Frost and Philosophy
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PHILOSOPHY. Frost's richness and depth of thought, manifested not only in his poetry but in his **prose** writings and letters, is carried in a current of deep speculation about the nature of humanity, the presence or absence of any guiding principles for humanity's interactions, and the relationship of that humanity with a transcendent other. Eddies in that current lead him to question, in very informal ways, the nature of art and the place of logic in the human condition.

Early critics of Frost attempted to show an affinity between his thought and that of the New England Transcendentalists. They fell prey to Frost's trappings but never really penetrated to the thought below his surface, the systemic reasoning that informed his poetry. Yvor Winters, for example, connects Frost and **Emerson**, noting especially a distrust of reason in Frost and the Transcendentalists and making this connection to Frost's detriment, claiming that Frost believes "that impulse is trustworthy and reason contemptible." Winters argues, "the principles which have hampered Frost's development, the principles of Emersonian and Thoreauistic Romanticism [*see* **Thoreau**], are the principles which he has openly espoused."

Later critics, such as Alvan S. Ryan and W.W. Robson, take a dimmer view of Frost's connection to the Transcendentalists, and carve out a niche, both positive and negative, for Frost's unique philosophical speculations. Ryan notes the differing views toward that most important of Transcendentalist subjects, Nature, in Frost's and Emerson's works. Robson condemns the critics who borrow weight from Emerson because they cannot divine the weight in Frost's own words. Both give Frost a philosophical space of his own, created through eclectic reading and a firm sense of the paradoxes of the human condition.

An informed discussion of Frost's philosophy, both in its influences and its method, must hold with the latter-day view. Frost had much personal energy invested in his public persona as a rural New England farmer, close to the earth and following in the philosophical tradition of the New England Transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau. To take him at his public face, however, would be misleading, for his current of thought runs much deeper, and in a much more systematic vein, than American Transcendentalism would allow.

Frost's philosophical influences are many, and are not solely American. In describing one of his earliest published poems, **"The Trial By Existence,"** he alludes to the influence of Schopenhauer on his own thought. Thompson writes that Frost eliminated all traces of the philosopher, but even a cursory glance at Schopenhauer's system and Frost's poem show that he imbued the poem with much that was digested from the classical and continental philosophical traditions. Indeed, the very conceit of the poem, that after death souls willingly choose to be reincarnated even though this means giving up not only a paradisiacal existence but also all memories of a previous earthly existence, is a Platonic notion coupled with elements of both Western and Eastern philosophy and mysticism.

In both Schopenhauer and Frost there is a reaction against Kantian epistemology, where Kant claimed that an individual could know the appearance of a thing but never the thing in itself. Schopenhauer, looking at the Self, disagreed. He knew himself both as noumenon (a thing in itself) and phenomenon (a 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. Denying the Cartesian mind/body dualism, he claimed that he was aware of his body and his Will, but both are subsumed in the lived experience of the Self. The

body is the manifestation of the Will, its objectification as it appears under the conditions of external perception. So what is willed and what is done are in reality the same thing viewed from two different loci. At the bottom of all behavior, of all embodiment of willing, is the Will to Live. This grounding principle of Schopenhauer's thought motivates the souls in "The Trial By Existence" who wish to return to earth.

Frost's thoughts on Nature may be seen as an exploration of this reaction to rational imposition upon the external world. Nature exists outside the Self, is formed there and has existence beyond the idealistic notion that thought determines reality. This is not to say that Frost eschews rationality but that it is not sufficient for a total understanding of Nature and the human experience. Poems such as **"Fire and Ice,"** ending in a paradox which cannot be rationally resolved, or **"The Witch of Coös,"** where extrarationality is an essential part of life, show Frost's insistence on the existence of something else, neither more nor less but parallel to rational thought. Frost recognizes the equality of both rational and extrarational processes and situationally gives prominence to one or the other. Richard Poirier's chapter on Frost's epistemology and especially his thoughts on Frost's ideas on love demonstrate this juxtaposition throughout Frost's corpus.

Frost's method of arriving at the "truth" of a poem is obviously indebted to the Hegelian notion of thesis and antithesis in conflict, which produces a synthesis. This is particularly clear in the dialogue poems, especially **"Home Burial"** and **"The Death Of The Hired Man."** In both poems, Frost sets up a dialogic conflict, and resolution of the conflict is the business of the poem. Rationality and extrarationality combine to create a synthesis, something different than either one alone. The movement toward such synthetic truth, something that combines the conflicts of human existence, is the philosophical work of such dialogue poems.

Perhaps Frost's strongest philosophical connection was with William James, the American pragmatist. Poirier cites James's *Pragmatism* as a source of many of Frost's metaphors and of his "general disposition." The final lines of **"The Road Less Traveled"** owe much to the final paragraph of James' essay, "The Will to Believe," and James' lecture "Some Metaphysical Problems Metaphysically Considered" is certainly a primary source for Frost's **"Design."** Pragmatism as a philosophical movement was concerned with the connection in humanity between thinking and acting. The pragmatist philosophers found little value in modes of thought that did not have some value in daily existence, and yet they placed the foundation of all action in thought itself. Pragmatism attempted to unite the disparate fields of empiricism and idealism, acknowledging a pluralistic approach to knowledge which would also include the extrarational, especially **religion** and morality. The pragmatic "method" of consideration for any theory was to ask what difference in daily existence the acceptance or rejection of that set of ideas and facts would make. Such concern for the outward manifestation of thought and feeling can be seen as the work of Frost's poetry. He does not reconcile opposing forces, nor does he side with one end of the spectrum or another. Rather, he acknowledges the tension between opposing ideas such as emotion and rationality, the individual and the community, morality and immorality, home and the outside world, existence and nonbeing, and he situates himself in the midst of the creative tension that the often paradoxical alternatives create.

References and further reading: Parini, *A Life*, 61-63, discusses William James's influence on Frost; for a study of Frost and Schopenhauer, see Pellegrino; Poirier, *Knowing*, is an essential tool for the study of Frost's philosophy; also helpful are Monteiro, *New England* and "Redemption: Robson, 750; Ryan, Wakefield, *Opposing Lights*; Winters, 75, 82.