

# Frost, Schopenhauer, And “The Trial By Existence”

published in *Robert Frost Review* 3 (1993): 93-100.

In a letter to Susan Hayes Ward dated the twenty-sixth of December, 1906, Robert Frost recounts the impression the publication of his poem “The Trial By Existence” in *The Independent* had on his fellow teachers at a small private school:

I had just started teaching at Pinkerton Academy when my poem about the heretofore [“The Trial By Existence”] turned up in the school library. Its effect was startling. From the moment of its appearance, all the teachers abruptly broke off all but the most diplomatic relations with me. Put to it for a reason, I thought at first that my poem had led them to question my orthodoxy (if not my sanity). Then I thought that a flock of teachers would be more apt to loathe me for misspelling Derry than for grafting Schopenhauer upon Christianity (Selected Letters, 37-38).

Frost’s distinguished biographer, Lawrance Thompson, dismisses the idea of Schopenhauer’s influence upon this poem, claiming instead that “it might seem that in the process he grafted Schopenhauer right out of sight” (566). He speculates that perhaps Frost, in the act of revising this poem, “ended his intermittently pessimistic feeling that the ‘Will to live’ might as well be blind, purposeless, amoral, and self-destructive” (566).

Thompson is correct in assuming that Frost did not find himself in Schopenhauer’s philosophical camp. One cannot detect in the poem the unrelenting pessimism that was both Schopenhauer’s burden and gift.

But, far from being grafted completely out of sight, many aspects of his philosophical world-view are manifested in the poem.

Since the Middle Ages, it has been very difficult, if not impossible, to meld together philosophy and theology. The Western philosophical tradition long ago lost the Scholastic notion of philosophy as the handmaiden of theology. But this is what Frost mentions in his letter, this blending of a philosophical and a religious system. Was he trying to fuse the two once again? Or was he merely noting the points of intersection between Schopenhauer, Christianity, and this particular poem? A delineation of Schopenhauer's philosophical system (if it can be called such) is necessary for an exploration of these intersecting points.<sup>2</sup>

Schopenhauer's philosophical ground point is a reaction to Kant's epistemology. Kant claimed that a man could know the appearance of a thing, but never know the thing in itself. Schopenhauer, through looking at the Self, disagreed. He knew himself both as *noumenon* [thing in itself] and *phenomenon* [collection of accidents]. As *noumenon*, he was self-moved, an active being possessing overt behavior which directly expressed his Will. As *phenomenon*, he was an object among objects. Reacting against the Cartesian school, he claimed that he was aware of his body and his Will, but both are subsumed in the Self. The body is the manifestation of the Will, its objectification as it appears under the conditions of external perception. So what he willed and what he did were in reality the same thing, just viewed from two different standpoints. At the bottom of all behavior, of all embodiment of willing, is the Will to Live. Schopenhauer explains it thus:

The Will to Live is that which cannot further be explained, but lies at the foundation of all explanations, and that this, far from being an empty word like the absolute, the infinite, the idea and similar expressions, is the most real thing we know, nay, the kernel of reality itself ("Characterization of The Will to Live" in *The Will to Live*, 45).

Everything strives and presses toward existence, and then, after existence is achieved, toward an organized existence. This, then, is the Will to Live: the desire for the highest possible grade of life that can be gained.

Schopenhauer also taught that man's rationality is ruled by his Will. This negation of Thomistic epistemology leads to certain necessary attributes of the Will, namely that what is real [an embodiment of some Will] is not necessarily rational. What is rational is a subset of what is real, and not vice-versa. He therefore characterized the Will as a nonrational, blind, striving power whose operations are without purpose or design.

But this concept of Will cannot stop with only humans. The universe itself is caught up in this striving toward existence. Extending this into the natural world, Schopenhauer saw the phenomenal world as an expression of some larger Will. This he termed the Universal Will. The natural world, or Nature, then is a meaningless [nonrational] struggle for existence. Existence itself is a struggle, filled with stress, conflict, and tension.

Here also life presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment, but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and soul ("Characterization of the Will to Live" in *The Will to Live*, 50).

This is the philosophical system that Thompson saw Schopenhauer spinning, and his claim that Frost rejects such a relentlessly pessimistic system is almost completely true. But if even a thumbnail sketch is made of "The Trial By Existence" a few chinks in the armor appear. It seems that Frost owes more to Schopenhauer, or experiences more things through Schopenhauer, than Thompson is willing to admit.

The setting of the poem is Paradise (4. All line references are to *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 19-21). The dramatis personae are God and the souls of all who have died. The plot is that God has offered a trial, a trial by existence (19). Only those souls which freely choose to be enfleshed again are sent to Earth to live another life (33). One soul stands forth to accept the trial (42). But he is to have no knowledge of his previous existence in Paradise (53-54). Still, he chooses reincorporation (57-58), so soul is bound to body and sent forth (61-64). The final stanza is a lyrical reflection on earthly life, claiming that the essence of life is this forgetfulness (65-69). This forgetfulness strips souls of pride in the greatness of their choice, and leaves them to bear their lives beaten and puzzled (70-72).

Even this superficial synopsis shows an attitude toward earthly life that cannot be called optimistic. While the setting and plot owe quite a bit to Plato's theory of transmigration of souls in *The Phaedo* and in Book X of *The Republic*, the lyrical last stanza, with its definition of life as "the pain that has but one close," (71) must in some small way be seen as a sharing of Schopenhauer's pessimism. One who has grafted Schopenhauer away does not describe the human condition as "crushed and mystified" (72). One who has opted for optimism does not posit that the reward of this existence is to be faced with other trials (1-8, esp. 7-8).

This acknowledgement of the painfulness of existence, an exploration of the many meanings of the word "trial," highlights one of Frost's preoccupying thoughts in his early life. Thompson himself notes this in his index to volume 1 of his biography, and yet does not make anything of it (628-629). Frost's first philosophical or religious influence was his mother's Swedenborgian religiosity. But this quickly butted against a conflict in the young child's mind between science and religion. From this he moved to a philosophical awareness of the antinomies of evil, or doubts about pain and evil in the Divine Plan.<sup>3</sup> This high-school boy was wrestling with concepts that are necessarily beyond rationality.

It was during this period, in 1892, that he wrote the first draft of “The Trial By Existence.” In 1895 he was exposed to Francis Thompson’s religious poetry, which, although it did not directly address the antinomies, did help assuage some doubts. These doubts were further addressed, although by no means erased, during the years of 1897 and 1898, when Frost was reading William James for the first time. In 1900, Frost’s son died, a blow which shook the foundations of both his rational and extra-rational systems. Throughout that year, he was plagued by more religious doubts. In November, he spoke for the last time with his mother, effectively dismissing her non-questioning faith. He toyed with thoughts of suicide. Through his subsequent readings of Thoreau and Emerson in the following five years he slowly reestablished his religious belief. In 1906 he took up again “The Trial By Existence,” having weathered not only rational questions about the antinomies of evil, but also experiential hardships.

Against this background of questioning and suffering, pain and loss, it is very easy to see the emergence of the ambiguities towards existence that were to mark the entire corpus of Frost’s work. He was constantly discovering and rediscovering faith in a benevolent god. Yet he was constantly buffeted by the trials of existence. It was the recognition of the hardships of humanity that led Schopenhauer to dismiss rationality in favor of the nonrational Will. Frost’s retreat into nonrational mythos for the setting and plot of this poem can be seen as a parallel thought process. There is a closeness between the two in the recognition of the painfulness of human life. The blind striving of the Will to manifest itself and its prerational desires leads to the suffering of humanity. Frost acknowledges this suffering in the final stanza of the poem, offering not even Platonic remembrance to assuage it.

But this recognition of the pain of human life is not all that Frost owes to Schopenhauer. There is also an ethical stance inherent in this poem that comes directly from the philosopher. Schopenhauer was the

first Western philosopher to acknowledge a debt to the Buddhist tradition. Man's attempts to place a rational pattern upon the unruly force of Nature is a bootless exercise. He must overcome such rational temptations. The moral worth of an individual lies in his capacity to liberate himself from the pressures and urges of the Will, not to conform to some rational guidelines. Playing an essential part in this process is the Brahman formula "*Tat tvam asi*," or "You that are." This recognition of the Self as a receptacle for existence enables one to rise above the *maya*, or the illusory world. One must lose all attachments to this illusion of life. It is only through this process that one can escape suffering.

In order to alleviate the suffering of others, one needs compassion, which is a movement of the Will. Compassion's effect is a momentary extinguishing of the Will itself, resulting from a perception of the same suffering in others. This is the first step toward deliverance, this ability to see beyond the phenomena of individuality separating the Self from the Other. This enables one to penetrate the rational veil of illusion and grasp the nonrational reality beneath it, the community that unites all things.

But from where does this compassion come? Schopenhauer must rely upon nonrational terminology, deeming a mystic insight from outside the Self as the power that enables the Self to transcend the Will and the world. This prompting of the heart is the seat of compassion, and is also the key to "*Tat tvam asi*." But this insight is incommunicable and undescribable. It does not reside in a creed or a formula. These can merely point the way to the renunciation of the Will, but can never tell one how to achieve it. Therefore, the end of all philosophy, if properly applied, is nothing but silence.

Frost, too, implicitly accepts the Buddhist influence on this poem. Life on Earth is suffering, for the Buddhist, for Schopenhauer, and for Frost. The end of human existence is to rise above this suffering through a denial of the Self. The Brahman seeks to transcend this world in search of nothingness. Schopenhauer also sought to transcend the Will, most

easily through the Will-less perception of the artist. Frost wishes to rise above this earthly plane. But Frost moves towards something, not nothing. And this is the perennial sticking point between Christianity and Buddhism: the Christian believes he is moving towards something when he transcends this world, while the Buddhist believes he is moving towards nothing. Both are the fonts of *Ipsum Esse*, or Being Itself, but antithetical metaphors are used to express the two concepts. Despite the attempts of Kierkegaard, Otto, and Ricoeur, this gulf in meaning still exists.

Underneath all this is still the transmigration of the soul, a tenet of the Buddhist faith and a non-Christian belief. In the first stanza, souls arrive in paradise only to find that their trials are not over. They may choose to go back to Earth again. The repetition of this cycle, where a soul is continually, cyclically en fleshed in order to be purified belongs not to Christianity but to Buddhism. Even the removal of pride through the forgetfulness of the soul is closer to Eastern than Western thought. Schopenhauer is ambiguous on this point, perhaps because of his rejection of the Cartesian soul/body dualism.

This mind/body or soul/body split is another element of the poem that can be shown in Schopenhauer. Lines 60-64 do not attempt to explain mind/body dualism in a Cartesian way:

And God has taken a flower of gold  
And broken it, and used therefrom  
The mystic link to bind and hold  
Spirit to matter till death come.

Rather, here is an appeal to the mystic force of the golden flower in order to bind soul and body. This position is akin to Schopenhauer's view that the body is a manifestation of the Will. He neatly bypasses the Cartesian dualism through the use of different points of view (see above).

Frost does the same thing, avoiding any question of soul/body dualism through the use of this mystic power to bind the two together.

There is also a more explicit borrowing from Schopenhauer's reading of the Buddhist faith. Line 19 retitles the trial of existence as "the obscuration upon earth." God speaks "life's little dream," as earthly life is called, in lines 37-38. This sounds remarkably like the maya, the illusory world of the Buddhists. Schopenhauer himself says:

...theism looks upon the material world as absolutely real, and regards life as a pleasant gift bestowed on us. On the other hand, the fundamental characteristics of the Brahman and Buddhist religions are idealism and pessimism which look upon the existence of the world as in the nature of a dream,... ("The Christian System" in *The Will to Live*, 315).

This "obscuration" implies that the true world, the real world, is not to be found on Earth, but in Paradise. Something is hidden on Earth, namely the true nature of the soul. The "little dream" of earthly existence is to be overcome through courage. Both Kierkegaard and Tillich expand upon this point in Schopenhauer, assenting that, when faced with the meaninglessness of existence, the naming of existence as meaningless is in itself both a courageous and a meaningful act. Indeed, it is the only meaningful act of earthly existence, and to exist after it requires nothing but courage.<sup>4</sup>

There is one final point of correspondence between Schopenhauer, Christianity, and this poem. When God creates this earthly existence, He "limns / And tenderly, life's little dream," (37-38). The use of this word "limns" is interesting. In standard Scholastic theology, God creates by speaking. The difference between the speech of humans and the speech of God is that, when humans speak, the word signifies an object. There is a distinction between signified and signifier. But when God speaks, His



word is the thing itself. There is no distinction between signified and signifier. Prime examples of this are the first chapter of Genesis (“and God said, let there be light...”) and the opening lines of the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word / and the Word was with God, ...”). So for God, reality is unmediated by language.

An analogous situation exists in Schopenhauer. His aesthetics call for a definition of art that is not concerned with action, but with Will-less perception. The world is seen in abstraction from the desires and anxieties that go with man’s normal perception of it. Therefore, aesthetic knowledge is greater than any other knowledge, because it knows in a disinterested way, in a way around the Will. All art is this way except music. Music expresses the Will itself, directly and immediately. Music is closest to the ultimate, unmediated reality which all men bear within themselves. It speaks an imageless language that all men share.

The creations of Schopenhauer’s artists are akin to the human language, where something created points to something else created or uncreated. But Schopenhauer’s music likens itself to the limning of God, a direct experience of reality which is unmediated by language. In the poem, God speaks and life is. In Schopenhauer, music speaks, and the Will is. Both are direct, unmediated realities.

This dependence upon Schopenhauer did not end with the publication of *A Boy’s Will*. Frost continued to borrow themes from him up until the end of his life. While it is not within the scope of this paper to approach many other poems from throughout Frost’s life, fruitful analyses of Schopenhauer’s influence may be gained in such poems as “Into My Own,” “A Servant to Servants,” “Fire and Ice,” “Wild Grapes,” “Kitty Hawk,” and “The Woodpile.” But to show the pervasiveness of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, at least one more poem should be addressed. “The Trial By Existence” comes from Frost’s first collection of poetry. By turning, then, to his final collection, indeed the

final poem in that collection, Frost's interest in Schopenhauer may be shown to span his entire poetic life.

[“In Winter in the Woods...”] is an untitled piece, taking this name from its first line (*The Poetry of R.F.*, 470). It provides another example of the ambiguity which Frost attaches to existence on Earth. Laurence Perrine reads this poem positively, attaching to the final line a type of optimism concurrent with his reading of “The Trial By Existence” (91). He claims that Frost is coming back ““To strike another blow”” (96). He pictures a man who will return to battle against Nature, never defeating it. Nevertheless, he will come back, he will be immortal, forever returning to fight, giving his one blow and then dying.

But the poem can also be read a different way. There is, of course, the point of reincarnation to tie it to Schopenhauer, but there is much more in this poem to link it with “The Trial By Existence” and Schopenhauer. The persona goes forth into the woods alone (1). He is pitted against Nature (2). He claims a part of Nature for himself (3) and kills it (4). When day, or life, is done, he goes away (5-8). He does not go home, but merely away. He has not defeated Nature (9). And he is not defeated himself, even though he leaves the scene of battle (11). But, and here is the crux of the matter, he will return again “For yet another blow” (12). Who will give and who will receive this blow? Perrine believes that the persona will give the blow, but that is not at all clear from the text. In fact, when one considers all the dark imagery which precedes this line, one might conclude the opposite, that the persona is to receive another blow from Nature. Images of winter, loneliness, a man at odds with the world around him, twilight, darkness, defeat, and indeed the generic martial imagery of the poem seem to set up an ambivalent interpretation of the final line, at best.

Schopenhauer enters the poem, then, in various ways. First, there is the intimation of a return to this wood. The transmigration of souls may help to explain this. But to what does the speaker return? There is no

reason to expect a life any different than the one he has just lived: a life of loneliness, pitted against Nature. Here one can see the uncompassionate Self, locked in a battle against the Universal Will which underlies all of Nature. This struggle, of course, will merely end in a draw, as the persona strives to overcome the Universal Will and the universe itself ceaselessly commits itself as the Will to Live. Finally, what does this life hold in store for him? The concluding line of the poem can be read with Perrine's optimism, or it can be seen as the close of the pain of existence, which the speaker has born, throughout life, crushed and mystified.

Frost's ambiguity toward existence in general leaves quite a bit of room for speculation about its origins. There is, of course, the fact of the poet's own hardships in life to suggest itself as a font for this ambiguity. His struggle with belief in a benevolent god in the face of such adversity is also a consideration in this argument. But there is a third factor, one which has been dismissed by critics, but one which Frost himself admits to quite frankly, the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. No analysis of the pain with which Frost paints earthly life can be complete without reference to this philosopher's influence on the young Frost, an influence which lasted throughout the poet's lifetime.

## Notes

1. Susan Hayes Ward was the literary editor of *The Independent*. The poem was published on October 11, 1906.

2. Primary sources in this study include:

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung: The World as Will and Idea*, R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, trans., 3 vols., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1891.

---. *Selected Essays of Schopenhauer*, T.B. Saunders, trans., NY: A.L. Burt, 1892.

---, *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, Richard Taylor, ed., NY: Doubleday, 1962.

The most helpful secondary sources are:

Frederic C. Copleston, *Schopenhauer, Philosopher of Pessimism*, London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1946

Patrick Gardiner, "Schopenhauer" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols., NY: Macmillan, 1972, v.7, pp. 325-332.

Richard Taylor, "Arthur Schopenhauer" in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, D.J. O'Connor, ed., NY: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.

I must also express my debt to C.D. Keyes for his phenomenological reading of the primary sources and to Michael Barber, SJ, for his ethical analyses of the same.

3. Perhaps the most succinct drawing of the antinomies of evil can be found in C.D. Keyes, *God or Ichabod?*, Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 1973.

4. See *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, Perry D. LeFevre, ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956, pp. 149-166. and also Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1952, pp. 178-186.

## Bibliography

Copleston, Frederic C. *Schopenhauer, Philosopher of Pessimism*. London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1946.

Frost, Robert. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*. Ed. Lawrance Thompson. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

---. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Gardiner, Patrick. "Schopenhauer, Arthur." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 8 vols. NY: Macmillan, 1972, 7, 325-332.

Keyes, C.D. *God or Ichabod?* Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 1973.

- Kierkegaard, Sören. *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. Ed. Perry D. LeFevre. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956.
- Perrine, Laurence. "Robert Frost and the Idea of Immortality." *Robert Frost: Centennial Essays II*. Ed. Jac Tharpe. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1976, 85-98.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung: The World As Will And Idea*. Trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp. 3 vols. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner, 1891.
- . *Selected Essays of Schopenhauer*. Trans. T.B. Saunders. NY: A.L. Burt, 1892.
- . *The Will to Live: Selected Essays of Schopenhauer*. Ed. Richard Taylor. NY: Doubleday, 1962.
- Taylor, Richard. "Arthur Schopenhauer." *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. Ed. D.J. O'Connor. NY: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.
- Thompson, Lawrance. *Robert Frost: The Early Years*. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven, CN: Yale UP, 1952.