

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR



**Emersonianism, American Nationalism, and Nature in the  
Poetry of Robert Frost**

**Emersonismus, americký nacionalismus a příroda v poezii  
Roberta Frosta**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, červen 2017

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Prague, 28 June 2017

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor doc. Justin Quinn, PhD for his encouragement, patient guidance, and helpful comments.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse three major aspects of Robert Frost's poetry: first his relationship with Emersonianism, second with American nationalism, and third with the natural world. Besides the use of form and the focus on rhythm and meter, these three aspects are to a great extent characteristic of Frost's poetry, recurring in many of his poems. Analysing them provides a comprehensive view of the poet's work and illuminates his unique style distinguishable by its play of imagination, the often unnoticed ambiguity and even obscurity.

The analysis will be based on close readings of Frost's poems, available critical material, and comparisons with other authors who deal with the same aspects and have influenced Frost's work. With Emersonianism this will include, besides Emerson's essays, the works of Thoreau and Whitman. The three authors had indubitably a great influence on Frost. Particularly their concepts of individualism, self-reliance and life in society can be traced in some of Frost's best known poems such as 'The Road Not Taken' or the 'Mending Wall'. Frost's take on them however, is much more complex than is generally believed. His development of these themes brings mainly indefinite results.

Given that in the U.S. nationalism is a concept that often overlaps with individualism, it is something with which the Emersonians also deal in great detail. Thus the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau are again important influences on the theme of nationalism in Frost's poetry, together with influences that can be traced to the very beginnings of American history and to the Jeffersonian tradition. However, Frost's nationalism must be assessed within the context of the events that took place during his lifetime. Specifically, the implementation of the New Deal, the Cold War, and, last but not least, Kennedy's inauguration – at which Frost read his poem 'The Gift Outright'. In this context, nationalism in America – as the opposition to socialism – becomes even

more important for Frost's poetry. What is also essential to consider in the second chapter, is the poet's role in forming national conciseness.

In the last chapter I will analyse perhaps the most dominant theme of Frost's poetry, which is nature. The poet spent a great part of his life in New England. For years he lived on his farms first in New Haven and later in Vermont. The nature in his poetry thus mirrors the nature of rural New England with its long hard winters, life-bringing springs, and deep forests. Still, Frost cannot be considered a nature poet. Nature in Frost's poetry is a force with which the humans are in constant battle. This fight brings both joy and despair. As opposed to the Romantics and the Transcendentalist (Thoreau and Emerson) Frost does not find the divine, or the always present goodness in nature. Rather through its imagery he explores human psychology.

## **ABSTRAKT**

Cílem této práce je analyzovat tři dominantní aspekty poezie Roberta Frosta: za prvé jeho vztah s emersonismem, dále s americkým nacionalismem, a nakonec s přírodou. Mimo formu a důraz na rytmus a metrum jsou tyto tři aspekty do velké míry charakteristické pro Frostovu poezii, opakující se v celé řadě jeho básní. Analýza těchto aspektů poskytuje obsáhlý náhled na básníkovo dílo a osvětluje jeho jedinečný styl, rozpoznatelný svou hrou s představivostí, často opomíjenou nejednoznačností a dokonce obskurnitou.

Analýza bude provedena na základě detailního čtení Frostových básní, dostupných kritických zdrojů a skrze srovnání s autory, kteří se zabývají stejnými tématy a jejichž práce ovlivnila Frostovo dílo. U emersonismu bude Frostovo dílo srovnáno s Emersonovými eseji a díly Thoreaua a Whitmana. Tito tři autoři měli na Frosta zásadní vliv. Zejména jejich koncepty individualismu, samostatnosti a života ve společnosti lze vysledovat v některých z Frostových nejznámějších básních jako je 'The Road Not Taken' či 'Mending Wall'. Frostovo pojetí těchto konceptů je však komplexnější, než se všeobecně považuje. Jeho práce s těmito tématy přináší především nejednoznačné výsledky.

Vzhledem k tomu, že je individualismus koncept, který na půdě Spojených států často splývá s nacionalismem, je to téma, kterým se také podrobně zabývali autoři z Emersonovy linie. Z toho důvodu budou pro analýzu v druhé kapitole opět zásadní díla Emersona, Thoreaua a Whitmana, společně s vlivy, které lze vysledovat až k počátkům dějin Spojených států a odkazu Jeffersona. Frostův nacionalismus je však nutné analyzovat také v kontextu událostí, které probíhaly za jeho života. Konkrétně zavedení Nového úřadu, studená válka a neméně důležitá inaugurace prezidenta Kennedyho, na které Frost odrecitoval svou báseň 'The Gift Outright'. V tomto kontextu se americký

nacionalismus – jakožto opoziční koncept k socialismu – stává ještě důležitějším pro Frostovu poezii. Ve druhé kapitole nesmí být opomenut ani básníkův podíl na utváření národního uvědomění.

V poslední kapitole budu analyzovat pravděpodobně nejvýraznější téma Frostovy poezie, kterým je příroda. Frost strávil velkou část svého života v Nové Anglii. Léta žil na svých farmách nejprve v New Havenu a následně ve Vermontu. Z toho důvodu kopíruje příroda vyobrazená v jeho básních novo-anglický venkov s jeho dlouhými tvrdými zimami, životadárným jarem a hlubokými lesy. I přesto nelze Frosta považovat za autora přírodní lyriky. Příroda v jeho básních je živá, se kterým musí lidstvo neustále bojovat. Tento boj může přinést jak radost, tak i zoufalství. Na rozdíl od romantiků a transcendentalistů (Thoreau a Emerson), Frost v přírodě nenachází božskost, ani všudypřítomnou laskavost. Na místo toho využívá přírodní výjevy ke zkoumání lidské mysli.

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## 1 Introduction

Individualism, nationalism, and nature are three seemingly disparate terms. If we however attempt to study important works of U.S. literature or even the country's history or geography, we can see that they are not only connected terms they are also complementary.

The population of the U.S. is heterogenous, due to various waves of immigration over a couple of millennia. Even more so, the land itself is very diverse, spread over nine different time zones, its climate ranging from sub-tropical to sub-arctic. For the U.S. to become a nation it was crucial to acknowledge these differences and build upon them. Consequently, the private individual, particularism - both in connection with the geography and the people - became the subject of study and the theme for many authors who are now considered a part of the U.S. literary canon.

When looking at the poetry of Robert Frost it is easy to see how important the themes of individualism, nationalism, and nature were to the poet. He wrote lovingly yet accurately of the countryside of New England, which gained him the mostly inaccurate label of a nature poet; he advocated individualism and self-reliance, just as he did nationalism, both through the voices heard in his poems and in person with his public comments and private activities. These themes are dominant in part because Frost's develops them in some of his most famous poems. Among these must be counted 'The Road Not Taken', 'Two Tramps in Mudtime', and 'The Gift Outright'. With Frost's poetry however, things are not often what they seem at first.

One of the viewpoints which enables the reader to understand Frost's poetry is to consider it within the Emersonian tradition. The authors Frost has most in common with are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and William James. Frost was well acquainted with their works and was greatly influenced by them.

Considering Frost within the Emersonian tradition allows us identify Frost's main goal as poet: to explore the limits of language, specifically through metaphors and sound. These limits open up almost endless possibilities, while at the same time they prevent arriving at any one definite meaning or truth. Thus, while the poem 'The Road Not Taken' is often described as being about individualism, it is much more about the "willing of the truth into existence"<sup>1</sup> and similarly 'The Gift Outright' is to an extent more a criticism than a celebration of the American nation as is sometimes believed.

Returning to the beginning of this chapter and the connection of the three themes, Frost saw individualism as the basis for nationalism. Americans and the U.S. itself had to become self-reliant and free before they could ever become a nation. Nature for Frost provided the best means for achieving that self-reliance, while at the same time its representation served as a means that would provide an accurate image of the New England countryside along with the people that live there. The assessment of these themes within the Emersonian tradition allows us to uncover the influence the authors of the tradition had on Frost's work and it also helps to understand how Frost develops them.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of a quote from William James' 'The Will to Believe'. Frost was greatly influenced by him. The influence James had on Frost will be analysed in chapter two.

## 2 Frost and the Emersonian tradition

### 2.1 Emersonianism

“Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradicts every thing you said to-day. – ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ – Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? [...] To be great is to be misunderstood,”<sup>2</sup> writes Emerson in his essay ‘Self-reliance’. One of his most famous works encompasses several important aspects of Emersonianism.

First, it focuses on the individual and the importance of self-reliance. Up to the early nineteenth century the dominant religious movement in New England was Calvinism, which emphasised “that human nature was irreparably corrupt,”<sup>3</sup> and that an “individual’s ‘work’ or character could have no bearing on his or her eternal fate.”<sup>4</sup> This changed first with the development of the Unitarian church, which rejected inherent corruption of the human soul and accentuated free-will, and later with the Transcendentalist movement. Greatly influenced by the English Romantics the Transcendentalists believed in the inherent goodness of people, rejected conformity and stressed the importance of introspection.<sup>5</sup>

While the individual is the central focus of both Emersonianism and Transcendentalism the two are not synonymous, mainly because Transcendentalism was not a cohesive movement. Both Emerson and Thoreau concentrated their “intellectual

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Halcyon House, 1941) 20-21. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Robinson, “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 14. All subsequent quotes are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 13-24. The whole paragraph is based on the main concepts of Transcendentalism that Robinson provides along with its historical background.

efforts on the ethical imperatives and moral choices faced by the individual,”<sup>6</sup> other Transcendentalists focused on “the importance of communal effort and larger-scale organization for institutional and economic reform.”<sup>7</sup>

Walt Whitman, although not counted amongst the Transcendentalists with Emerson and Thoreau, was greatly influenced by the movement, and most of all – being the next author considered a part of the Emersonian tradition – by Emerson's work.<sup>8</sup> As apparent from the quote from the beginning of this chapter Emerson's self-reliance is not a static state which can be achieved, it is an ever-changing variable which can contain paradoxes. In ‘Song of Myself’ Whitman also addresses the need for contradictions, which arises from the fact that the self is not definite as seen, for example, in the following lines of the poem: “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well, then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”<sup>9</sup>

Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman are thus connected through their concept of the individual which is never definite. The word ‘concept’ in connection with the Emersonian tradition cannot however be used. As Poirier writes in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*: “The many voices that can be heard in [Emerson’s] essays [...] exist [...] on the periphery of [the psychological] self, wondering what it might be like,

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Although Walt Whitman, as Emerson, resisted the influence of other writers, he used and developed many of Emerson’s essential doctrines. He was also influenced by other writers, for example Shakespeare or Keats. Emerson’s influence on Whitman’s work is discussed for example in Catherine Tufariello’s essay “‘The Remembering Wine’: Emerson’s Influence on Whitman and Dickenson” in the *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 162-191.

<sup>9</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Lancashire: University of Toronto Press, 1998) University of Washington Departments Web Server  
<<http://depts.washington.edu/lsearlec/TEXTS/WHITMAN/SONGSELF.HTM>> 5  
March, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition.

playing with its possibilities joking with and about it.”<sup>10</sup> We see how both Thoreau and Whitman also adopted this way of writing about the self, as Poirier further points out. For Thoreau, it meant to be “‘beside’ himself ‘in a sane way,’”<sup>11</sup> and for Whitman “[to be both] in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.”<sup>12</sup> The Emersonian concept of the individual is thus not a concept at all, it is an ever-evolving process of playing with the possibilities of the self and wondering at them.

Pragmatism, like Transcendentalism, rejected empiricism. It emphasised “the constant need to adjust and readjust knowledge and beliefs about the world.”<sup>13</sup> Poirier – amongst other academics – calls Emerson the father of American Pragmatism, and places one of the most prominent figures of Pragmatism, William James, in the Emersonian lineage. James will now serve as an example of how language is used by the Emersonians.

“A pragmatist [...] turns away [...] from verbal solutions [...] he turns [...] towards action and towards power,”<sup>14</sup> writes William James in his work *Pragmatism*. From this excerpt, we can see how the Pragmatist James – as well as other Emersonians – focused on action rather than its result, which in this passage is given the name a “verbal solution.” Poirier points out how James here uses the word “turns”, saying that it is synonymous with trope:

The turning or troping of a word is in itself an act of power over meanings already in place, it distorts verbal solutions which are thus shown not to be solutions at

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 75.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 75. Poirier quotes from Thoreau’s *Walden*.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 4. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Poirier’s *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 17.

all. In that sense one could argue [...] that a turn or a trope is in itself a verbal solution. It promises to save us from being caught or fixed in a meaning and in that state of conformity which Emerson famously loathed.<sup>15</sup>

This may seem contradictory, but it in fact is not because troping allows for transition – the movement from one meaning to another – to happen. As Jonathan Levin explains: “The poetics of transition requires the very forms it ceaselessly attempts to overcome. It rejects these forms even as it draws on them to posit new ones that will in turn set the same transitional dynamic in motion.”<sup>16</sup> By the forms Levin means “concepts, metaphors or larger formal structures.”<sup>17</sup> What is thus typical for the way that the Emersonians use language, and especially essential for the poetry of Robert Frost, is the meaning beyond the individual words or sentences. This meaning is conveyed by tropes, and is, as is the Emersonian self, never definite but rather, as Levin points out, dynamic.

In summary, the Emersonian tradition unites authors from the same region, specifically New England, whose work focused on individualism, which depended on constant introspection. The philosophical movements that have shaped the authors of the Emersonian tradition are mainly Transcendentalism and Pragmatism. Emersonianism will be described further in chapters three and four of this thesis. In this chapter the focus will be mainly on its concept of self-reliance, truth and the importance of troping, namely metaphor being that this was the trope that was of great importance to Robert Frost and his poetry.

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<sup>15</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Levin “Preface,” *The Poetics of Transition*, x.

<sup>17</sup> Levin “Preface,” *The Poetics of Transition*, x.

## 2.2 Frost's Emersonianism

Robert Frost first became acquainted with the works of Emerson at an early age when his mother Isabelle would read him his works.<sup>18</sup> In his acceptance speech, after being awarded the Emerson-Thoreau Medal, a literary prize awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1958, Frost spoke at length about Emerson's influence on himself and his work, mentioning, amongst other things, how Emerson influenced his language. "Some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian. 'Cut those sentences and they bleed,' he says. I am not submissive enough to want to be a follower, but he had me there."<sup>19</sup> In this passage he quotes from Emerson's essay 'Montaigne; or, the Sceptic'. In Emerson's essay this liveliness of sentences indicated that Montaigne, the sixteenth century French philosopher, used in his essays the speech of real people, similarly as Frost so often imitates the speech of the people of New England. The fact that to Frost sentences were somehow alive – or could become so – means not only that they imitate real speech and serve to express realistic images or experiences, but that they do not have to be static units with a fixed meaning. One of the ways to make the sentences become alive is, for Frost, through the use of metaphor. The importance of metaphor for Frost is apparent in his essay 'The Constant Symbol' where he writes: "Poetry is simply made of metaphor."<sup>20</sup> As apparent from section 2.1, troping (in Frost's case metaphor) prevents us from becoming caught in a fixed meaning, which would make the sentences static. The reader of Frost must therefore "accept the

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<sup>18</sup> William Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 128. All subsequent references are to this edition. Pritchard mentions how Frost's mother would read to him the works of Emerson.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995) 861. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>20</sup> Frost 786.

challenge,” as Judith Oster writes, that his poems do not have “one correct answer,”<sup>21</sup> or in other words no fixed meaning. One of the most important Emersonian aspects of Frost’s poetry is thus the means he uses to convey his themes.

The problematic aspect of a metaphor is its limit as “all metaphors break down somewhere.”<sup>22</sup> The Emersonians explored these limits, as well as those of language itself; as Poirier writes “the Emersonian inclination is to locate the problem of literary production mostly in language [...] in [its] obscure origins, and in the mysteries of its transmissions and transformations.”<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, we thus have the limits of metaphor and of language itself, on the other the possibilities that are opened up to us by its transmissions and transformations. Frost is very much aware of both, as will further on be made clear.

What is also important to note is that it is not only the writer, or in Frost’s case the poet, who explores these limits and possibilities of language, but also the reader. As Frost notes in his essay ‘A Figure a Poem Makes’ poetry “must be a revelation or a series of revelations for both the writer and the reader.”<sup>24</sup> In accordance with the Emersonian tradition what the reader is asked to reveal are the revelation themselves, rather than some kind of an answer. As Poirier points out “it is never any particular trope that matters, but rather the act of troping.”<sup>25</sup>

With Frost’s poems, the reader is always in the danger of reading too little or too much into them. On the one hand, we have the familiar voice of an “old neighbourhood

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Oster, “Frost’s Poetry of Metaphor,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 156. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>22</sup> Oster, “Frost’s Poetry of Metaphor,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Frost 777.

<sup>25</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 17.

friend”<sup>26</sup> together with Frost’s skill with forceful final lines, or as Poirier calls them “epigram[s], something we can take with us”<sup>27</sup> such as from ‘The Road Not Taken’: “Two roads diverged in a wood and I -/ I took the one less travelled by.”<sup>28</sup> which may lead us, erroneously, to believe that we understand everything. But Frost’s meaning is never definite – this would go against the ideas of the Emersonian tradition. As were mainly Emerson and William James, and also Whitman and Thoreau, concerned with adjusting and readjusting their ideas, so is Frost always hinting at but never offering the answers.

In the following sections I will analyse the Emersonian aspects of three of Frost’s poems that deal with individualism, a theme that is essential for the tradition

### 2.3 ‘Into My Own’

‘Into My Own’, the first poem of Frost’s first published poetry collection *A Boy’s Will*, opens with the following stanza:

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,  
  
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,  
  
Were not, as ’twere, the merest mask of gloom,  
  
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.<sup>29</sup>

Frost here paints a gloomy even depressing image. His trees are dark, quiet and miserable. The speaker of the poem is nevertheless lured by the them: “I should not be withheld but

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 6. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>27</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Frost 103.

<sup>29</sup> Frost 15.

that some day/ Into their vastness I should steal away.”<sup>30</sup> But what lures could such a place hold? The question is answered in the final lines of the poem. Even in such an undesirable place, the speaker would not be different: “They would not find me changed from him they knew—/ Only more sure of all I thought was true.”<sup>31</sup> The speaker of the poem is not affected by the external forces. The woods filled with despair will not change him only make him more sure of himself.

The poem develops one of the most important aspects of Emerson’s self-reliance which is living from within. “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?”<sup>32</sup> asks Emerson in ‘Self-reliance’. The traditions – the external factors – cannot shape the individual as cannot the woods stretched unto the edge of doom, it is only in the power of the individual. The isolation, leaving everyone behind, is part of a journey towards self-reliance, as Jeffrey Steele writes in ‘Transcendental Friendship: Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau’ “The demands of self-reliance, especially the intuition of the divine depths of the self, often pull one out of the social orbit into intense introspection.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of the speaker of the poem it is a successful journey, because by abandoning everyone he becomes more sure of himself.

Mark Richardson summarises the poem in his essay ‘Frost’s Poetics of Control’:  
“[It is] a poem in which the speaker threatens to lose himself in the wilderness of imagination the better to secure his own claim to integrity and forceful will.”<sup>34</sup> But if the journey only takes place within the boundaries of the imagination can the speaker truly have secured his claim on ‘integrity and forceful will’? As Richard Poirier points out in

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<sup>30</sup> Frost 15.

<sup>31</sup> Frost 15.

<sup>32</sup> Emerson 17.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Steele, “Transcendental Friendship: Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 121.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Richardson, “Frost’s Poetics of Control,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 202.

*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*: “All that [the speaker] has ‘thought’ in the preceding stanzas is ‘true’ only because it is only a thought.”<sup>35</sup> Herein lies the Emersonian paradox. On the one hand, there is the certainty, on the other the fact that it was achieved through imagination thus never really achieved. More so, the journey could not be achieved because the woods did not stretch out to the edge of doom, it was merely the speaker’s wish, as Poirier also notes.

Besides the imaginary aspect, Poirier remarks that the uncertainty stems from the use of conditional tense, for example in the final two lines of the poem: “They would not find me changed from him they knew—/ Only more sure of all I thought was true.”<sup>36</sup> In these two lines the speaker merely prophesises what might happen if he went to the woods. He says they “would not find him changed” rather than the certain ‘will’. Thus, we can see how Frost plays with possibilities. While he develops the themes most characteristic for Emersonian individualism, he does so under circumstances that question them similarly as Emerson “calls into doubt the very existence in language of the individual self even while he famously affirms it.”<sup>37</sup>

## 2.4 Misreading Frost

As has been indicated in the previous sections, Frost’s language and metaphors can often encourage misunderstandings. The poem ‘The Road Not Taken’ from Frost’s third poetry collection *Mountain Interval* is perhaps the best example of a misread Frost poem and remains one of his most studied poems. Many of the studies devoted to ‘The Road Not Taken’ actually deal with the misinterpretations of the poem. One example is

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<sup>35</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Frost 15.

<sup>37</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 69.

David Orr's book-length analysis whose title *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* characterizes the poem's place in U.S. culture. Exactly how the poem is misread and what causes it will now be explained.

The final three lines, as has been mentioned in section 2.2, are an example of a Frostian epigram: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference."<sup>38</sup> When Frost wrote the introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem *King Jasper*, many critics agree that he was talking more about himself and his poetry. In the introduction Frost writes: "The utmost ambition of [a poet] is to lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of, to lodge a few irreducible bits."<sup>39</sup> Amongst "those irreducible bits" that Frost managed to "lodge" are the epigrams and especially the one from 'A Road Not Taken'. The impact of the epigram together with "the simplicity of imagery and resonance of phrasing [have made 'The Road Not Taken'] a secular scripture, a modern parable encoding the brave individualism with which we so readily identify."<sup>40</sup> The poem is however Emersonian, and by looking at its Emersonian features we can discover how the it is more about perception than about facts one can identify with.

First of all, in lines eleven and twelve, the speaker of the poem says that the two roads diverging in a wood were exactly the same: "And both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black."<sup>41</sup> Neither of the roads could thus be "less travelled." There is therefore a prominent change that takes place between the first three stanzas and

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<sup>38</sup> Frost 103.

<sup>39</sup> Frost 744.

<sup>40</sup> John Savoie, "A Poet's Quarrel: Jamesian Pragmatism and Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'," *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2004, p. 5–7, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/1559684](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559684)> March 17, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>41</sup> Frost 103.

the final one which opens with the following lines: “I shall be telling this with a sigh/  
Somewhere ages and ages hence.”<sup>42</sup> These two lines explain the sudden change between  
what at first were two roads that “equally lay” and then become viewed as two roads one  
of which was less travelled by. The change is caused by the poem’s time-shift. The  
speaker predicts the outcome of his choice with such conviction that there can be no doubt  
about whether the road less travelled by was the right road. Here we can see how Frost  
employs the Emersonian concept of truth. William James writes in his essay ‘A Will to  
Believe’ “faith in a fact will help create a fact”<sup>43</sup> Poirier further develops this concept  
saying that “truth is best seen not as an accurate representation of reality but what is better  
for us to believe.”<sup>44</sup> Essentially the poem is thus about that will to believe that changes  
reality to what is better for us to believe. The speaker of the poem convinces both himself  
and the reader. He manages this by the very complicated time shifts which James Savoie  
summarizes in the following way: “The poem speaks from an indefinite present, looking  
back on the past in the first three stanzas and anticipating the future, through a  
retrospective, in the final stanza.”<sup>45</sup>

Adding to the confusion about the poem’s meaning, is the Frostian metaphor. It is  
difficult to discern between the simple representation of reality – the traveller’s dilemma  
– and more significant life-changing choices. As we can see from the following excerpts  
he juxtaposes the two. First in lines one through three we are presented with a realistic  
image:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

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<sup>42</sup> Frost 103.

<sup>43</sup> Savoie 20.

<sup>44</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Savoie 20.

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood<sup>46</sup>

But later on, in lines thirteen through fifteen, Frost gives the image significance through making it a once in a lifetime experience:

Oh, I kept the first [road] for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back<sup>47</sup>

On the one hand, we have the powerful metaphor of choosing between two roads. It is a very old metaphor that reaches “not only back to the Gospels and beyond them to the Greeks but to ancient verse as well,”<sup>48</sup> which makes it seemingly obvious. The two roads or paths usually represent Heaven and Hell, the good and evil, the right and wrong. But Frost’s roads lie “really about the same” and neither “has a better claim”. The decision thus only depends on “whimsical impulse”<sup>49</sup> as Savoie notes. The road is less travelled not because of its inherent quality but because the speaker describes it in such a way. On the other hand, we can consider Frost’s own explanation. In *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* William Pritchard recounts what Frost himself said about the poem. He “characterized himself in [this] poem [...] as ‘fooling my way along.’”<sup>50</sup> He explained that the poem was about his friend Edward Thomas “who when they walked together

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<sup>46</sup> Frost 103.

<sup>47</sup> Frost 103.

<sup>48</sup> George Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988) 44. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>49</sup> Savoie 11.

<sup>50</sup> Pritchard 128.

always castigated himself for not having taken another path than the one they took.”<sup>51</sup> But this simple explanation will again not suffice. It would not be in accordance with the Emersonian and with Frost’s own definition of poetry as metaphor. With ‘The Road Not Taken’ the reader is certain that the “image or small drama has meaning beyond itself.”<sup>52</sup> As Oster writes we must not dare “to close down or be conclusive.”<sup>53</sup> We therefore must not search for the meaning of the metaphor but rather open up to the possibility or rather possibilities it offers.

## 2.5 Boundaries of Freedom

Though ‘Mending Wall’ from Frost’s second poetry collection *North of Boston* offers a whole range of different readings, drawing the lines between where one’s freedom ends and another’s begins is certainly one of them. Poirier writes: “The real significance of the famous poem ‘Mending Wall’ is that it suggests how much freedom is contingent upon some degree of restriction,”<sup>54</sup> as is metaphor to Frost and language to Emersonians.

The poem recounts the story of a time in spring when the speaker of the poem and his neighbour are mending a wall that divides their two lands – “He is all pine and I am apple orchard.”<sup>55</sup> The speaker of the poem is trying to question the reasons behind the needs for the wall: “My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his

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<sup>51</sup> Pritchard 128.

<sup>52</sup> Oster, “Frost’s Poetry of Metaphor,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 160.

<sup>53</sup> Oster, “Frost’s Poetry of Metaphor,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 160.

<sup>54</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Frost 39.

piners, I tell him.”<sup>56</sup> . But all the neighbour replies is “Good fences make good neighbours.”<sup>57</sup> .

The wall faces constant attack from nature, where frozen ground tears it apart, and hunters as seen in lines six through nine: “I have come after them and made repair/ Where they have left not one stone on a stone,/ But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,/ To please the yelping dogs. [...]”<sup>58</sup> It must be repaired over and over again. This never-ending labour makes the speaker question the need for the wall’s existence – question but not denounce. We can attempt to search for the speaker’s opinion of the wall through implicit clues. Such as that mending it is a pointless work as apparent from lines seventeen through eighteen where he describes the stones used for mending: “And some are loaves and some so nearly balls/ We have to use a spell to make them balance.”<sup>59</sup> The speaker also indicates that wall-mending is something reminiscent of the prehistoric times and therefore should long have been discouraged as implied by the way he sees his neighbour in lines thirty-nine through forty: “I see him there/ Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/ In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.”<sup>60</sup>

In this light, it seems that the speaker opposes the wall. However, he still, year after year, meets with his neighbour and repairs it. He in fact, as Poirier points out, is the one who “initiates the fence-making.”<sup>61</sup> Whatever his true opinion is, he never explicitly states it. Yet he gets close to disclosing it near the end of the poem:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

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<sup>56</sup> Frost 39.

<sup>57</sup> Frost 39.

<sup>58</sup> Frost 39.

<sup>59</sup> Frost 39.

<sup>60</sup> Frost 39.

<sup>61</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 104.

That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,

But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather

He said it for himself.<sup>62</sup>

The word “something” is crucial for Frost. “In characteristic locution,” writes Poirier, “Frost says only that [‘something there is that doesn’t love a wall’], only ‘something’. [...] something lurks inconspicuously in our speech, a mystery on the tip of our tongues, on the very surfaces of our lives.”<sup>63</sup> What the Emersonians were at odds with were “people who prefer to think of truth as something already waiting to be discovered.”<sup>64</sup> Frost in this poem, and also in many others, arrives very close to the truth, only to show that it must always remain a mystery contained within the word “something.”

## 2.6 Frost and the Emersonian Tradition – Conclusion

Frost’s poetry can be a pleasurable experience for the reader but at the same time it can be frustrating. As Poirier notes: “Engaging yourself critically with Frost is like taking a trip with an old neighbourhood friend and discovering under the stress of travel that he can on occasion be altogether more mysterious than you’d bargained for.”<sup>65</sup>

The Emersonian tradition unites both poets and philosophers who have written during the course of one century. What the authors were mainly concerned with is language, because it is only through this medium their thoughts on individualism, truth and poetry can be conveyed. Therefore, the themes that the Emersonians deal with must

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<sup>62</sup> Frost 40.

<sup>63</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 174.

<sup>64</sup> Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 175.

<sup>65</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 6.

suffer from its constraints and at the same time benefit from its possibilities as Frost's themes do in the poems 'Into My Own', 'The Road Not Taken', and 'Mending Wall' as well as in a great number of other poems.

While the theme of individualism as developed in Thoreau's *Walden*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Emerson's essays is a crucial one in the three poems discussed in this chapter, what is more important than the theme itself is how it is conveyed; through metaphor – saying one thing while meaning another - which does not provide a solution but becomes a “programme for more work.”<sup>66</sup> One of the greatest influences on Frost's poetry is William James. It is important to note this mainly because Frost follows “a tradition that passed from Emerson influence through William James,”<sup>67</sup> therefore Frost's Emersonianism is specific, and the term itself cannot be generalised and applied to all the Emersonians.

Individualism was not only a subject of study for the Emersonians. It was also essential for the development of American literary nationalism and for the theme of nationalism in Frost's poetry, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, 17. Poirier quotes this from James' work *Pragmatism*.

<sup>67</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 145.

### 3 Robert Frost and the National Poet

#### 3.1 Nationalism in American Literature

While American literary nationalism is difficult to define, the period of its emergence can be dated between the 1830s and the 1850s. The debate as to what American national literature should be actually began very soon after the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 and “went on for seventy-five years – and indeed is still occasionally revived.”<sup>68</sup> It was not until the 1820s however that “critics first agreed that the United States had produced great writers who wrote distinctively American works worthy of a great nation.”<sup>69</sup>

In ‘American Literary Nationalism: The Process of Definition’ from *The Review of Politics*, John T. Frederick concludes that American national literature is defined – or would become – by two concepts. Firstly, by “the demand for immediacy and particularism in relation to and treatment of American life, extending not merely to accurate observation but also to active understanding, through participation,”<sup>70</sup> and secondly by “the idea of literature not merely as entertainment, or as a passive mirror of manners, but as an active social and spiritual force.”<sup>71</sup>

The period from 1830 to the Civil War marks not only the emergence of American literary nationalism, but it is also the period that “has long been recognised as the richest in America’s literary history.”<sup>72</sup> It is a period for which F. O. Matthiessen coined the term

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<sup>68</sup> John T. Frederick, “American Literary Nationalism: The Process of Definition, 1825-1850,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1959, p. 224, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/1405346](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1405346)> 10 April, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition. Frederick provides the timeline for the development of American literary nationalism.

<sup>69</sup> “1820-1865,” Period Introduction Overview, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 8th ed. Gen. ed. Nina Baym, Vol. B. Norton, 2011, <[www.wwnorton.com/college/english/naal8/section/volB/overview.aspx](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/naal8/section/volB/overview.aspx)> 11 April, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Frederick 237.

<sup>71</sup> Frederick 237.

<sup>72</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 3. All subsequent references are to this edition.

American Renaissance. It was not a renaissance per se, as Mattheissen explains: “[it was not] a re-birth of values that had previously existed in America, but [...] America’s way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in a whole expanse of art and culture.”<sup>73</sup>

Both Frederick’s definition of American literary nationalism and Mattheissen’s concept of American Renaissance are broad and include several great literary works of the twentieth century. The focus will now therefore turn again towards the Emersonian tradition whose authors - specifically Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau – shaped American literary nationalism and were a crucial part of the American Renaissance, and, as was discussed in chapter two, greatly influenced the work of Robert Frost.

### 3.1.1 Individualism

When studying American literary nationalism and American nationalism as such, it is essential to discuss individualism. The right for life, individual liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are rooted in the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson. According to Yehoshua Arieli individualism was the founding stone of America as a nation. “[It] supplied the nation with a rationalization of its characteristic attitudes, behaviour patterns and aspiration. [...] It explained the peculiar social and political organization of the nation – unity in spite of heterogeneity.”<sup>74</sup> In the nineteenth century the focus on the individual and self-reliance – beside becoming a central topic for the Emersonians - initiated several reforms in various fields: the religious reform and the

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<sup>73</sup> F. O. Mattheissen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) preface p. VII. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2006) 38, Google Books <[https://books.google.cz/books/about/Individualism.html?id=IEOg9yiNx7kC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.cz/books/about/Individualism.html?id=IEOg9yiNx7kC&redir_esc=y)> 30 December, 2016. Lukes quotes Arieli in the chapter ‘America’.

formation of the Unitarian Church, as described in the previous chapter, the Transcendentalist movement and consequently led to the Civil War.

### 3.1.2 Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman

“Independence, the avoidance of too much reliance on the past, active participation in the everyday life of America and moral earnestness,”<sup>75</sup> thus Frederick summarises the three requirements made by Emerson in his essay ‘The American Scholar.’ Emerson’s requirements together with the description of every day American life, nature, and the concern with natural language form the basis of literary nationalism as practised by the three Emersonians.

Independence and self-reliance were not for Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman synonymous with isolation – rather they were a way of existing in harmony with society. As Emerson writes in ‘Self-reliance’: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius.”<sup>76</sup> Emerson denounces conformity but also solitude: “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”<sup>77</sup>

Whitman similarly connects the individual to society through his individualism. For example, in the following excerpt from *Leaves of Grass*:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

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<sup>75</sup> Frederick 225.

<sup>76</sup> Emerson 15.

<sup>77</sup> Emerson 18.

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you<sup>78</sup>

While Thoreau's *Walden* was merely an experiment it could nevertheless inspire. For Robert Frost it was a "tale of adventure... a declaration of independence and a gospel of wisdom [...] [which could] provide private freedom against too much structured social restraint."<sup>79</sup>

The Emersonians as Poirier argues in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* were mainly concerned with language, thus it is mainly in the language (and the theory of) of these three authors in which we find the most "accurate observation" and "active understanding through participation" of the American life, that Frederick stresses in his definition of American literary nationalism.

Emerson's theory of natural language can be summarised here in brief. Firstly, in probably one of the most famous quotes from *Nature*, Emerson writes "Words are signs of natural facts."<sup>80</sup> Secondly, the substitution of natural facts for words is the essence of education, as he further develops in the 'American Scholar': "Education of a mind consists of a continual substitution of facts for words."<sup>81</sup> And finally, this substitution could not be found in dictionaries, but can only be heard in the streets: "Such grasping of facts was what [Emerson] heard in the speech of man in the barber shop."<sup>82</sup> In the essay 'Art and Criticism' Emerson concludes: "'the key to every country' is 'command of the

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<sup>78</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Lancashire: University of Toronto Press, 1998) University of Washington Departments Web Server <<http://depts.washington.edu/lsearlec/TEXTS/WHITMAN/SONGSELF.HTM>> January 5, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Peter J. Stanlis, "Robert Frost: The Individual and the Society," *The Intercollegiate Review*, 1977, p. 217-219 <[https://isistatic.org/journal-archive/ir/08\\_05/stanlis.pdf](https://isistatic.org/journal-archive/ir/08_05/stanlis.pdf)> March 6, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Matthiessen 32.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Matthiessen 35.

<sup>82</sup> Matthiessen 35.

language of common people,”<sup>83</sup> making language – the language of common people – inseparable from nationalism.<sup>84</sup>

Whitman, following Emerson’s lead, writes: “The final decisions of language are not made by dictionary makers but ‘by the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea [...] living speech could come to a man only through his absorption in the life surrounding him.”<sup>85</sup> In this passage from the preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman stresses the need for “active participation” and – again – denounces solitude in favour of society.

Thoreau emphasises another aspect of natural language besides the actual words, writing: “The tone and pitch of [the] voice is the main thing.”<sup>86</sup> What Thoreau outlined in this quote would later become the central focus of Frost’s poetry (as Matthiessen also points out). For Frost poetry was “the sound of sense.” The aural quality of the words and sentences was for Frost “the main thing,” as he wrote in a letter to John Bartlett, “the ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.”<sup>87</sup>

### **3.2 Frost’s Nationalism**

Just as in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Frost’s nationalism stems predominantly from individualism. Though it is a broad concept and the word itself has several definitions, for Frost individualism was “a perpetual conflict between society and the individual.”<sup>88</sup> Their coexistence was “subjected to perpetual adjustments.”<sup>89</sup> This

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Matthiessen 35.

<sup>84</sup> Matthiessen 32-35. In chapter ‘The Word One with Thing’ Matthiessen describes Emerson’s theory of language, using quotes from his work. This paragraph summarises Matthiessen’s findings which are connected with the theory of American literary nationalism as outlined by Frederick.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted Matthiessen 520. Matthiessen uses the quote from the preface to demonstrate how Whitman uses language.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Matthiessen 156.

<sup>87</sup> Frost 677.

<sup>88</sup> Stanlis 211.

<sup>89</sup> Stanlis 212.

never-ending struggle is best exemplified by the poem ‘Mending Wall’ analysed in the previous chapter.

The individual’s relationship with society according to Frost is complex. “[H]is relationship to society extends first to his family and close friends, then to his home town or local community, then to his state province or region and finally to his country.”<sup>90</sup> It is thus important to look at Frost’s nationalism also on a regional level, given that the requirement for accurate representation of American life Frederick stresses cannot be fulfilled in its entirety unless it is particular. The particularism stems from different religious beliefs, politics, and also from the various climates, diverse nature, and language differences in specific regions of the United States.<sup>91</sup> For Frost, New England and its people provided his immediate grounding

Lawrence Buell situates Frost’s work within the New England regional identity using five criteria: biographical, geographical, ideological, linguistic, and formal.<sup>92</sup> The first two are fairly basic, referring to where the poet spent most of his life and the landscapes and nature he represents in his poetry, respectively. The ideological criteria can be defined, Buell notes, for example via self-sufficiency with which Frost and also Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman – all New Englanders – were greatly concerned. The formal and linguistic criteria – as apparent from section 3.1.2 – are in the context of literary nationalism of greatest interest.

According to Buell, linguistically New England can be characterised by distinctive idioms, syntax and wry, dry, and concise tonality.<sup>93</sup> Together with specific words and syntax Frost was also careful to reproduce the region’s idioms and speech.

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<sup>90</sup> Stanlis 222.

<sup>91</sup> Frederick mentions these features throughout his article “American Literary Nationalism: The Process of Definition, 1825-1850.”

<sup>92</sup> Lawrence Buell, “Frost as a New England Poet,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 110.

<sup>93</sup> Buell, “Frost as a New England Poet,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 110.

Like his Emersonian predecessors, Frost used the language of the common people of New England. At the same time however Frost was equally concerned with form. “Like his New England precursors, Frost favours either bound or prosodic forms,”<sup>94</sup> writes Buell. Another struggle is thus apparent in Frost’s poetry – apart from the one between the individual and society – between the form and the vernacular with its actual sound. For Frost poetry was “the sound of sense: the music of speech being watched in its transcribed form, within a diagramming and punctuating and annotating grid of metrical pattern.”<sup>95</sup> Thus while the vernacular – with both its vocabulary and sound – and the restrictive forms seem to be contradictory for Frost they go hand in hand.

### 3.3 ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’

In the poem ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time,’ published in 1934,<sup>96</sup> Frost develops his principal notion of nationalism through an idea of the social contract. The poem takes place during a sunny April day when the speaker is chopping wood in his yard. Two tramps come to him wanting to chop his wood for money. The two tramps need the money, while the speaker is chopping wood only for the pleasure of it:

And all their logic would fill my head:  
As that I had no right to play  
With what was another man's work for gain.  
My right might be love but theirs was need.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Buell, “Frost as a New England Poet,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 110. By “precursors” Buell is referring to the Fireside poets, amongst who was for example Henry Wordsworth Longfellow. While Buell notes that the impact the Fireside group had on Frost’s work can be debatable, he sees the connection mainly on a formal level.

<sup>95</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 218.

<sup>96</sup> George Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 222. Monteiro provides the publication date.

<sup>97</sup> Frost 252.

There is thus the conflict between the need of the tramps and the love for the labour of the speaker. Who has the better claim, is resolved in the following lines:

And where the two exist in twain

Theirs was the better right – agreed.<sup>98</sup>

However, same as the individual cannot exist without society, so should the labour not exist without the love for it, it is always necessary to connect the two:

My object in living is to unite

My avocation and my vocation<sup>99</sup>

Monteiro writes: “the needs of the self [the avocation] are paramount in its constant struggle against the destructive pressures of socialisation [the vocation].”<sup>100</sup> The only solution is to eliminate the conflict altogether and merge the two into one which, as the constant struggle between the individual and society, is not something that can be settled for good but must become the “object in living.”

Throughout his life Frost was very critical of any form of socialism, as will be further discussed in this chapter. If we view the poem in the context of Frost’s political philosophy, it can thus be seen as critique of “practising social welfare to the detriment of an individual’s right at well-being,”<sup>101</sup> of which the poet accused president Roosevelt and his administration who put into motion the New Deal programme. It, amongst other things, created new work positions to help with the countries unemployment rate. Frost did not criticize this per se, being that need should always come first. However, he stresses what the tramps in the poem fail to realise, and what the government according to him ignored: the need for the unity of vocation and avocation.

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<sup>98</sup> Frost 252.

<sup>99</sup> Frost 252.

<sup>100</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 223.

<sup>101</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 223.

The most dominant theme of the poem is the critique of socialism, but if we focus on stanzas three, four, and five, we can also see the features of particularism described in section 3.2. In these three stanzas, the speaker describes the typical New England climate, with its chilly springs when “winter was only playing possum,”<sup>102</sup> and dry summers when one must look for water “with a witching-wand.”<sup>103</sup> The bluebird who the speaker sees is also typical for New England. The particularism is also apparent from the very title of the poem. Mud time is a noun used mainly in the New England region to describe a “period in early spring before the ground is completely thawed, when the ground is particularly muddy.”<sup>104</sup>

### 3.4 The Role of the Poet

In his sixth poetry collection, *A Further Range*, published in 1937, Frost became more focused on writing political poems, turning away from his “subjective lyrics and narrative poems.”<sup>105</sup> In both his poems and essays Frost would often criticise any form of socialism or collectivism. During Roosevelt’s presidency he often took on “the role [...] of the loyal opposition”<sup>106</sup> criticising the governments involvement in the lives of individuals, which mainly resulted from the implementation of the New Deal.

Frost was however also politically active outside his poems. In 1954 he represented the United States in South America as a delegate to the International Writers Conference, and in 1957 was sent to England by the Department of State. In January 1961, he famously read at John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s presidential inauguration and a year

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<sup>102</sup> Frost 251.

<sup>103</sup> Frost 251.

<sup>104</sup> “mud time,” *Oxforddictionaries.com*, 2017

<[https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/mud\\_time](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/mud_time)> 1 May, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 225.

<sup>106</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 222.

later, close to the end of his life, Frost met with the premier of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev.<sup>107</sup>

What Frost imagined should be the role of poetry and the poet is perhaps best summarised in his poem ‘For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration’ written specifically for the occasion of Kennedy’s inauguration. The newly commencing era – that of the presidency of Kennedy – would according to Frost have the “the glory of the next Augustan age” and would become “a golden age of poetry and power,”<sup>108</sup> an age in which, as Steven Gould Axelrod writes, “the creative arts and politics join together to produce global primacy for the United States, just as they once did for imperial Rome.”<sup>109</sup> This meant to establish not only the importance of the role of poetry as such, but it was also Frost’s way of envisioning “a practical role for himself and other poets on the international political stage,”<sup>110</sup> which he hoped to take during his cultural visit to the Soviet Union.

The meeting with Khrushchev was for Frost, as Monteiro notes in ‘Robert Frost and the Politics of the Cold War’, a “last gesture to claim a grand public role for poetry.”<sup>111</sup> Frost believed that it “might contribute to a new relationship between the superpowers founded upon the principle of rivalry,”<sup>112</sup> specifically a rivalry in “sports, science, art, business, and politics [not in the] bloody politics of war.”<sup>113</sup> But the aftermath of Frost’s meeting with Khrushchev did not provide what Frost hoped for, rather the

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<sup>107</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 226. Monteiro provides the historical data used in the paragraph.

<sup>108</sup> Frost 436-437.

<sup>109</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, “Frost and the Cold War,” *Robert Frost in Context* ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014) Google Books <<http://books.google.com/books?vid=ISBN1107022886>> 210. 30 April, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>110</sup> Nancy L. Tuten, *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001) Google Books <<http://books.google.com/books?vid=ISBN031329464X>> 30 April, 2017, p. 119. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>111</sup> Monteiro, “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 234.

<sup>112</sup> Pritchard 222.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Monteiro’s “Frost and the Politics of Cold War,” *Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 237.

opposite. It was a “final lesson that poetry and power went together only in poems, and that to prophesy [...] a golden age [...] was a course fraught with peril.”<sup>114</sup> While Frost was meeting with Khrushchev nuclear missiles were being installed in Cuba by the Soviet Union posing a threat to the United States. Furthermore, upon returning to America Frost’s public comments<sup>115</sup> on the Khrushchev meeting caused Kennedy to sever all ties with the poet. Thus, the close alliance between poetry and power Frost hoped for turned out to be impossible as his attempt at diplomacy showed.

Nevertheless, the role of the poet should still be an important one, though perhaps not as ambitious as Frost imagined, and as Axelrod remarks, the poet too realized this. In a letter to Heineman of the *Country Government Magazine* Frost mentions “a dread of terribleness we feel capable of.”<sup>116</sup> Axelrod notes that perhaps Frost sensed “the problem of aligning poetry too closely with power having become sensitized to the ‘terribleness’ [Frost mentions in his letter] that power may unleash,”<sup>117</sup> similarly as Kennedy when he remarked in his speech at Amherst College after Frost’s death in honour of the poet, that poetry should be seen “as the means of saving power from its self.”<sup>118</sup> Poetry therefore should not go hand in hand with power but should be the thing that prevents it from unleashing its ‘terribleness.’ The ideal poem on which to discuss the role of Frost as national poet is ‘The Gift Outright’ published in the volume *A Witness Tree*.

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<sup>114</sup> Pritchard 255.

<sup>115</sup> Frost spoke with the press and said that Khrushchev “feared for us modern liberals. He said we were too liberal to fight.” His remarks angered Kennedy, as Monteiro writes on p. 233 in his essay “Frost’s Politics and the Cold War.”

<sup>116</sup> Frost 901.

<sup>117</sup> Axelrod 212.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Axelrod 212. Axelrod quotes from Kennedy’s speech ‘Convocation Address.’

### 3.5 'The Gift Outright'

Frost wrote a poem specifically for the occasion of Kennedy's inauguration on January 1 1961, but never got to read it due to the glaring winter sunlight. Instead he recited 'The Gift Outright,' a poem which he knew by heart. In this poem he summarises American history from its colonial period to its declaration of independence.

The land was ours before we were the land's.  
She was our land more than a hundred years  
Before we were her people. She was ours  
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,  
But we were England's, still colonials,  
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
Something we were withholding made us weak  
Until we found out that it was ourselves  
We were withholding from our land of living,  
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.  
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she would become.<sup>119</sup>

In the first seven lines Frost develops the notion of nationalism – that in order to become a nation the people have to be free from the rule of others, they cannot be England's colony. As Stanlis remarks, one of the most important aspects of nationalism

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<sup>119</sup> Frost 316.

for Frost was the rejection of anything foreign: “Whether the nationalism of Americans was a result of thoughtless default or profound reflection made little difference to Frost: in either case, they were not corrupted by a yearning for foreign norms or ideology,”<sup>120</sup> be it the rule of England in the colonial times or the socialistic ideologies of the Soviet Union during Frost’s lifetime. In ‘The Gift Outright’ this is the result of the uniting of men and land.

As Hamida Bosmajian notes in her analysis of the poem in *American Quarterly* “mere physical presence on the land was not enough to achieve national identity.”<sup>121</sup> There had to be a shift from possessing the land physically to being possessed by the land spiritually – as described in lines eighth through eleven. Bosmajian concludes that “each fulfils then its function to the other.”<sup>122</sup>

On the one hand, in this poem the American nation is formed through a spiritual almost a sexual unity of men and land, though Frost describes the poem as being about revolutionary war. This theme is subdued by the parentheses within which it is expressed “(The deed of gift was many deeds of war).” Bosmajian notes that this line provides the poem with a moral implication that America was possessed by violence “not just the revolutionary war but also the conquest of the American land itself.”<sup>123</sup> In this single line Frost manages to subtly “make the promise of salvation [in surrender]”<sup>124</sup> doubtful.

The final two lines are even more complex. The first of the two “But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,” describes the state of America at the time the nation formed. The last two lines however are not optimistic. “The final lines mean not only that

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<sup>120</sup> Stanlis 223.

<sup>121</sup> Hamida Bosmajian, “Robert Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’: Wish and Reality in History and Poetry,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1970), JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711675>> p. 98, 29 April, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>122</sup> Bosmajian 99.

<sup>123</sup> Bosmajian 99.

<sup>124</sup> Bosmajian 99.

the land was unstoried, artless, unenhanced but would become so too,”<sup>125</sup> Bosmajian writes.

In this poem Frost employs, as in ‘The Road Not Taken,’ his Emersonian inclination towards ambiguity. While at first the poem may appear to celebrate, and glorify America as a nation, upon closer examination this image is shattered by the acknowledgment of its bloody history and most dominantly by its lack of enhancement which may never be achieved.

This may seem at odds with the role of the poet that Frost has envisioned. But at the time of the inaugural reading, being the very first poet to perform at a presidential inauguration, Frost found “the momentary fulfilment of his dream of the poet as a civilising agent,”<sup>126</sup> and in that moment, he was making America more “enhanced.”

‘The Gift Outright’ thus shows several crucial aspects of both Frost’s nationalism, his poetry and his role as a poet. First of all, the need for political independence, secondly this freedom depended upon the relationship of the people and the land – on “belonging to the land,”<sup>127</sup> and finally, in the context of the presidential reading, the poem was one of the ways Frost fulfilled “the practical role of the poet on the political stage,” while nevertheless remaining true to his Emersonian heritage.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

When asked by a reporter whether he had any wish for the world Frost replied: “For the world, no. I’m not large enough for that. For my country? My chief wish is for it to win at every turn in everything she does.”<sup>128</sup> From this quote we can see how

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<sup>125</sup> Bosmajian 100.

<sup>126</sup> Bosmajian 103.

<sup>127</sup> Stanlis 220. Stanlis quotes Frost from an interview.

<sup>128</sup> Stanlis 223. Stanlis quotes from an interview with Frost from 1959.

important nationalism was for Frost. The same demand for “self-identity”<sup>129</sup> (in face of society) Frost had for the individual, he had for the nation “before any other corporate loyalty outside of it.”<sup>130</sup> While Frost did not favour war, he was not against rivalry between countries and as a nationalist he of course hoped that his country would succeed.

The same holds true for Frost on a regional level. Nationalism in Frost’s poetry takes the form of accurate representation of New England – with its climate, nature, and specific language – together with the essential theme of individualism and the critique of everything that jeopardizes it.

While Frost was a true nationalist he was also an Emersonian, a poet that often said one thing while meaning another. This may seem of lesser importance when considering his more political poems such as ‘Two Tramps in a Mudtime’ but is essential for the seemingly clearly nationalist poem ‘The Gift Outright.’

Although his political activities did not have the international impact he desired, they help to further understand his concept of nationalism, and, most importantly, the role of the poet and of poetry itself as Frost imagined it. To conclude, Frost was indeed a national poet. The extent to which he helped to form national consciousness cannot be satisfactorily assessed with any definite conclusion, but his poetry and politics helped him to become the poet-diplomat who was on several occasions heard by the entire nation.

Nature has played a secondary role in Frost’s poems about nationalism, it however remains to be his most dominant theme, and as such will be analysed in the next chapter.

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<sup>129</sup> Stanlis 223.

<sup>130</sup> Stanlis 223.

## 4 Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost

### 4.1 Nature in Poetry

As Raymond Williams remarks: “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the English language.”<sup>131</sup> Thus it is necessary to define the term nature itself as it will be discussed in this chapter. It will be limited to physical nature and its role in the poetry of Robert Frost. In his definition of nature poetry Edward Hirsch mentions themes such as landscapes, changing seasons, agriculture practices, and the pastoral,<sup>132</sup> which are all themes that appear in Frost’s poetry and are limited to the geographical area of New England.

For nature poetry, one of the simplest definitions is provided by Wendell Berry: “[it is] poetry that considers nature as subject matter and inspiration.”<sup>133</sup> This definition is very broad, therefore in order to describe to what extent Frost was a nature poet – or rather was not (as will become apparent later in this chapter) – it is necessary to focus on how individual authors treat nature in their works, specifically how Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman do and how their treatment differs from Frost’s.

### 4.2 Nature According to the Emersonians

For Emerson nature was not only the surrounding visible nature in the form of mountains, rivers, and the fauna and flora, it was, as Robert D. Richardson Jr. sums up in ‘Emerson and Nature’, “[the] art, all other persons, and [one’s own] body.”<sup>134</sup> Emerson, as Richardson notes, divides the universe into “nature and the soul, or nature and the

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<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Edward A. Hirsch, “nature poetry, nature in poetry,” *A Poet’s Glossary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/nature-poetry-poets-glossary>> May 7, 2017. All subsequent references are to this edition. Hirsch cites Raymond Williams in his definition of nature poetry.

<sup>132</sup> Hirsch “nature poetry, nature in poetry.”

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Hirsch “nature poetry, nature in poetry.” Hirsch quotes Wendell Berry in his definition.

<sup>134</sup> Richardson, “Emerson and Nature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 97.

consciousness.”<sup>135</sup> In other words, everything is nature except the soul or the consciousness which perceives and is affected by it.

While physical nature was only a part of Emerson’s definition of nature, he, as did the English Romantics, encouraged people to return the rural land: “the men must leave the house, the streets, and go to the wooded uplands, to the clearing and the brook. Well for him if he can say with the old minstrel, ‘I know where to find a new song.’”<sup>136</sup> Emerson acted upon his words and found much of his subject matter for both his essays and poetry - for the “new song” – in nature. However, both Emerson and Thoreau, distinguished between nature and the soul, and their concern was mainly with the latter. As Matthiessen writes: “their interest in [visible nature] was subordinate to their concern with men.”<sup>137</sup> This does not mean that their nature was simply descriptive or representative of reality. As we have learned in the second chapter of this thesis, the Emersonians were concerned with transcending meaning. Thus, the nature they saw was accurately described – in a geographical sense - but still kept “the value of the symbol.”<sup>138</sup>

In the first chapter of *Nature* Emerson writes: “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. [...] I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”<sup>139</sup> In this passage Emerson describes the unity of nature and soul. However, it is only momentary. It is a “rare privileged moment of vision.”<sup>140</sup> Whitman differs from Emerson with his “mystical

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<sup>135</sup> Richardson, “Emerson and Nature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 97.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, preface IX.

<sup>137</sup> Matthiessen 157.

<sup>138</sup> Matthiessen 601. In chapter ‘Whitman’s Landscapes’ Matthiessen discusses Whitman’s transparency and his desire to present reality to his readers. Nevertheless, Matthiessen notes that Whitman still remained indirect, still kept the “value of the symbol”, but presented “real images” which emerged from contact with real things.

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Tufariello, “‘The Remembering Wine’,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 172.

<sup>140</sup> Richardson, “Emerson and Nature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 172.

conception of the unity between man and nature, together constituting God.”<sup>141</sup> Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman is thus more connected to the Romantic poet Wordsworth for whom “there existed the union of mind and external reality [which he] most often through suggesting a blending of thought and landscape.”<sup>142</sup>

If we narrow down the definition of nature poetry based on the findings from this section, we can outline some more specific features. Firstly, nature serves as an inspiration for poetry, it can provide “the standard of beauty,”<sup>143</sup> imagery, and metaphors. Secondly, there is the connection between humans and nature. For Emerson it was the momentary revelation in the woods, for Thoreau the Walden experiment, and for Whitman it is the consummation of “Emerson’s uncelebrated union between self and soul, body and spirit, mind and world.”<sup>144</sup>

### 4.3 Robert Frost as a Nature Poet

Robert Frost did not in fact grow up in New England. He was born in San Francisco. After turning eleven he moved with his mother to Lawrence, Massachusetts, an industrial city. He took up farming when he moved to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, which he inherited from his grandfather, after marrying Elinor White in his early twenties, and only then he “began learning about the rural matters.”<sup>145</sup> George Monteiro remarks that it cannot be ascertained “whether Frost chose to be a farmer primarily because he expected farming to provide him with poetic images, metaphors,

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<sup>141</sup> Norman Foerster, “Whitman as a Poet of Nature.” *PMLA*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1916, pp. 736–758. JSTOR, <[www.jstor.org/stable/456988](http://www.jstor.org/stable/456988)> 12 May, 2017, p. 756.

<sup>142</sup> John F. Lynen, “Nature and Pastoralism” *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960) Frost Friends <<http://www.frostfriends.org/FFL/Nature%20and%20Pastoralism%20-%20Lynen/lynenessay1.pdf>> 13 May, 2017, p. 141. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>143</sup> Richardson, “Emerson and Nature” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 100.

<sup>144</sup> Tufariello, “‘The Remembering Wine,’” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 172.

<sup>145</sup> The biographical data is based on the information George Monteiro provides in the preface to *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, p. IX.

and subject matters [...] but he did sometimes act as if his only interest lay in following Emerson's advice,"<sup>146</sup> to find a "new song" by leaving the city and going to the "wooded uplands, to the clearing and the brook."

Many of Frost's poems are indeed poems about nature. If we look at his first poetry collection for example, we can see that over half of the poems have a natural image in their very title (e.g. 'Stars', 'Rose Pogonias', 'The Tuft of Flowers', 'October'). In the poems discussed in this thesis so far, nature has always played an important role (e.g. the image of the two roads diverging in the wood in 'The Road Not Taken', the affinity of man and land 'The Gift Outright', the nature of New England in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time').

Nevertheless, Frost did not see himself as a nature poet: "I'm not a nature poet. I've only written two poems without a human being in them, only two. All my poems have got a person in them,"<sup>147</sup> he said in an interview for NBC News in 1952. He further admits that he likes to be called a humanist. Peter J. Stanlis agrees with this saying "in [Frost's] poems physical 'nature' is most often merely the background setting for a human drama, rather than the subject."<sup>148</sup>

In Frost's poetry, we often find an accurate representation of nature and of New England rural life, shown with both its beauties and horrors. But there is no blending of men and nature or soul and nature as there is in Wordsworth or Whitman. There is always a distinction between the two.

In 'The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost' Lynen analyses several of Frost's poems looking at how the poet uses nature and its imagery. From his analyses, it can be

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<sup>146</sup> Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, preface IX.

<sup>147</sup> 'A Conversation With Robert Frost (1952)' Bela Kornizer, correspondent, NBC News, NBC Universal Media, 23 Nov. 1952, NBC Learn Web, 19 January, 2015 <<https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/flatview?cuecard=62594>> 15 May, 2017.

<sup>148</sup> Stanlis 213.

concluded that, firstly, Frost saw “men and nature separated by a boundary which is both definite and inalterable.”<sup>149</sup> Secondly, that “the only meaning one can find in nature is that imposed upon it by the human mind.”<sup>150</sup> being that only men are capable of “intense awareness of life.”<sup>151</sup> This emphasises the distinction between men and nature and also differentiates Frost from Emerson because unlike him, Frost believed that the boundary between the two could not be crossed even momentarily. Thirdly, Frost uses personification to make “nature and men distinct and separate and yet parallel planes.”<sup>152</sup>

To sum up, Frost was not a nature poet in the sense that he used nature as a subject matter. Rather through nature he explores the human capacities and limitations, his relationship to society as well as the journey towards self-reliance.

#### **4.4 Nature in Frost’s Poetry**

The misclassification of Frost as a nature poet perhaps again stems from how his poems are misread. He describes the beauties of nature with great affection as Lynen notes, which may lead the reader into the false belief that the nature is idyllic, however “none of the nature poems is free from hints of possible danger; under the placid surface there is always the unseen presence of something hostile.”<sup>153</sup> Lynen mentions ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time.’ While its central theme is the connection of work and love, the opening stanzas describe the natural scene. The image of the spring day seems innocent enough but almost in every line there is a threat. Looking at the third and fourth stanzas of the poem for example, we see a constant tension between winter and spring, the first always threatening to take over the latter:

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<sup>149</sup> Lynen 161.

<sup>150</sup> Lynen 144.

<sup>151</sup> Lynen 158.

<sup>152</sup> Lynen 160.

<sup>153</sup> Lynen 146.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.

[...]

You're one month on in the middle of May.

But if you so much as dare to speak,

A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,

[...] Winter was only playing possum.<sup>154</sup>

At the poet's eighty-fifth birthday party Lionel Trilling went as far as to call Frost a "terrifying poet."<sup>155</sup> It is true that some of his nature poems present truly terrifying images. Lynel points out for example the poem 'Bereft' where the speaker's utter loneliness is embodied in the bleakness of the landscape. The poem does not present two contrasting forces as explicitly as 'Two Tramps in Mud Time,' but Lynel sees the recognition of the extent of the loneliness in the landscape as sign of courage, meaning that there is always hope.

Frost was not the author of "'pretty' nature poem[s]"<sup>156</sup> rather he viewed nature as he did the individual: as a conflict of two forces. With nature, it was the conflict of beauty and hostility. Lynel summarizes this: "Love of natural beauty and horror at the remoteness and indifference of the physical world are not opposites but different aspects of the same view."<sup>157</sup>

#### 4.5 'The Wood-Pile'

'The Wood-Pile,' from Frost's second poetry collection *North of Boston*, is perhaps one of the best poems about his relationship with nature. It shows his attempt to

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<sup>154</sup> Frost 251.

<sup>155</sup> Grzegorz Kosci, "Frost and the Second World War," *Robert Frost in Context*, 205.

<sup>156</sup> Lynen 147.

<sup>157</sup> Lynen 147.

connect with nature, and the impossibility of that. The nature described in the ‘The Wood-Pile’ seems impenetrable. It is so uniform that the speaker is unsure of where he really is and whether he is truly even there:

[...] The view was all in lines  
Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by  
So as to say for certain I was here  
Or somewhere else: I was just far from home.<sup>158</sup>

Richard Poirier notes that the speaker’s anxiety “expresses the kind of paranoia that goes with any feeling of being lost and of losing thereby a confident sense of self.”<sup>159</sup> Nature cannot provide any certainty, the only thing of which the speaker can be certain of is his connection to (or rather disconnection from) the human world. He knows he is not home.

Nature may support the speaker, but by the same token it will also let him fall: “The hard snow held me, save where now and then/ One foot went through. [...]”<sup>160</sup> It is completely indifferent to him. In order to find some sense of self the speaker tries to “structure realities”<sup>161</sup> which are not there. He first encounters a small bird:

A small bird flew before me. He was careful  
To put a tree between us when he lighted,  
And say no word to tell me who he was  
Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought.  
He thought that I was after him for a feather—  
The white one in his tail; like one who takes

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<sup>158</sup> Frost 100.

<sup>159</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 141.

<sup>160</sup> Frost 100

<sup>161</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 142.

Everything said as personal to himself.<sup>162</sup>

It is possible that the bird is a personification of the speaker. Poirier argues that “the paranoia [‘He thought I was after him for a feather’] and self-regard are really a characterisation of the man who is observing the bird.”<sup>163</sup> The bird, or the projection of the speaker, is again isolated, he cannot or is too scared or ‘paranoid’ to make a connection with his surroundings and rather puts a tree between himself and the speaker.

Next the speaker sees the pile of wood “the only evidence of structure”<sup>164</sup> and of some human presence. He describes it thus:

It was a cord of maple, cut and split

And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.<sup>165</sup>

Poirier notes that what the speaker resembles in the end is the woodpile itself. But its image is a dreary one, mirroring the speaker’s hopelessness and feeling of abandonment: “The wood was gray and the bark warping off it/ And the pile somewhat sunken.”<sup>166</sup> It was abandoned by its maker and left in woods to rot “with the slow smokeless burning of decay.”<sup>167</sup>

First with the bird and later with the woodpile the speaker tries to “find some human resemblances [...] and demarcations for the human capacity to make a claim on an alien landscape.”<sup>168</sup> In this aspect we can see how radically Frost differs from Emerson, and much more from Wordsworth and Whitman, in his concept of nature. While Emerson believed in the possibility of the moment of blissfulness by becoming a part of the nature, the “transparent eyeball,” the attempts of the speaker of the poem turn

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<sup>162</sup> Frost 100-101.

<sup>163</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 141

<sup>164</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 142

<sup>165</sup> Frost 101

<sup>166</sup> Frost 101

<sup>167</sup> Frost 101

<sup>168</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 142.

out to be futile. Like the woodpile, the speaker is, as Poirier sums up, “on the point of being obliterated by the landscape rather than allowed to exist even as an observer of it, much less a mediating or a transcending presence,”<sup>169</sup> as he unsuccessfully tries to connect with it.

#### 4.6 ‘The Oven Bird’

An example of a poem that uses personification is ‘The Oven Bird’ from Frost’s third poetry collection *Mountain Interval*.

There is a singer everyone has heard,  
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,  
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.  
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers  
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.  
He says the early petal-fall is past  
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers  
On sunny days a moment overcast;  
And comes that other fall we name the fall.  
He says the highway dust is over all.  
The bird would cease and be as other birds  
But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 144.

<sup>170</sup> Frost 116.

One way to interpret the meaning of the poem is to see the bird as a personification of the poet, most prominently in line eleven. If we return to Frost's concept of truth and his metaphor (as described in chapter two of this thesis) we can see that he was exceptionally skilled in "singing not to sing" or in other words in saying one thing while meaning another. In this poem the poet-bird indeed manages to sing in not singing, but in order to see this it is necessary to look at the poem more closely.

Firstly, we should notice the recurring use of the word "says" (in lines three, five, and nine) in favour of the word 'sing.' This choice of words makes the ovenbird's song seem less a song and more a "monotonous repetition."<sup>171</sup> Moreover, "the singer everyone has heard" is mostly not a good one. The real ovenbird actually has two songs. The first is a "beautiful flight song most often heard in May and June."<sup>172</sup> The second, which we would hear from him in mid-summer, would sound like a "series of short, ringing, empathic notes that grow louder and louder."<sup>173</sup> The second song gained the ovenbird the nick name teacher-bird because his song sounds like he is repeating the word "teacher" over and over.<sup>174</sup> There can therefore be nothing musical about his song.

If we accept the fact that the ovenbird is the poet, then we can say that the main theme of the poem is the creative process of writing poetry. Poirier remarks that the poem is about the "poise of creativity in the face of threatened diminishments."<sup>175</sup> The diminishments are represented for example by the ever-present fall: the petal-fall, the pears and cherries that go down in showers, the fall as a season in line nine which can also perhaps evoke the Fall of Adam and Eve from Heaven.

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<sup>171</sup> Pritchard 149. Pritchard also points out the repetition of the word "says" and discusses the poet's connection to the ovenbird, which was pointed out by Frost's friend Sidney Cox.

<sup>172</sup> Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, 96.

<sup>173</sup> Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, 96.

<sup>174</sup> Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, 96. The information used in the sentence is provided in chapter 'Solitary Singer.'

<sup>175</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, 75.

George Monteiro writes “the ovenbird’s paradoxical trick [...] [is] to sing an unlyrical song in those times that are not at all conducive to joyous song.”<sup>176</sup> It is a trick, Monteiro adds, that Frost has learned well. If we look at the poem in this light, we can provide the answer to the final line: “what to make of a diminished thing.” It is to balance it with creativeness and turn it into a poem; not perhaps a “joyous song” but into everything that Frost believed a poem could provide: a “‘momentary stay against confusion’ against ‘immedicable griefs’”<sup>177</sup>

#### 4.7 Pastoral poetry and ‘Build Soil’

It is necessary to further address Frost’s motives for choosing rural life in favour of a life in the city and for using nature in so many of his poems. To answer this question his relationship with pastoral will be discussed.

In the definition of pastoral from the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* its main theme is “the search for the simple life away from the court and town, away from corruption, war, strife, the love of gain, away from ‘getting and spending.’”<sup>178</sup> Frost uses the theme of retreat but modifies it in order to create new themes which are of greater importance to him. Ann Mikkelsen summarizes Frost’s intentions in the following way: “To reimagine the ideal American self and community.”<sup>179</sup>

To see how Frost modified the pastoral we can look at the poem ‘Build Soil’ subtitled ‘A Political Pastoral.’ It is based on Virgil’s First Eclogue (a dialog between two shepherds).<sup>180</sup> The two main characters are Tityrus, the poet farmer and Meliboeus a

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<sup>176</sup> Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, 93.

<sup>177</sup> Pritchard 203.

<sup>178</sup> J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston, ‘pastoral’ *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th Ed. (London: Penguin, 1999) 645.

<sup>179</sup> Robert Bernard Hass, “‘Measuring Myself against all Creation’: Robert Frost and Pastoral,” *Robert Frost in Context*, 121.

<sup>180</sup> Tuten, “Build Soil-A Political Pastoral,” *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia*, 44.

“poverty stricken potato farmer.”<sup>181</sup> In order to save Meliboeus from poverty, Tityrus suggest the following:

Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself  
Until it can contain itself no more,  
But sweating-full, drips wine and oil a little.  
I will go to my run-out social mind  
And be as unsocial with it as I can.<sup>182</sup>

Here we can see the image of retreat and withdrawal. The core of the advice of Tityrus that will enable Meliboeus to be saved from poverty is to work the land of his farm hard. This “toil will eventually enable [him] to reap the rewards of a higher market value.”<sup>183</sup> Tityrus criticises (as did Frost) the government aid programmes:

Friends crowd around me with their five-year plans  
That Soviet Russia has made fashionable.  
You come to me and I'll unfold to you  
A five-year plan I call so, not because  
It takes ten years or so to carry out,  
Rather because it took five years at least  
To think it out.<sup>184</sup>

Instead he favours “refraining from cash cropping altogether,”<sup>185</sup> meaning that the farmer should grow only for himself and not sell anything. This withdrawal would however not be permanent since it would enable to “reap the rewards” later on.

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<sup>181</sup> Tuten “Build Soil-A Political Pastoral,” *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia*, 44.

<sup>182</sup> Frost 295.

<sup>183</sup> Hass 120.

<sup>184</sup> Frost 295.

<sup>185</sup> Hass 120.

If we return to the characterisation of pastoral provided in the *Penguin Dictionary* we can see how Frost modifies it in 'Build Soil.' First of all, life in the country is not simple. To build soil will require a lot of hard work. Secondly, the country should provide a retreat from "getting and spending" while in fact in the poem it is a means to it. Tityrus himself is moving between two worlds. He is a farmer who also works at a university where the two characters have their conversation. The poem does not therefore in any way praise country life. It is all about finding balance. It is foremost a critique of that which threatens it, specifically socialism that threatens any balance by imposing plans that limit individuality.

For Frost life in the country was synonymous with self-reliance. As Stanlis writes "love of individual freedom, reflective leisure and integrity of character, was to be found in the rural life of the country."<sup>186</sup> However, Frost did not condemn the urban life. Robert Hass mentions a "double consciousness" in relation to Frost's position on the country and urban life. "Neither fully integrated nor wholly separated from either the country or the city Frost immersed himself in both loci, moulding the pastoral tradition in response to ever-changing social and environmental exigencies,"<sup>187</sup> and as such he speaks through Tityrus, who advises Meliboeus "to turn the farm upon itself" to be "unsocial," in order to come to the market as a truly self-reliant individual.

#### **4.8 Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost – Conclusion**

When looking at nature in Frost's poetry we can find the first strict boundary that he establishes between two opposing forces and that is the one between the humans and the natural world, because "unlike Emerson, Frost does not take nature as merely the

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<sup>186</sup> Stanlis 214.

<sup>187</sup> Hass 121.

externalization of the soul.”<sup>188</sup> According to Frost, we are drawn to nature not to become one with it but to find our own individuality. It is truly the most resourceful place, because as Faggen writes “both human and non-human nature spring from the same source”<sup>189</sup> and thus in both we find struggles of conflicting forces. In nature it is the conflict of beauty and inspiration with complete disillusionment and estrangement.

Another important conflict, present in Frost’s pastoral poems, is between rural and urban life. Though Frost viewed “the rural society as the best means”<sup>190</sup> for achieving self-reliance, he also believed in the necessity of a balance between the rural and urban life, and in his time felt that the country was under threat from industrialisation.

Finally, it is important to emphasise the fact that Frost was not born to the country life. He chose it most probably out of creative necessity being inspired by his favourite authors Thoreau and Emerson, but also to act out his philosophy of individualism, of finding balance between the city and country life and the individual and society.

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<sup>188</sup> Faggen, “Frost and the Questions of the Pastoral,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 59.

<sup>189</sup> Faggen, “Frost and the Questions of the Pastoral,” *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, 59.

<sup>190</sup> Stanlis 215.

## 5 Conclusion

To classify Frost only as a certain type of a poet would always mean to miss some important aspect of his work. When asked by an interviewer which label given to him by critics and essayists he prefers, Frost replied: “I take them all, take them and put my arms around them.”<sup>191</sup>

Frost often provided oversimplified explanations for the meanings of his poems. For example when he said the poem ‘The Road Not Taken’ was really about his friend Edward Thomas, or that ‘The Gift Outright’ was about revolutionary war, adding to the ambiguity already present in the poems themselves.

Analysing Frost’s poems with regard to his Emersonian heritage uncovered the way Frost often structured them. He was very skilled at writing impactful lines, those ‘irreducible bits that would be hard to get rid of’. They however, ironically, often reduced the meaning of the poems to something simple. What is characteristic of Frost is the conflicting of two contradicting sources, be it the self and the society, work and play, or country and the city. He favours neither but strives for unity and balance.

Due in part to Frost’s conventional use of form, especially when contrasted with the Modernists, and the seemingly obvious themes, there exists “the assumption that he is more easily read than his contemporaries.”<sup>192</sup> In fact, children in the U.S. are taught some of his poems at early stage of their education, which would further support this assumption. But the real meaning of the poems remains most of the time subdued by the tenses, contained within metaphors or even hidden both from the poet and the reader, such is the case in ‘Mending Wall’ in the line “Something there is that doesn’t love a

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<sup>191</sup> ‘A Conversation With Robert Frost (1952)’ Bela Kornizer, correspondent, NBC News, NBC Universal Media, 23 Nov. 1952, NBC Learn Web, 19 January, 2015 <<https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/flatview?cuecard=62594>> 18 May, 2017.

<sup>192</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, Preface p. x.

wall.” The Emersonians did not attempt to uncover the truth but played with its possibilities and even accepted the fact that it may remain hidden.

In his poems dealing with the theme of nationalism Frost was a national poet, but he cannot be classified only as such. Providing the features of American national literature as Frederick describes them, such as particularism, the accurate representation of the American life and even the “social spiritual force” with his critical political poems, Frost nevertheless expressed doubts about his nation, as seen in the poem ‘The Gift Outright’, and also a certain reluctance about a too close of an affiliation between politics and poetry.

Finally, what can be excluded from the labels that Frost was given is his classification as a nature poet; a nature poet in the sense that Wordsworth, Whitman, and Emerson were. Frost’s nature is a completely separate entity, often times indifferent and even hostile. What Frost’s sees in nature is most of the time some form of the human-self. It can mirror his feelings as in ‘The Wood-Pile’ or be a projection of himself as a poet as in ‘The Oven Bird’. What nature enables Frost’s characters and also the poet himself to achieve is self-reliance.

While this thesis primarily offered a critical analysis of Frost’s poems and their connection to the Emersonian tradition, from Emerson to William James, it was also necessary to look at some biographical facts. Frost’s diplomatic activities and his journey towards a country life serve as evidence that in real life Frost employed the same philosophy he did in his poetry.

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