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West Toward Heaven:  
The Adventure of Metaphor  
in Robert Frost's "West-running Brook"  
by FRITZ OEHLSCHLAEGER

In his fine study of Robert Frost, Richard Poirier departs notably from the critical consensus on one of Frost's most widely admired poems, "West-running Brook," calling it "over-clarified and relatively complacent." While I disagree with Poirier's judgment, I think his objection goes to a central problem in the poem's criticism, the tendency to focus on Fred's long disquisition on the "stream of everything that runs away" as if it represented the whole Frogsian truth about the flux and the counter-pressure of humanity. If accepted uncritically, Fred's speech overpowers the rest of the poem: we begin to read the early dialogue as merely a rather perfunctory warm-up to the great chestnut. A careful look at the rest of the poem, however, can reveal a set of values by which to judge Fred's monologue critically. Even with its final image of the resistant wave, that "backward motion toward the source, / Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in," Fred's position is both a partial and a temporary one that receives its necessary completion only within the dialectic of marriage that the poem establishes. Deemphasizing Fred's monologue by restoring it to its dramatic context also allows us to raise a series of new questions about the poem. What significance does the direction West itself have in the poem? What is it precisely that frees Fred from his devotion to a purely naturalistic reading of the wave to a highly metaphoric one? What is the importance of sex in the poem? How does the poem articulate a view of marriage as metaphor which subsumes Fred's metaphor of stream and resistant wave within a larger synthesis? By investigating these questions within a set of contexts provided by the three major intellectual influences on the poem—Emerson, William James, and Henri Bergson—we can see that "West-running Brook" is anything but complacent or excessively clarified and that it is indeed an even bolder statement for the value of metaphor and marriage than has previously been recognized. Indeed Frost never more nearly approaches

2. Jerry McGuire has similarly objected to the tendency of Frost's critics to focus only on Fred's speech. See his excellent, "The Discourse of the Two Cheeks: Robert Frost's Concept of 'Colloquiality,' " American Poetry, 2, No. 3, 43–44. As I do, McGuire emphasizes the need to focus on the whole drama of the poem.
ultimate confidence in metaphor and marriage: a confidence that spirit can be said in terms of flesh and that the way to spirit, to God, is through the flesh.

The beginning of “West-running Brook” places the woman in the role of poet in the Emersonian sense: she is the language-maker, the Namer:

‘Fred, where is north?’
‘North? North is there, my love.
The brook runs west.’
‘West-running Brook then call it.’
(West-running Brook men call it to this day.) (1-3)

Frost’s parenthetical interjection suggests that she does her work as poet well; she attaches her thought to a symbol that calls forth a similar expression or understanding from other human beings. Or in William James’s terms, Frost’s interjection establishes the pragmatic truth value of the wife’s symbol-making. The fact that men continue to use the symbol “West-running Brook” suggests that it answers to their experience as it does to hers. I introduce William James here not only because his general influence on Frost was major, as is well known, but because his ideas about the nature of truth and about the process by which one truth becomes exchanged for another are central to “West-running Brook.” For one aim of the poem is to reveal the process by which the “truth” that “marriages are made in heaven” becomes translated into a more complex truth that incorporates a scientific understanding of cosmic process and the human conviction that spirit has entered into, and continually renews, a covenant with flesh.

After naming the brook, the woman of the poem finds in it an analogy to her marriage:

‘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
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?’ (4-10)

We should begin by reflecting on the resonances of the direction West, traditionally associated with youth, the future, and the movement of civilization, but also with the setting sun and death. The westering myth was of great importance to Frost, as is indicated by “The Gift Outright,” with its tribute to “the land vaguely realizing itself westward” (14), and also by “Kitty Hawk,” which possesses some remarkable affinities to “West-running Brook.” In “Kitty Hawk” Frost mythologizes the Wright

brothers' flight as the representative thrust of a specifically Western consciousness:

Westerners inherit  
A design for living  
Deeper into matter—  
Not without due patter  
Of a great misgiving.  
All the science zest  
To materialize  
By on-penetration  
Into earth and skies  
(Don't forget the latter  
Is but further matter)  
Has been West Northwest.  
If it was not wise,  
Tell me why the East  
Seemingly has ceased  
From its long stagnation  
In mere meditation. (225-41)

West, then, becomes associated with the dynamic, scientific spirit that commits itself to matter in its search to create ever more inclusive orders out of the chaotic flux of existence. East, on the other hand, represents a static quality of mind that seeks to discover an order that exists prior to and independent of material existence. Frost's distinction between West and East is very much like William James's distinction between his pragmatism and traditional rationalism. Speaking of the "essential contrast" between rationalism and pragmatism, James writes, "for rationalism reality is ready made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future. On the one side the universe is absolutely secure, on the other it is still pursuing its adventures." For James, truths—always in the plural—are made things, created by human beings in an open-ended and constantly continuing process of "building out" the "sensible flux." We "plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already"; in the process we "engender truths upon the world." James's language itself recalls Frost's in "West-running Brook" and "Kitty Hawk," even to the sexual metaphors surrounding the mind's active penetration into experience.

In identifying with the brook, then, the woman of "West-running Brook" allies her husband and herself to a broad complex of meanings implicit in the direction West. Hers is a commitment to youth, the future, and the unknown, to matter and to death. The brook metaphor itself is a brilliant one with many implications. The couple of the poem are walking somewhere in New England, where the Atlantic is at most a hundred miles away. All of the other brooks in the area—though this is not liter-

ally true of New England brooks—take the definite course toward that ocean, thus finding a home, our spiritual home being always East, but at the same time losing their individual identities. West-running Brook, on the other hand, sets off into an indefinite future where the nearest ocean, at least in the mind's geography, is three thousand miles away. It thus defers both finding its home and yielding up its identity. Of course the brook cannot literally run three thousand miles westward to the Pacific (assuming for a moment that poetic brooks do actually run somewhere). But once the wife has made the brook's west-running impulse our own, we give ourselves in imagination to that long extended westering, driving deeper and deeper into the indefinite future and into matter itself.

After she establishes the contrariness of the westering brook, the wife seeks to draw her husband into a contemplation of the water's motions. In boldly Emersonian fashion, she marries both their minds to the brook:

‘We’ve said we two. Let’s change that to we three.
As you and I are married to each other,
We’ll both be married to the brook. We’ll build
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
Look, look, it’s waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me.’ (11–17)

Fred’s first response is to insist that nature does not answer to consciousness, that it has its reality quite independently of human beings. Some meaning in his wife’s words, however, gets tangled in his own speech, and his mind indulges itself in an elaborate digression where first he sees the counter-pressure of white wave against the black stream as a poetic figure:

‘Why, my dear,
That wave’s been standing off this jut of shore - - -’
(The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled
In a white scarf against the far shore alders.) (17–26)

Fred’s speech and digression deserve careful attention, for they suggest the process by which he is released from one kind of seeing to another: from the naturalistic perception of his first remarks to his wife to the fully poetic metaphor-making he engages in later in the poem when he sees the wave finally as a figure for human resistance to the flux. What has given Fred pause and spurred his digression is the wisdom encoded in the traditional expression that “marriages are made in heaven,” which becomes conflated in his mind with his wife’s marrying their minds to the brook:
Fred's pause indicates his recognition that his materialistic view of the wave is at odds with a heritage of human faith in the ultimate promise of spirit to flesh, a heritage preserved and transmitted through language and an idea of marriage. Fred's wife is in touch with that heritage. Her faith in going by contraries, her identification of their hopes with a brook that runs toward the direction of matter, the future, and death, indicates her acceptance of the promise encoded in the idea that "marriages are made in heaven." That phrase preserves something of the historic Christian sense that the marriage of man and woman is the fleshly type of the ultimate marriage of Christ and the church or of heaven and earth: the ultimate resolution of contraries. In marriage the sexual relationship that carries the race forward in history on its westering course is sanctified: that is, given the promise that it has its place within a larger pattern of human redemption. To the waters of a west-running brook in New England, marriage is the pledge that a Pacific, though distant, is someday to be found.

Here "Kitty Hawk," Frost's essay "Education by Poetry," and William James's theory of the movement of truths provide a helpful context. In "Kitty Hawk," Frost presents his own version of the centuries old idea of felix culpa, the fortunate fall:

Pulpiteers will censure  
Our instinctive venture  
Into what they call  
The material  
When we took that fall  
From the apple tree.  
But God's own descent  
Into flesh was meant  
As a demonstration  
That the supreme merit  
Lay in risking spirit  
In substantiation. (213-24)

The Incarnation, then, confirms the instinctive wisdom of humanity's fall into the material world of generation and death. Poetry, too, at its highest is an incarnation, as Frost remarks in "Education by Poetry": "It is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking, that attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter." Poetic metaphor, "West-running Brook," and marriage are all attempts to say spirit in terms of matter. They each attempt "to make the final unity," what Frost calls "the greatest attempt that ever failed."? Of course the attempt fails for any individual human being, but the formula-

tions of the attempt that humanity cherishes—belief in the Incarnation or the idea that marriages are made in heaven—give us “useful leadings” into the future. Here James’s view of the way one truth leads to another is directly relevant. For James, “Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found.” The function of truth is to help us marry previous experience to new experience with the least possible difficulty. In the poem, the truth that marriages are made in heaven provides what James calls “the ancient body of truth,” onto which Frost grafts the knowledge of the flux, of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which Fred articulates in his final speech about the “stream of everything that runs away.” The poem carries the old truth, which holds our first loyalty, into the future in a form that disturbs it and us as little as possible while bringing it into line with new facts. It is perhaps no longer possible to claim “truth” for the statement that marriages are made in heaven, but we can claim truth for the statement that marriage is a dialectic which brings together in creative interaction the westering impulse—with its drive into the material world, into flesh, individuation, generation, and death—and its “contrary,” the spiritual impulse that seeks a return to its sources, a unity with God, a transcendence of the flux.

When Fred insists—without much conviction, for the language has already forced him to the recognition that our world is one thoroughly imbued with human desire—that the wave “wasn’t waved to us,” his wife responds, somewhat enigmatically,

‘It wasn’t yet it was. If not to you
It was to me, in an annunciation.’ (30–31)

The lines are rich with suggestion and humor. The first part of her statement provides no difficulty; the wave “wasn’t waved” to us if seen from the everyday view that treats reality as a world “out there,” separate from us and different in kind, unaffected by human desire, yielding up its truth only to the “objective” methodology of the scientist. In what sense, though, are we to understand her statement that the wave was waved to us? We might dismiss her for indulging in “irresponsible whimsy,” as one critic does, but I do not think we need or should do this. Instead we need to turn to Emerson and again to William James for a way of understanding her remarks. In Nature Emerson argues that the relationship between man and his world is so complete and so profound that he cannot be understood without these things nor they without him: “He is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every

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8. James, p. 37.
9. James, p. 36.
other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these ob-
jects, nor these objects be understood without man."\textsuperscript{11} The wave does
wave to Fred and his wife in the sense that a “ray of relation” passes from
it to them. All reality indeed tends inward to man, who is the discloser of
relation and being. James, in developing a suggestion by the German
philosopher Rudolph Hermann Lotze, speaks even more precisely to the
point raised by the woman of “West-running Brook.” James argues that
we “naturally think” reality to be “ready made and complete,” to be ap-
proached by our intellects “with the simple duty of describing it as it is
already.” He then goes on to ask, however, whether “our descriptions” are
not “themselves important additions to reality.” Then, in a bold move,
James asks whether our everyday sense of reality is not backwards: that
is, whether “previous reality” is not “itself there, far less for the purpose
of reappearing unaltered in our knowledge, than for the very purpose of
stimulating our minds to such additions as shall enhance the universe’s
total value.”\textsuperscript{12} In this view, one purpose of the brook’s wave is to give us
material for our additions to reality, specifically Fred’s figure for the
spirit’s resistance to the flux and Frost’s larger attempt to say spirit in
terms of matter which is the whole poem. Seen from this view, the wave
does wave to us, in a profound sense. In a copy of Lotze’s \textit{Logic}, James
wrote in the following terse summary of this matter: “Things for the sake
of knowledge not knowledge for that of things.”\textsuperscript{13} In short, waves exist
at least in part to serve the mind’s need for poetic figures, and if, as “West-
running Brook” strongly implies, what Lotze calls “the whole spiritual
life” is the ultimate goal, then this purpose may indeed be the very highest.

The humor of the woman’s response to her husband’s skepticism turns
on the word, “annunciation,” which recalls the Annunciation, itself a
promise of spirit to flesh, a saying of spirit in terms of matter, and also,
in Mary’s exaltation, of matter in terms of spirit. By insisting that the
wave waves to her “in an annunciation,” the woman of Frost’s poem half
seriously aligns herself with the Virgin, suggesting implicitly that spirit
has entered into a relationship with her that circumvents Fred. And at this
point we must wonder just how “new” this couple is, for the wife’s lines
are the culmination of an argument that can clearly be read as a seduction.
From her first observations of the west-running brook, she is trying to
draw her husband into a relationship that makes the future possible. On
the simplest level, that relationship is sex. If we do not understand the
need for her strategy at this point in the poem, we need only wait until
Fred’s long final speech for this to become clear. For in that speech he
reveals a melancholy that is life and future denying.

That Fred senses an implicit sexual threat in his wife’s “annunciation”

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson}, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern
Library, 1940), pp. 15-16.
\textsuperscript{12} James, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in James, p. 172.
is apparent from his response, in which a high formality only barely disguises the shrillness of his reference to the Amazons:

‘Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,
As't were the country of the Amazons
We men must see you to the confines of
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,—
It is your brook! I have no more to say.’ (32-36)

The language describing the Amazons' “country”—the word carrying its Shakespearean or Donnean pun here—is decidedly sexual. Fred's consigning the brook to his wife as he withdraws from her country indicates the close identification of the couple's sexual life with the brook itself, both of which carry forward the future (we should remember it is a “country brook”). But while there is perhaps a certain frightened shrillness in Fred's comparison of his wife to the Amazons, there is also perhaps a certain justice. She has claimed to receive spirit directly, without his involvement, in her “announcement,” but he suggests that to do so is to be like the Amazons, who, complete in themselves, have not fallen into the duality that requires completion through another, through sex.

The dialogue between the couple almost breaks down at this point, but the wife restores it by encouraging Fred to develop his thoughts. To his, “‘I have no more to say,’ ” she responds, “‘Yes, you have, too. Go on. You thought of something’ ” (37). Critics have yet to ask, however, what it is she responds to in him here. How does she know that he has “thought of something” and has more to say? I would suggest that the answer to this question lies in the line of argument I have been developing. Three things make her aware that Fred has more to say: his pause in the middle of his simple naturalistic denial of any connection between the wave and them; the way the language itself, with its heritage of human hope, has spoken through him in the metaphor of rivers being made in heaven; and his warning to her about becoming an Amazon, which she reads as a signal that he does cherish the relationship of mutuality with her. Fred then begins the long speech which has become something of a critical chestnut, a speech that works supremely well within the total dialectic that is the poem and marriage but which most emphatically ought not to be taken as Frost's ultimate wisdom about man and the flux of things.

The beginning of Fred's speech suggests that he has been freed from his earlier scientific view of brook and wave:

‘Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.’ (38–44)

Here Fred is able to see the wave as a figure, but he still seeks to assert a
discontinuity between human and non-human worlds. His is a Platonic attempt to locate an ideal human essence which existed at some moment of origin, “the beginning of beginnings,” and which the flux of time and matter degrades. What we are, most basically, is something that we were “long before we were from any creature.” His emphasis is at once anti-evolutionary and anti-Jamesian. Moreover, it is contrary to the spirit of the French philosopher who is so often mentioned as an influence on Fred’s speech, Henri Bergson. Bergson, whose Creative Evolution Frost read with great interest and admiration in 1911, has influenced the final movement of Frost’s poem, but his *elan vital* should not be identified with the counter wave of West-running Brook. Indeed Bergson’s creative evolution is much more clearly represented by the boldly forward looking spirit, the westering spirit, of Fred’s wife.

Fred fails in his attempt to get back to the “beginning of beginnings,” to find some essence that we were “long before we were from any creature.” Even at his imagined beginning, he finds motion, the stream of existence:

‘It seriously, sadly runs away
To fill the abyss’ void with emptiness.
It flows beside us in this water brook,
But it flows over us. It flows between us
To separate us for a panic moment.
It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love—
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness—’ (39-48)

But is this widely praised passage dramatically believable or justified? Has Fred earned the right to be so darkly meditative? Or should his speech be seen instead as the expression, perhaps even self-indulgent, of one terrified of experience? Richard Poirier has complained of the overly “genteel” talk in the poem, but I would suggest that Fred’s lines here give us a way to understand the admittedly somewhat mannered quality of his wife’s speeches. The careful artificiality of her approaches to him may well derive from a sense of the real danger that he will take seriously his ideas about existence and withdraw from the flux, from life and love and sexuality. Let us take her view for a moment: what is she to do, after all, with a young man, full of strength, life, and possibility, who so easily conflates life and love with the “universal cataract of death”? Fred proceeds of course to emphasize the resistant motion of the wave against the stream, but such resistance can itself be life-denying, for the flow of time and matter that leads to nothingness is also “strength, tone, light, life, and love.” To resist the “cataract of death” is, in one sense, to resist life.

14. Thompson, p. 381.
15. Poirier, p. 223.
Paradoxically, however, Fred's acceptance of his immersion in the flux, his yielding to the continuity of man and nature, even if only in the entropic flow toward nothingness, leads him toward the way of poetry and the freedom it allows. In short, he comes to see the descending flow of matter and the resistant wave of spirit not merely as opposing forces but as organically related parts of a single process. Fred has thus begun the highest kind of adventure, that to which his wife has invited him, the adventure of poetry, of saying matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter. The "universal cataract of death" is "unresisted," he maintains:

'Save by some strange resistance in itself,  
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,  
As if regret were in it and were sacred.  
It has this throwing backward on itself  
So that the fall of most of it is always  
Raising a little, sending up a little.  
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.' (63–77)

The last two lines here indicate a significant change in Fred's thinking that has occurred during the long speech itself. Earlier he identifies our essential humanity with something we were, in the past tense, "long before we were from any creature." What "is most us" was something we were at the "beginning of beginnings," before the stream of time began. Now, however, Fred defines our essence as something we are in the present and which derives from nature. What we are is no longer independent of time; it is created by time, the universal becoming.

Clearly the figure of the brook’s flow and counterflow seems to derive from Bergson’s idea of life and materiality as inverse movements:

In reality, life is a movement, materiality is the inverse movement, and each of these two movements is simple, the matter which forms a world being an undivided flux, and undivided also the life that runs through it, cutting out in it living beings all along its track. Of these two currents the second runs counter to the first, but the first obtains, all the same, something from the second.16

But Bergson does not identify the counter-current to materiality with human consciousness alone. Bergson's "wave" is not only what is "most us" but the impetus of life in general. The organization of matter by the current of life into what seem to be individual forms causes us to "shut our eyes to the unity of the impulse" which passes through generations, link-

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ing “individuals with individuals, species with species,” but it is nevertheless “the whole series of the living” that forms “one single immense wave flowing over matter” (p. 250). It is not Bergson’s view that “life” is “the stream of everything that runs away to spend itself in death and nothingness except as it is resisted by the spirit of human beings,” as Lawrance Thompson has argued in his widely influential interpretation. Bergson represents matter, not life, as a descending flow countered by the impulsion of life as a whole. Human spirit does not run counter to life; it is one of several points of highest development at which the evolutionary process of life has arrived and the one point at which it attains freedom.

Of individual consciousness Bergson writes:

Our own consciousness is the consciousness of a certain living being, placed in a certain point of space; and though it does indeed move in the same direction as its principle, it is continually drawn the opposite way, obliged, though it goes forward, to look behind. This retrospective vision is, as we have shown, the natural function of the intellect, and consequently of distinct consciousness. In order that our consciousness shall coincide with something of its principle, it must detach itself from the already-made and attach itself to the being-made. It needs that, turning back on itself and twisting on itself, the faculty of seeing should be made to be one with the act of willing—a painful effort which we can make suddenly, doing violence to our nature, but cannot sustain more than a few moments. (p. 237)

I have cited this passage at length because it is absolutely vital to an understanding of Frost’s poem and because it contains a source of potential confusion. Bergson’s figure of consciousness twisting back on itself might seem analogous to Fred’s reading of the wave in “West-running Brook.” But, in fact, Bergson is working toward a conclusion that is somewhat antithetical to Fred’s. Bergson’s concern here is to distinguish between the movement of consciousness in general and that of individual consciousness. By “consciousness” Bergson denotes the “principle” that opposes the descending flow of matter; it is the dynamic, creative principle of life that is always pressing against the future. Individual consciousness, while it is the result of this principle and thus moves in the same direction, tends, however, to focus on the past and thus to oppose the movement of its principle, consciousness in general: “it goes forward” but “look[s] behind.” This retrospective quality of our vision derives from the intellect’s failing to perceive time as continuous flow, or duration, rather than as a series of instants following in succession. This problem is caused by what Bergson calls our “cinematographic” manner of perception. We perceive reality, in part because of the demands of praxis, as a series of cinematic cuts rather than as continuous flow. We thus reduce time to measurement and thereby lose sight of the wholeness and constantly creative quality of duration. Bergson insists that the individual

consciousness must free itself from this retrospective vision and bring itself into sympathy—at least partly the result of intuition, which Bergson values highly—with the creative dynamism of life itself. If we can complete this painful process of detaching consciousness from the “already-made” and attaching it to the “being-made,” we “understand, we feel, that reality is a perpetual growth, a creation pursued without end” (p. 239). Clearly this vision of freedom cannot be equated to the figure of the wave resisting West-running Brook, for Fred’s orientation is completely retrospective: the wave’s resistance, as he sees it, is “a throwing back, / As if regret were in it and were sacred.”

Fred’s “regret” that existence is flowing away and his obsession with nothingness and the abyss indicate that he represents what Bergson calls “the natural function of the intellect” (p. 237). Bergson in fact very specifically shows the relationship between “regret” and the void in his discussion of the “idea of ‘nothing’” (p. 273). Bergson argues that the idea of nothing can have no absolute existence, for “the idea of annihilation” always involves “a substitution of one thing for another” (p. 282). To a being fully immersed in the flow of existence and without memory, the idea of the void would be impossible, for it is only possible to perceive the “presence of one thing or another, never the absence of anything” (p. 281). Such a being would only report what he perceives as it occurs and would never know the ideas of absence, nothing, or annihilation, for these depend on the expectation that one will encounter something remembered from the past—an expectation unfulfilled. “The conception of a void,” then, depends on memory or regret, for it arises “when consciousness, lagging behind itself, remains attached to the recollection of an old state when another state is already present. It is only a comparison between what is and what could or ought to be, between the full and the full” (p. 283).

Two of the Bergsonian ideas summarized above apply directly to Fred in “West-running Brook.” Even Fred is unable to free the idea of the void from substitution; his stream of existence “seriously, sadly, runs away / To fill the abyss’s void with emptiness” (italics mine). Second, Fred almost seems designed by Frost to manifest the truth of Bergson’s argument that “the idea of annihilation . . . implies that we regret the past or that we conceive it as regrettable, that we have some reason to linger over it” (p. 295). Fred so fears nothingness precisely because he has so identified himself with the wave’s retrospective movement of regret. He turns his back on the present, dwells in the past, and, to use Bergson’s phrase, “think[s] the contrast of the past with the present in terms of the past only” (p. 295). His absolute sense of the void derives from his absolute focus on the past. Totally committed to the “backward motion toward the source,” he can only see life as lapse, “the universal cataract toward death.”

Bergson repeatedly calls for a “second kind of knowledge” that would,
by an "effort of sympathy" counter to the "natural aspirations of the intellect," place itself directly within "true duration," the flux of becoming itself. We would thus arrive at a "life of the real" (pp. 342-43), an understanding that the universe is a process of constant growth and change pressing into the future. To this "intuition of true duration" creation would appear "not simply as continued but also as continuous" (p. 346). The universe would no longer seem a mechanism, like the cosmic clock Fred imagines, its whole history given as if wound on a giant reel whose unrolling is time. Instead the "universe would really evolve" and the "future would no longer be determinable by the present" (p. 346). Consciousness would not only raise itself from, but also lower itself back into, the stream of real time, thus freeing us from the intellect's exclusively external view of the flux, a view that leads, as it does in Fred's case, to a mechanistic view of the universe. By "raising and lowering itself by turns," consciousness would "grasp from within. and no longer perceive only from without, the two forms of reality, body and mind" (p. 358). For this double movement Bergson makes the most striking of claims: "Would not this twofold effort make us, as far as that is possible, re-live the absolute?" (p. 358).

That "twofold effort" is what "West-running Brook" dramatizes. Fred's awareness of the intellect's resistance to the flux finds its complement in his wife's passionate commitment to the brook, which as a fitting metaphor for duration presses on through an indefinite landscape toward the direction of the future. The poem's couple enact the double motion of consciousness that Bergson recommends: they raise one another above the flux and lower each other into it by turns. The result is a final reconciliation that suggests the value of both intellect and immersion in duration. The woman speaks first:

'Today will be the day
You said so.'
'No, today will be the day
You said the brook was called West-running Brook.'
'Today will be the day of what we both said' (78-82)

She first notes the effect of what he has said in his long disquisition on the "stream of everything that runs away," but her tone implies that Fred's statement not be taken as final wisdom. Her insistence on "today's" being the day he has said so suggests that he may be saying something quite different in the future. She thus recognizes that he has changed in his manner of seeing and saying during their dialogue, in reaction to her own way of seeing and saying. In line with her original commitment to the westering movement of the brook, she sees in him a process of change, growth, and becoming. Her insistence on "today," the present, is also a way of prod-

ding him further toward a position within the flux, one that cherishes the present and sees the present in terms of the future, instead of so strictly in terms of the past alone—the attitude which, as I argued earlier, leads to his mechanistic thinking and fear of the void. Thus Fred’s characterization of “today” in terms of what his wife has said is exceedingly significant, for it indicates not only his recognition of her influence upon his view of mind and matter but also a reorientation on his part toward the future. We know very little, of course, about this couple’s life beyond the “today” of the poem, but we do know one very important thing: the name Fred’s wife applies to the brook endures, as Frost has told us in the mysterious interjection at the very outset of the poem: “West-running Brook men call it to this day” (3). Fred’s coming round to speaking the name “West-running Brook” indicates, then, that he both acknowledges the call of the future and becomes part of the movement of common humanity as it presses toward the west, toward death but also toward freedom.

The last line of the poem completes the reconciliation between husband and wife but suggests as well that it is only a temporary stage in a dialectical process that will continue into the future: again it is “today” that is the day of what both have said. It also emphasizes the importance of “saying,” the role of language, in bringing about both the changes in each and their temporary harmony. The line affirms that what they have done is to “relive the absolute” through their twofold effort, at least as far as that is possible. Frost’s poem has given us another way of saying that “truth,” understood in its Jamesian sense, which expresses so much human hope and which has generated the dialectic that frees Fred to look away from the past toward an enriching future. It may no longer be possible to affirm simply that “marriages are made in heaven,” but the husband and wife of Frost’s poem can relive the absolute through the double motions of their transcendence and immersion in the flux. And they do so in a Jamesian universe where truths, even those of God and heaven, are in the making, still to be made.