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"Against and With" in Robert Frost's Poetry

by DARREL ABEL

"LIFE ALWAYS sways perilously at the confluence of opposing forces,"¹ Robert Frost said. "Everything has its opposite to furnish it opposition" (*Letters*, 105). This principle of oppositions enables, even compels, man to make choices instead of yielding willy-nilly to "the drift of things."

Nature within her inmost self divides
To trouble men with having to take sides.

This couplet, entitled "From Iron: Tools and Weapons," was prompted by consideration of a lump of iron at the United Nations Building, which stirred reminiscence of the swords-to-plowshares paradox. He said, "That lump of iron is the basis of both tools and weapons. I'm on the weapons side."²

Actually Frost was on both sides. What he prized was the principle of opposition *per se*, not a strict adherence to either term. "I contain opposites," he said; "I can hold a lot."³ "As to the conflicts of our age, I *am* the conflicts, I contain them."⁴ He valued differences more than agreements, for differences resulted in oppositions. "Every time . . . I hear of the extinction of another breed of bird fish or animal in our day I get scared about our differences. We'll probably end up all one breed one world and one word. . . . Our last differences are disappearing in saccharine agreement."⁵

The importance of opposition to Frost was that it aroused will and creative energy. "The beauty of life. . . lies in struggle and change and taking tough decisions" (*Interviews*, 177). "The lovely shall be choosers." Antagonisms are necessary; if there were nothing adverse, there would be nothing for the will to encounter. "I'm on the side of adversity" (*Interviews*, 156). Typically, then, his poems are not expositions of situations developed from a single point of view but are posings of dilemmas,

1. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 467. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

2. Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 360. Hereafter referred to as Mertins.

3. *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 271. Hereafter referred to as *Interviews*.

4. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial By Existence* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 406.

5. *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 345. Hereafter referred to as Untermeyer.

disagreements, misunderstandings, conflicts, and sometimes “standoffs.” “We ought to enjoy a standoff” (*Interviews*, 177). “Do you know what the sun does with the planets? It holds them off and holds them off. The planets don’t fall away from the sun, and they don’t fall into it. That’s one of the marvels: attraction and repulsion. You have that with poetry and you have that with friendships” (*Interviews*, 245).

Such standoffs gave the poet opportunity not furnished by “saccharine agreement.” “I should hate to get stuck in the golden mean” (*Letters*, 503). “Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament: a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.”⁶ He wrote a fellow poet, Kimball Flaccus, “You wish the world better than it is, more poetical. You are that kind of poet. I would rate as the other kind. I wouldn’t give a cent to see the world, the United States or even New York made better. I want them left just as they are for me to make poetical on paper. I don’t ask anything done to them that I don’t do to them myself” (*Letters*, 369).

It is this prizing of the principle of oppositions that accounts for the “frostiness” some moralistic critics object to in Frost’s attitudes toward such concerns as war and mercy. “I shouldn’t like war if it were incompatible with poetry as some seem to think it is incompatible with Christianity” (*Letters*, 186). He was complacent about war because “There’s something indestructible in us that will save us from annihilation. . . . These annihilative tendencies in mankind are all apt to bump into and counteract one another” (Mertins, 303). He called mercy “illogical kindness.”⁷ “Take Justice and Mercy. . . . They are like the two hands that, by first tightening and then loosening the double string between them, make the tin buzzer buzz like a little buzz saw” (*Poetry and Prose*, 360). Frost meant his poetical buzzers to buzz.

The doubling principle, the tendency of nature within her inmost self to divide, so essential to Frost’s poetry, may have been clarified for him by two of his acknowledged philosophical mentors, William James and Henri Bergson.⁸ Bergson stressed what he called “the original doubling of the modes of life.”⁹ James described matter, “the original world-stuff,” as “the presence of resisting factors.”¹⁰ It is a “plenum,” but this “One is not an existence, but the father of existences” (James, 259). Where we encounter reality, it is divided into manyness, and it is “a vain attempt to

6. *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p. 25. Hereafter referred to as *Prose*.

7. *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 392. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry and Prose*.

8. For discussion of the influence of James and Bergson on Frost’s thinking, see Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetry and the Landscapes of Self* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1975); John F. Sears, “William James, Henri Bergson, and the Poetics of Robert Frost,” *New England Quarterly*, 48 (Sept. 1975), 241–61; and Darrel Abel, “Two Philosophical Poets: Frost, Emerson, and Pragmatism,” *ESQ*, 25 (3rd Quarter, 1979), 119–36.

9. *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911), p. 119. Hereafter referred to as *Bergson*.

10. *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 451. Hereafter referred to as *James*.

reconvert the manifold into which our conception has resolved things, back into the continuum out of which it came" (James, 249). Bergson said, "Matter divides actually what was potentially manifold, and in this sense individuation is in part the work of matter, in part the result of life's own inclination" (Bergson, 272).

Frost's poem "A Never Naught Song" is apparently a poetic redaction of this idea:

Matter was begun –
And in fact complete,
One and yet discrete
To conflict and pair.

James said that "everything is in an environment, a surrounding world of other things, and . . . if you leave it to work there it will inevitably meet with friction and opposition from its neighbors" (p. 514). Bergson said that the progressive organization of matter "admits of much discord, because each species, each individual even, retains only a certain impetus from the universal vital impulsion and tends to use this energy in its own interest" (pp. 50–51). Thus "Nature sets living beings at discord with one another" (pp. 254–55).

In observing this discord and strife of interests, some persons are more impressed by conflict, others by compromise. James said, "Some men will keep insisting on the reason, the atonement, that lies in the heart of things, and that we can act *with*; others, on the opacity of the brute fact that we must react against" (p. 333). Frost combined both attitudes when he said that "as to the conflicts of our age, I *am* the conflicts, I contain them." "In this consists adaptation," according to Bergson (p. 51).

Like Bergson, Frost saw in the conflict and compromise of different interests a partially yielding and partially resistant process of adaptation. He told C. Day Lewis that many of his poems answered "something somebody had left me dissatisfied with—some argument—maybe a year after the argument" (Mertins, 344; Lathem, 174). He often made such statements about his poems, but he did not mean that he answered arguments with counterarguments. He meant that he set his own "trueness" *against* some other opposing trueness to achieve a "standoff." He said that all his poems were "adaptations that I've made. . . . They are not arguments. I've never contradicted anybody. My object in life has been to hold my own *with* whatever's going—not *against* but *with*—to hold my own" (*Poetry and Prose*, 420–21).

What Frost meant by his distinction of adaptations from arguments, by endeavoring to hold his own "*with* whatever's going—not *against* but *with*—," is perfectly figured in his poem "The Grindstone." There are not just two, but three, terms in any relationship: the two beings with their opposed positions and purposes and the object or event that is the ground of a possible common interest, although the opponents differ in what they "invest" and perhaps in their intentions. The object or event that is the

ground of their meeting would not be humanly interesting unless these vectors of intelligent energy and will encountered there.

Having a wheel and four legs of its own
Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone
To get it anywhere that I can see.

What gives it importance is that

One summer day, all day I drove it hard,
And someone mounted on it rode it hard,
And he and I between us ground a blade.

There is an apparent opposition of wills deployed in managing the grindstone:

He turned on will-power to increase the load
And slow me down—and I abruptly slowed.
.....
I wondered who it was the man thought ground—
The one who held the blade back or the one
Who gave his life to keep it going round?

But the apparent opposition is subsumed in the larger agreement of result—the sharpening of the blade between them. “Men work together,” not against each other, in the long view.

The poem “Mending Wall” gives further treatment to the theme. Walls and fences in Frost’s poetry define the progressive divisions within nature by which individual existences identify themselves by “staying” and “standing off” opposed existences. Walls and fences divide human beings from each other but unite them in maintaining their artificial constructions, what Frost called their “strongholds,” against nature’s continual dilapidations. Frost’s poems are full of boundary images suggesting his respect for divisions and “definiteness of position.” “I’m in favor of reserve and withholdings. I’m in favor of individuals with some age on their time apart” (Untermeyer, 223). But he was also in favor of community: “I like all this uncertainty we live in, between being members and being individuals.” “That’s the daily problem: how much am I a member; how much am I an individual; how comfortable am I in my memberships?” (*Interviews*, 213).

In “Mending Wall” the primary opposition signified by the wall, a construction derived from the “rock principle” in nature, annually thrown down by nature’s “immortal force,”¹¹ is between the human design expressed in building and rebuilding the wall and nature’s frozen ground swell that repeatedly throws down some parts of it: between the “something” in nature that the poet might call “elves” and all human agents, whether hunters, farmers, or horticulturists.

The energy in nature that man endeavors to resist or control was often

11. For the quoted terms, see *Letters*, p. 244, and the poem “A Brook in the City.”

alluded to by Frost as a scarcely definable "something." Sometimes this something is simply ambiguous and elusive: the "something" whispered by the scythe in "Mowing," a message with meaning that "I knew not well myself"; the "something" tantalizingly glimpsed in "For Once, Then, Something"; the questioned "something brushed against my mind" in "A Passing Glimpse."

At other times it is a wild force in nature. This can have a sinister character, as the "something or someone" watching persons in the poem "The Bonfire" that "made that gust" which caused the fire to flare up suddenly out of control. Or this wild force can have a comic manifestation, as the "something" that "inspires" the "Cow in Apple Time" to scorn pasture grass, jump the fence, and bellow "on a knoll against the sky." This "something" that bursts through normal limits has the aspect of threat to apprehensive humans who have an interest that seems opposed to its activity. Then it is the "some pallid thing" of which the snowdrift squashed flat against the windows in "Snow" is a presentment. It is the "something" that waves threaten to do to the shore in "Once By the Pacific," and the "something in a Balearic sling" that is "no doubt directed at our heads as rebels" by the "enormous Outer Black" in "A Loose Mountain." This threat may have the appearance of taunt to the human who faces it with pathetic fallacy. Such is the "something" pursued among the leaves in "The Demiurge's Laugh," and the "something" in the mountain's ironical smile upon the human beings whose clearing it briefly tolerates in "The Birthplace."

But principally it is the unchecked energy in nature that man must try to understand and direct toward fulfilment of his purposes: the "something sending up the sun" in "West-running Brook"; the "something" that promises perpetual renewal of life to patient folk who look "away ahead" in "Something for Hope"; the "something" that the poet wishes may "go always unharvested" in "Unharvested."

A characteristic treatment of this something is the repeated reference to "something that doesn't love a wall" in the opening poem of *North of Boston*, "Mending Wall." This something is the immortal force of nature that bursts through restraints and flows forth in various forms in spring—or, as Frost elsewhere wrote, in order to get the kinetic force of the gerund, in "the springing of the year." The wall defines human neighbors to each other, defines their common humanity as against other living creatures (rabbits and dogs), and brings out their need of cooperation as well as their disagreements. "First I want to be a person. And I want you to be a person, and then we can be as interpersonal as we please" (*Prose*, 45).

Frost's view of the epistemology of different minds meeting on a common ground is that set forth by William James in "A World of Pure Experience." "Practically," James wrote, "our minds meet in a world of objects which they share in common" (p. 210). And "whatever differing

contents our minds may eventually share a place with, the place itself is a numerically identical content of the two minds, a piece of common property in which, through which, and over which they join" (p. 212). "Mending Wall" illustrates this. The wall that the neighbors meet to rebuild each spring is a place in the world of objects where their minds meet and to a minimal but important extent agree—a place which would continue to exist in the world of objects even if the perceiving minds were absent.

But, although "our minds thus meet in a world of objects which they share in common," James goes on to remark that our minds do *not* "terminate at or in a numerically identical percept," for we see the objects in the place where our minds meet "in different perspectives" (p. 211). The two neighbors in "Mending Wall" see beyond the wall different sets of background realities that give different meanings to the wall they are building together. "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." Furthermore, the different perspectives resolve into "the mere notion of imperceptibles," so that "our knowledge is only speciously completed, being, in theoretic strictness, only a virtual knowledge of those remoter objects which conception carries out" (p. 211). The apple-tree man in the poem is aware of "remoter objects" of conception, and thus aware that his knowledge is only "speciously completed" at the wall that separates him from and unites him with his neighbor; but the pine-tree neighbor is content with the knowledge that terminates in his percept. If the apple-tree poet is to communicate to his neighbor any of the larger content of his conception, he must do it through the modicum of their shared perception of the wall. The poet's neighbor stands for his possible audience, and the wall is an emblem of the perceptual space where he meets their minds, which is both a barrier, and, paradoxically, the poet's only means of communicating his larger knowledge. But the unimaginative pine-tree neighbor is one of those persons who, as Thoreau said, "think that if . . . stone walls are piled up on our farms, bounds are henceforth set to our lives and our fates are decided." The pine-tree man, as he hoists a stone, "looks like an old-stone savage armed," and the resemblance is not visual only: "He will not go behind his father's saying."

The poet tries to get him to go behind his father's saying, for the poet imagines something that their wall building excludes. To him, the wall doesn't merely separate him from his neighbor; it puts them together in a relationship opposed to something inhuman that "doesn't love a wall":

I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself.

The something he could call elves is the demiurge that cooperates with and tolerates human designs only insofar as they coincide temporarily with its own rough imperatives, the force that Emerson in "Fate" called a "terrific

benefactor." "The shrewd eft that sits" in the poet's intelligence, and in a cruder development also in his neighbor's, enables them to adapt their human designs to each other and to the something in nature that seasonally destroys their constructions. The poet's "shrewd eft" questions the worthwhileness of reimposing a merely traditional design if no practical human worth is served thereby. "Spring is the mischief" in the poet, for it is then that the question is periodically forced:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offence.

The two minds that meet at the wall are certainly not what James called "co-conscious" over a large part of their contents. Nevertheless, interpretations of the poem are mistaken when they attend only to the differences and opposition between the neighbors, and if they argue that the point of the poem is to exhibit poetic imagination resisted by stolid traditionalism. Frost repeatedly said that he did not "take any 'character's' side in anything I write" (*Letters*, 138). When asked to explain his intention in the poem, he dodged the question, saying, "Maybe I was both fellows in the poem" (*Interviews*, 257). In an interview at Harvard in 1944, "Clarifying the meaning of 'Mending Wall,' Frost denied that he had any . . . allegory in mind other than the impossibility of drawing sharp lines and making exact distinctions between good and bad or between almost any two abstractions. There is no rigid separation between right and wrong. 'Mending Wall' simply contrasts two types of people" (*Interviews*, 112). On an earlier occasion (in 1927), he said, "[Somebody asked], 'In my Mending Wall was my intention fulfilled with the characters portrayed and the atmosphere of the place?' . . . I should be sorry if a single one of my poems stopped with either of those things—stopped anywhere in fact. My poems—I should suppose everybody's poems—are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless" (*Letters*, 344).

That is to say, the wall, which is a figure for what James called "the ultimate common barrier" between two minds, "can always be pushed . . . farther than any actual percept of either, until at last it resolves into the mere notion of imperceptibles" (James, 211). This is the intention of "Mending Wall" and of Frost's poetry generally.