstructive and obdurate but impends as a massive missile apparently aimed by some apprehensive and angry power in "the heartless and enormous Outer Black" which resents man's continual encroachments on what Poe would have called "the kingdom of inorganization."

The poem remarks that the annual star shower "known as Leonid" is

No doubt directed at our heads as rebels
In having taken artificial light
Against the ancient sovereignty of night.

And the poet takes it as a cosmic "hint"

That the loose mountain lately seen to glint
In sunlight near us in momentous swing
Is something in a Balearic sling
The heartless and enormous Outer Black
Is still withholding in the Zodiac
But from irresolution in his back
About when best to have us in our orbit,
So we won't simply take it and absorb it.

In "Kitty Hawk" the poet says,

Poets know a lot,
Never did I fail
Of an answer back
To the zodiac
When in heartless chorus
Aries and Taurus,
Gemini and Cancer
Mocked me for an answer.

His answer to the threat from the Zodiac in "A Loose Mountain" is to assert, as a hyperbolic expression of "the limitless trait in the hearts of men," "That to no limits and bounds can he stay confined" ("There Are Roughly Zones").

Of course the poet concedes that not even the terrestrial Mountain can be entirely reduced to soil as fine as flour, much less can the Outer Black be subdued to human designs. But he is cocky enough to maintain a "stand-off"; to suggest that man's intelligent enterprise is successful enough to induce respect for his capacity to "take it and absorb it," and to insure that he will keep his "strongholds" in unfriendly nature.

Lisbon Falls, Maine