Further Ranges

3.1. Introduction

Amy Lowell paid a glowing tribute to Robert Frost with the following lines:

Majestic, remote, a quite beautiful pose,

(Or escape, or indulgence, or all three, who knows?)

Set solidly up in a niche like an oracle

Dispensing replies which he thinks categorical.

Yet note, if you please, this is but one degree

Of Frost, there are more as you’ll presently see,

And some of them are so vexatiously teasing

All this stored heat is needed to keep him from freezing.

Robert Frost has been described as a pastoral poet, Nature poet, modern poet, a poet of democracy and much more. But reading and rereading Frost leads one to the conclusion reached by Amy Lowell—"this is but one degree of Frost, there are more." He is still one of the most widely read poets of America, even though different critics attribute different reasons for that. In his poetry there is always an easy image, a
familiar image and people speaking every-day language with which the reader quickly identifies himself.

Despite this popularity, Frost and his poetry has always baffled the critics and the readers alike. Almost all aspects of the poetry and poetic creed of Frost like diction, tone, rhyming, metre, sensibility, approaches and perceptions were subjected to very strict scrutiny. Even after all these comprehensive discussions, Frost, just like an ice berg, is visible only partially.

His poetry is, by general apprehension, a persistent quest for the truth, revealing the isolation, alienation and limitations of man in this vast universe. It has transcended the boundaries of time and place with metaphysical significance and modern exploration of human Nature in all its beauty and contradictions. Poet Octavio Paz’s observations will perhaps serve as an introduction to the discussion of Frost’s philosophy and vision. In an interview with the American poet in 1945, the Mexican poet says:

... he looked like an ancient sage, the kind who prefers to observe the world from his retreat. But there was nothing ascetic in his looks, rather a manly sobriety. There he was, in his cabin, removed from the world, not to renounce it but to see it better. (2)
This chapter endeavours to analyse Frost’s views on God-realisation and the Mystical consciousness of Nature as manifested in his poems. The mutual relation and influence of Man, Nature and God have been generally acknowledged as the hallmarks of Frost’s poetry. At times being bitter-sweet, sometimes ironic, or simply marvelling at his surroundings, one can see autobiographical details in Frost’s work.

3.2. Frost’s Mystic Vision

It is not a well known fact that Frost had moments of illumination which had its reflections on his poetry. Rabbi Victor E. Reichert, Frost’s neighbour and long-time friend, writes of one such revelation that the poet told him.

“Did you ever have a revelation?” Robert asked once in walking about Bread Loaf.

“What about you?” I countered.

Then at last Frost said, “I’ve had insights that have come to me when I was riding high. Call them ‘nature favors.’ An owl that banked as it turned in its flight made me feel as if I’d been ‘spoken to—favored.’ ” The poems “Dust of Snow” and “A Passing Glimpse” flashed through my mind. (424)
"Dust of Snow" is a short poem in which the poet recounts the change of mood caused by a crow shaking down the dust of snow on him. It was an unexpected and pleasant experience from an unlikely source. The incident, according to the poet:

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued. (221)

Young Robert might have been considerably influenced by his mother's mystical beliefs. Lawrence Thompson recounts a curious incident of Frost's childhood:

He was still a child in San Francisco when he began to hear voices. If left alone in a room for some time, he was often simultaneously fascinated and terrified by hearing a voice, which spoke to him. . . . When he told his mother about these perplexing experiences, she seemed to understand them better than he did. Sympathetically she hinted that he shared, with her, mystical powers; (21)

Jay Parini, another biographer of the poet corroborates this fact. He quotes one friend of the poet as saying:
To the end of his life, Robert believed that he could hear voices, real voices. His poems came to him like voices from nowhere. He liked to be alone just to listen, to communicate with the spirit-world. (15)

3.3. God-concept of Frost

Whether Frost believed in God is a frequently asked question in interviews with the poet. Much debate has taken place in this regard. The poet’s daughter Lesley Frost regards this question as “quite superfluous.” She refers to an interview in which the poet has remarked, “I despise religiosity. But I have no religious doubts. Not about God’s existence, anyway” (313).

Frost’s approach towards God who created this universe and the ways of God are noteworthy. Though he was baptized in the Swedenborgian church by his mother, he quit it in his later years. He does not side up with any religious doctrine but at the same time he has faith in God, the Creator of this universe. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, he writes:

I was brought up a Swedenborgian. I am not a Swedenborgian now. But there’s a good deal of it that’s left with me. I am a mystic. I believe in symbols. (qtd. in Bagby 380)
The spontaneous sermon Frost delivered at the Rockdale Avenue Temple throws more light to his concept of religion and God. He began by saying wisdom is better than bravery. He explains:

Now religion always seems to me to come round to something beyond wisdom. It's a straining of the spirit forward to a wisdom beyond wisdom ... the fear of God always has meant the fear that one's wisdom, one's own wisdom, one's own human wisdom is not quite acceptable in His sight... Always the fear that it may not be quite acceptable. That, I take, is the fear of God, and is with every religious nature, always.

(Reichert, Faith of Frost 420)

Frost believes in the existence of an Almighty, an invisible power which gives an order to the universe. Through reason alone one cannot understand God. The close relation between matter and spirit or soul reveals the essence of life:

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. (FP 21)

To understand the God of Frost, an understanding of the streak of mirth in him is essential. Nothing is closer to truth than the reply made by
Bishop Henry W. Hobson to a man who said that Frost was an atheist. Reichert remembers the bishop’s words: “Robert Frost was no atheist. What you don’t understand and Frost did was that God has a sense of humor!” Reichert terms this relationship of the poet with God as “the playful intimacy of a naughty grand child” (Faith of Frost, 416). The poet is able to promise to God: “Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee / And I’ll forgive Thy great big one on me” (FP 428).

Frost never resorts to any categorical statements in his conception of God. It is typical of him to be playfully serious in his concept of God. Marion Montgomery emphasises this point thus:

He does not choose to make any sweeping statements about God any more than he does about nature or man. This has occasioned the belief among some critics that Frost is at best agnostic. But Frost feels that Heaven “gives its glimpses to those/Not in position to look too close.” (141)

It has been pointed out that transcendentalism influenced Frost’s God-concept very much. The scope of transcendental ideas which had become a powerful movement in America was much expanded and thus included, among many ideals, Swedenborgianism and Oriental Philosophy. Frost was also attracted by the concept of ‘Brahma’ as propounded by
Emerson. God according to him transcended the limits of human knowledge. Yvor Winters points out:

Frost has said that Emerson is his favorite American poet, and he himself appears to be something of an Emersonian. Emerson was a Romantic pantheist: he identified God with the universe; he taught that impulse comes directly from God and should be obeyed, and that through surrender to impulse we become one with God; he taught that reason is man-made and bungling and should be suppressed...Frost believes in the rightness of impulse, but does not discuss the pantheist doctrine... (60)

His perception of God is quite different. He firmly believed that God's ways are mysterious and beyond the scope of human survey. He had a strong opposition against empirical methodology or sensory impressions practised by the modern society in search of God. Guy Rotella opines thus:

Frost thought that there are no validations, or that if there are, they are inaccessible to human consciousness. Any appearance of external validation for human meaning results from metaphoric impositions of pattern where none demonstrably exists, and from the human tendency to take those impositions as fact or gospel. (58)
Frost’s father was a puritan. Puritans also believed in the existence of a transcendental God who is the guarantor of the universe. For them Nature was a composition of God which could be read for His presence, His truth. So the poet writes in “Time Out”:

It took that pause to make him realize
The mountain he was climbing had the slant
As of a book held up before his eyes
(And was a text albeit done in plant). (355)

Whether this text is understood or not depends upon the observer. But what Nature does is to provide its moments for reflections.

The poem, “Kitty Hawk,” according to Dorothy Hall, “is a crucial statement of Frost’s belief” (325). To Lawrence Thompson, the poem is “a partial autobiography of his early life and the philosophy of his maturity” (Biography 419). The poet envisages man as the creation of God. Therefore he should follow God’s demonstration:

But God’s own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation. (FP 435)
The question as to what is the meaning and nature of this ‘demonstration’ and ‘risk’ has caused several interpretations of the poem. A deeper penetration of the mysteries of life and the universe can be attained by charging the material world with the spiritual. The poet himself speaks of the poem:

My theme is that the only ‘event’ in all history is science plunging deeper into matter. . . . In taking us deeper and deeper into matter, science has left all of us with this great misgiving, this fear that we won’t be able to substantiate spirit. (qtd. in Dorothy Hall, Frost 64)

Though an exploration for Absolute Truth is a constant theme in many of his poems, it was in his later poems that he expressed much about his views of God. The two masques, A Masque of Reason and A Masque of Mercy are explorations and evaluations of man’s relation to God and God’s relationship to man. Man with his limitations is not able to comprehend God. The book keeper in A Masque of Mercy laments, “We were not given eyes or intellect/ For all the light at once the source of light-/For wisdom that can have no counter wisdom.”

But the human perception is not able to figure out the Eternal Wisdom. The keeper is only able to perceive “A light that falls diffused
over my shoulder/And is reflected from the printed page/And bed of flowers so as not to blind me” (515). Similarly,

In our subscription to the sentiment

Of one God, we provide He shall be one

Who can be many Gods to many men, 

.............................................

’ Twas said the lesser gods were only traits

Of the one awful God. Just so the saints

Are God’s white light refracted into colors. (515-6)

If one is cognizant of this white light, the rough zones will vanish. So “Meditate nothing. Learn to contemplate/Contemplate glory. There will be a light/Contemplate Truth until it burns your eyes out” (517). This contemplation might lead to glimpses of heaven sometimes. When there are no glimpses, man is a solitary figure isolated from a universe he cannot comprehend proclaiming that ‘I have been acquainted with night’ or that he is scared of his own desert places.

To sum up, Frost’s God is an Almighty who endows this universe with a divine order. He cannot be conceived through logic or reason. He is the Eternal Wisdom. He is transcendent.
3.3. Mystical Consciousness in the Poetry of Frost

Frost has proclaimed himself as a mystic. As quoted above in this study, he also declares that he is a believer in symbols. But it seems that there are very few pronouncements of Frost as a mystic poet. Nonetheless many critics have pointed out in Frost's poems a pattern of revelation and concealment as in The Bible. The notion of mysticism needs to be rescinded to analyse the poetry of Robert Frost.

Literature, like all spiritual discourses, is a manifestation of the experience of God. Joyce Carol Oates says:

Out of the spontaneous mystical experience of the individual, we have, gradually, inevitably, the intellectualization of that experience—religion, philosophy, science, formal art, civilization itself. (4)

In Frost, this experience as well as its manifestation in poetry is slow and gradual. In his early poems he is reticent about the 'ways of God.' But he did move away from this state to that of sight and then to insight, the phases of which are quite discernible in his poetry. The very first few lines of 'Astrometaphysical' simply state how he has loved the changing skies of His Lord.

Lord, I have loved Your sky,
Be it said against or for me,
Have loved it clear and high,
Or low and stormy; (FP 388)

The Poet’s prayers do not demand anything. They only seek the strength to live in the present. “A Prayer in Spring” is an example. One need not be unduly worried about the harvest. It is of no use because man is not in control of the harvest. It is uncertain. In the larger scheme of things our hopes may or may not be fulfilled. It is not that the poet is unconcerned about tomorrow, but it is wiser to focus attention on today and this is love, love towards God also. So he says:

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

...............................

And make us happy in the darting bird
That suddenly above the bees is heard,
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
And off a blossom in mid-air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above (FP 12)

Occasionally, in a state of contemplation man perceives something in the cosmos that beckons him to a truth beyond. This can be described as
a preliminary stage of illumination. The speaker in "For Once Then
Something," describes how he saw deep down in a well "a shining surface
picture."

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,

I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,

Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,

Something more of the depths—and then I lost it. (FP 225)

A drop of water from a fern created a ripple and it was blurred and
blotted out. The speaker is now left wondering, "... what was that
whiteness/ Truth? A pebble of quartz?" He recognizes that it is what it is
for once and it is then something. The wholeness of vision is denied to the
speaker-narrator. The sudden illuminating moment is lost forever. The
words like "something white", "uncertain", "blurred" etc. are quite
suggestive. These suggestive qualities, richness of meaning and mystic
haze are found in Frost’s mystic poems.

The well into which the poet gazes can be a symbol of one’s own
self, one’s own consciousness. Piercing the mystery, he sees something
white. Mario L. D’Avanzo rightly remarks that "While ‘Birches’ aspire
upward, ‘For Once, Then, Something’ gazes downward to a mystical
essence" (89). The ‘whiteness’ perhaps indicates a vision of the Absolute
Truth.
Guy Rotella's analysis of this poem is significant:

In a sense, this poem is a version of the story of the Fall ... *Once*, human beings had access to truth and could discern it through the world's transparent surface. But then some drop, some fall, occurred. The world became opaque, so that now it gives us back no more than the image of ourselves, our projections. Still, the memory of that one-time penetrating glimpse keeps us kneeling religiously, heroically at well-curbs, writing poems or philosophies, seeking the something "deeper" we may never see. (84)

Mystical experiences are usually short-lived. Occasionally an experience becomes a moment of sudden illumination. The focus of the poem, "Happiness Makes up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," is such an experience in the life of a couple. Here the man is surveying his past life which was dominated by tragedies and sorrows. He wonders from where he got the lasting sense of happiness to survive and he remembers one perfect day they had:

When starting clear at dawn

The day swept clearly on

To finish clearly at eve.

I verily believe
My fair impression may
Be all from that one day
No shadow crossed but ours
As through its blazing flowers
We went from house to wood
For change of solitude. (FP 333)

This radiant experience, though it did not last for long changed
everything for them. The couple was rapturously happy for one single day.
But the intensity of happiness makes up for what it lacked in duration. As
W.G.O'Donnel points out, this experience "transfigured everything and
acted as an insight into the strength of man's spirit that can suffer evil yet
remember good" (54).

This poem resembles "Going for Water" in A Boy's Will. In both
pieces the central characters are a couple who live in solitude and go
towards wood. The couple in "Going for Water" shares the joy of youth
and companionship. The following lines indicate it: "We ran as if to meet
the moon/ That slowly dawned behind the trees" (18). But the couple in
"Happiness Makes Up in Height" speaks with Knowledge of experiences,
the experiences tempered with the tragic discoveries of life. The transition
from innocence in the early poems to knowledge in the later poems is
vivid. Lawrance Thompson asserts:
. . . From his early lyrics in *A Boy's Will* (Such as, for example "A Prayer in Spring") to his last major poem "Kitty Hawk" Frost makes representations of the venture of spirit into matter, in ways best understood if interpreted as expressions of worship, even as expressions of prayer. His basic point of departure (and return) is a firmly rooted belief in both Nature and human Nature as at least poetically relatable within a design which has its ultimate source in a divine plan . . . (Theory of Poetry 32)

Once being reassured of the mystic experience, the poet searches for some solutions to the human problem. Certainly he is seeking a brief interval away from this "pathless wood." Very fervently he expresses his wish: "I'd like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over." (FP 122)

But his yearning to go beyond this world is accompanied by a fear of death. The sense of mystery behind this fear is also note worthy. But what is more notable is the poet's desire to come back to this earth to "love." Mystical experience, for him, is not an escape from this world.

In "Wild Grapes", the terrified little girl does not 'let go' of the branch she clings to. She pays no attention to her brother's coaxing. The brother tries to console her and finally finds a way out to rescue her. He
bends the tree down and she touches the ground again. The brother mocks her for being such a weightless creature that even the birches can swing her into space. But the lesson that she should have learned, 'the first step in knowledge' is that she should learn to 'let go' and that she shouldn't cling onto things precious for her. But she is like the majority who vainly wish that they could let go with the heart, with the mind and discover that it is next to what is impossible.

The plight of the little girl is that of the common man who cannot give up little things. But he hardly realizes that his possessions actually restrain him. It separates him from others and from God. Freedom is when one learns to 'let go' and lets go everything. The undertones of Eastern mystical thoughts, especially the transitoriness of worldly gains or the concept of Maya are quite clear. This is also an indication of the phase of purgation in which the self realises the impediments which stand in its way towards God.

Man's attempt to understand the world around him may not succeed always. "The Trial by Existence" explains how the soul in its earthly journey retains no memory of the other world. Only through struggles and sufferings on earth one can get rid of pride. So God says to the soul which has willingly chosen the life on earth:

... the pure fate to which you go
Admits no memory of choice
Or the woe were not earthly woe
To which you give the assenting voice. (FP 21)

Thus the soul in Frost's poem is much unlike Wordsworth's, which proclaims "trailing clouds of glory" of the other world (247). The human mind at birth is entirely blank. So the poet asserts that even the bravest who are slain will discover in Paradise that "the utmost reward of daring should be still to dare" (19). Marion Montgomery in her penetrating study of the poem suggests:

It is futile to attempt a complete explanation of why there are so many difficulties to prevent man's taking in and building his garden in the world. Man's real virtue, it argues is to dare, to seek to build the wall which allows the garden to flourish for a time. (143)

In his essay "On Grief and Reason," Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky, lists "Acquainted With The Night" among the poems "dealing with the dark nights of the soul" (17). The poem presents a city of night. Life in the city is artificial, away from Nature. As in many other poems of Frost, whenever man is away from Nature, he is lonely and anguished. The poet-speaker goes out of his home and returns while it is raining. He casts a glance at the "saddest city lane" and passes the watchman on his beat. He
suddenly hears a cry from another street. This cry from far off enhances the awfulness of the scene. He stood still to listen to that sound. The poet then moves further and hears the "luminary clock" that stood "still at an unearthly height" proclaiming the time that was "neither wrong nor right."

In the mechanical, impersonal world of the city the clock at the "unearthly height" has no sense of good or evil. The poem begins and ends with the statement "I have been one acquainted with the night" (FP 255). The repetition enhances the darkness that pervades the poem. As Manorama Trikha observes:

> Each man has to be acquainted with the "night" on his own; the night sets the image for the entire poem and "I" implies every man. Theologically speaking, the night may stand for ignorance of evil; symbolically, it represents the sadness that life has to offer. (154)

The poem "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" is a typical example of intellectual mysticism. It is a religious poem. The intuitive faculty of the poet makes him a supervisor of "faith" and "life." God withdrew from the world, after declaring that He was true. Even though God has withdrawn the tokens of evidence of Himself, one must not scoff about His existence. The universe is still charged with the grandeur of God. Critics are of the opinion that the bush by which the poet sits is the burning
bush of Moses. It no longer burns now because the revelation has been given. All life, all creations persist from that one revelation. Thus the poem ends with a positive note of affirmation of faith:

God once spoke to people by name.
The sun once imparted its flame.
One impulse persists as our breath;
The other persists as our faith. (FP 266)

Metaphoric language is one of the prime attributes of Frost's poetry. It renders an unusual depth to his mysticism. The poet's own words vouchsafe this:

There are many other things I have found myself saying about my poetry, but the chiefest of this is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. . . every poem is a metaphor inside or it is nothing. (FCP 786)

A fine example for such poems that require a symbolic interpretation is "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep." It asserts the deep mystery of Nature and the limitation of man's vision. The people looking towards the sea "cannot look out far" and they "cannot look in deep" (FP 301). Their vision is limited only to the surface. The poem, according to Reginald Cook, "is the continued image of human limitation" (289). But this does not mean that
they should not look towards the sea. D’Avanzo calls it “A calmer search for vision.” He adds that the poem expresses “religious affirmation and the Emersonian idea that nature mirrors the eternal” (101-2).

This haunting lyric lends itself to several interpretations. The people standing on the seashore have their backs turned to the land and are looking towards the sea. The land symbolises the world of change and flux while the sea represents the perfect world of imagination. Thus the quest for the mysterious, the far-off and the unknown is communicated by means of symbols. Man is very small and unimportant in this vast, changing universe. But still he continues to watch and hope for the truth wherever it may be. What is laudable is man’s courage in facing an unpredictable universe.

The delight of remembering something as expressed in the line, “I didn’t know I knew” is quite different an attitude from the early Romantics or the late Moderns (FP 301). Frost is always able to acknowledge the limitations of human knowledge. But at the same time he tirelessly continues his quest for truth. This is visible in “The Secret Sits.” The poet says, “We dance around in a ring and suppose/But the Secret sits in the middle and knows” (FP 362).

“Directive” is considered to be one of his most philosophical poems. Written with a rare combination of humour and matter of fact acceptance,
this many-layered poem becomes memorable for several reasons. The opening lines direct the reader to another world, to a "time made simple by the loss of detail, burned, dissolved and broken off" (FP 377). Nothing is certain but the journey.

For the traveller, the journey is an ordeal. But it is noteworthy that the destination is the life-giving brook. After the strenuous and demanding journey, when you reach the brook: "Here are your waters and your watering place / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (FP 379). In closeness to Nature, confusions are allayed. Perhaps John Le Vay has put it most aptly when he claims: "Frost as the creedless (though not faithless) 'guide,' 'only has at heart (our) getting lost' that is losing our confused, fragmented artificial self; find our 'simple,' 'whole' natural self" (43). This can be called the culmination of the mystical consciousness in Frost.

3.4. Concept of Nature

Frost's attitude to Nature also has been much debated upon. Most of the readers readily agree that Frost is a Nature poet as they come across flowers, woods, trees, snow, spring, butterflies etc. in his poems. Many of the critics also share this view. But this is just a surface evaluation of the poet. He was not just a bard who sang of the wonders of flowers and mountain streams. He is a Nature poet with a difference like Wordsworth. Robert W. French comments on the Nature element in the poetry of Frost:
Rightly or wrongly, Robert Frost has achieved a reputation as a poet of nature; and it is true that one tends to think of him posed against the landscapes of rural New England. He may in his poems be looking at birches, or stopping by woods on a snowy evening, or picking apples, or listening to the thrush or the ovenbird; wherever he is, he seems to be participating in the life of nature, deriving sustenance from it, and finding in it a deeply satisfying source of pleasure.(155)

It is true that Nature is the subject of most of Frost's poems. But his concept of Nature is fundamentally different from Nature as conceived by the romantics. Nature is not merely a fountain of endless beauties. To Robert Frost, Nature is invariably connected to man. He places equal emphasis on man and his attitudes towards Nature. He is perhaps reiterating this aspect when he claims in an interview, "I guess I'm not a Nature poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in it" (Montgomery 138).

A survey of the poems of Robert Frost from A Boy's Will to the last untitled poem "In Winter in the Woods Alone," published in In the Clearing, reveals that Nature remains an enchanting phenomenon for the poet. At times, man experiences a brief harmony with Nature. Invariably something else intrudes as if to establish that everything cannot be
explained by reason alone. Some times it seems that the poet is stating what is obvious. When he does so, he has some other design also. An event, an object or the backdrop of Nature gradually acquires greater significance. It begins to offer a range of interpretations. A tree at the window, the tuft of flowers or blueberries reveals several layers of the reality of life. His meditations on Nature mark a clear departure from the traditional notions.

Over the years, the concept of Nature Poetry has undergone rapid changes. For a long time, Nature Poetry was interpreted from the Romantic’s point of view. Poetry, with a philosophical view of Nature was considered Nature Poetry. Robert Frost’s concept of Nature is quite different from that of the Romantics. Like a true Nature-mystic he wistfully yearns for this world of perfection, where man is in harmony with all life. He explores Nature and in his journey of exploration he almost always comes across a sort of veil between the soul of Man and Nature. When this veil is lifted, even if it is only for a moment, man has a glimpse of heaven, a world of perfection. Brodsky tries to connect this exploration with the quest for self realisation when he says: “Nature for this poet is neither friend nor foe, nor it is the backdrop for human drama; it is this poet’s terrifying self portrait” (8).
Frost observes and records whatever he sees in Nature. He finds spiritual echoes in it but at times it is impersonal and baffling. While the nineteenth century poets had a highly serious attitude to Nature, Frost is half serious, half playful, in his approach to Nature. One of his later poems is of particular interest here. It seems to state something about his poetic technique also. The poet himself warns the readers not to take him too seriously: “It takes all sorts of in—and outdoor schooling /To get adapted to my kind of fooling” (FP 470).

Nature constantly fascinates him. Whether it is the dark lovely woods, a songbird, a butterfly or the falling of snow, images drawn from Nature pour forth incessantly. “Birches”, “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “The Tuft of Flowers”, “A Minor Bird”, “A Hillside Thaw”, and “The Tree at My Window” are just some of the examples. “A Hillside Thaw”, gives a captivating picture of how the sun shines on the snow on hillside. It is like:

Ten million silver lizards out of snow!

As often as I’ve seen it done before

I can’t pretend to tell the way it’s done.

It looks as if some magic of the sun

Lifted the rug that bred them on the floor . . .(FP 237).
For him Nature is both benevolent and intimidating. "Nothing Gold Can Stay", "Leaves Compared with Flowers" and "Our Hold on The Planet" are some poems which illustrate this aspect. For Frost, "Nature is at once harsh and mild. Man's relation to Nature, as to his fellows, is both together and apart" (Gerber, Frost 132). Even if Nature has her darker moods, man has an advantage over her. At least, the poet thinks so, for he writes in "Our Hold on The Planet":

There is much in nature against us. But we forget:

Take nature altogether since time began,

Including human nature, in peace and war,

And it must be a little more in favor of man . . . (FP 349)

As John F. Lynen points out "there is bleakness in his landscape and a sharpness of outline in imagery quite foreign even to Wordsworth's Cumberland. . ." (Nature and Pastoralism 125). "Desert Places" gives a picturesque description of snow fall and night fall in deep woods. Everything is under a heavy blanket of snow: "A blanker whiteness of benighted snow/ With no expression, nothing to express" (FP 296). The stark whiteness of the snow against total darkness of the woods is quite frightening. Its indifference ("no expression") and lack of interest ("nothing to express") are almost smothering. The emptiness of the
landscape is similar to the desolation that the speaker feels within him. What is more disturbing is the emptiness felt in his mind. Thus Nature and its moods acquire great significance in the emotional landscape of the poet.

Any discussion on the concept of Nature of Frost will not be complete without mentioning his famous letter to The Amherst Student. He writes:

There is at least so much good in the world that admits of form and the making of form. And not only admits of it, but calls for it. . . . In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself. . . . The artist, the poet, might be expected to be the most aware of such assurances, but it is really everybody's sanity to feel it and live by it. (Sel Letters 418)

A concern with the form of poem becomes part of poetic activity itself. So the poet declares, "Let chaos storm!/Let cloud shapes swarm!/I wait for form" (FP 308). This contention invariably leads to a discussion on the Nature Mysticism of the poet.

3.5. **Nature Mysticism**

In Frost's poetry the relation between man and Nature is an extension of the relation between self and Nature. Usually, with a glint of
humour the poet chooses the specific to embody the universal. His attitude towards Nature varies from poem to poem. Mystical consciousness of Nature or rather a sense of oneness with Nature elevates man to a higher level. "A Tuft of Flowers" serves as an example. Nature, like a true companion leads him out of gloom and loneliness to a state of happiness. Someone had mowed the grass before the poet reached his workplace to turn the hay. A bewildered butterfly was looking for the tuft of flowers on which it rested the day before. Suddenly it flew towards ‘a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook’ unnoticed by the poet. The poet understands that the mower had left it as an expression of his own love of Nature.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,

By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,

But from sheer morning gladness at the brim. (FP 23)

The poet now feels a kinship with the mower, his loneliness vanishes and he experiences happiness within. Thus when he seeks the mower for lunch he states, "Men work together, I told him from the heart/ Whether they work together or apart" (FP 23). The beauty of the poem comes not only from this wisdom but from the drawing out of a gloomy self to an affiliation, a communion with Nature and men. Thomas March and Harold Bloom write:
Frost frames the mower’s moment of noticing as an opportunity to come to understanding by means of reflection. It is also a moment of choice between facile dreams of ease and the more rejection of such dreams in favor of an appreciation of the mystery of the moment and the speculation it engenders. (54)

An analysis of his poems from the early collection *A Boy’s Will* to his later collection *A Witness Tree* reveals that when man remains distant and detached from Nature, his loneliness intensifies. When he is one with Nature, he is at home with the world. “A Prayer in Spring” from *A Boy’s Will*, demonstrates this. Otherwise the loneliness can be quite frightening. “The Most of It” displays this isolation in a shocking manner. Man, in his ignorance might think that “he kept the universe alone” But at the same time he yearns for a response from Nature. What he wants is not a mocking echo of his own

He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response
And nothing ever came of what he cried. (FP 338)

The buck crashing down the cliffs, swimming across the lake, which lands pouring like a waterfall does not hold the desolate man’s attention.
His self-centered loneliness thus deserves pity. He is so immersed in himself that he fails to appreciate even the best that Nature can offer.

"The Most of It" is an impressive poem in many ways. Yvor Winters comments:

Frost's buck has much the same kind of symbolic grandeur as the apocryphal beast in "The Second Coming" by Yeats, and he has the advantage of greater reality; the style combines descriptive precision with great concentration of meaning and at the same time is wholly free from decoration, ineptitude, and other irrelevancy... In this poem especially and to some extent in "Acquainted with the Night" the poet confronts his condition fairly and sees it for what it is, but the insight is momentary: he neither proceeds from this point to further understanding nor even manages to retain the realization that he has achieved. (79)

However this is only partially true. Even though the lyric lays emphasis on man's isolation, it also brings out the magnificent in Nature. If man is not able to recognize the spiritual strength that rests in Nature, it is his limitation. Randall Jarrell considers "The Most of It" as a pointer towards Frost's 'stubborn truthfulness.'
...if the universe never gives us either a black or a white answer, but only a black- and -white one that is somehow not an answer at all, still its inhuman not-answer exceeds any answer that we human beings could have thought of or wished for.(91)

Amelia Klein comments on the poem’s spiritual significance as follows:

‘it’ may be the incarnation of some abstract meaning, spirit risked in substantiation . . . yet if ‘it’ gestures toward a meaning beyond itself, it is most striking in its massive, crashing and splashing corporeal presence. It does not prove human, nor does it prove that nature contains or complies with human intelligence. . . (367)

The natural world is magnificent and impressive. But at times it shines brighter because of the blackness of its background. Possibilities of danger always lurk beneath the calm surface. “Spring Pools” as the title indicates, begins with a beautiful description of the pools in forests which reflect “the total sky almost without defect” and the flowers that grow beside them. But there are grim realities also. “The trees that have it in their pent up buds/ To darken Nature and being summer woods . . . is a good example (245). The pools like the flowers beside them will disappear.
They will be sucked up by the roots of the trees to aid summer growth. This vision of beauty almost at once followed by fearful realities enhances the loveliness of Frost's Nature Poems. Beauty and terror are thus two sides of the same coin. To appreciate the beauty, one has to bear with the darker forces of the universe.

Attempts to identify himself with Nature are present in many of his poems. Many critics conclude that the poet at the last moment withdraws. Philip L. Gerber comments:

When Frost considers individual frustrations and joys, or when he writes of his "lover's quarrel with the world", he does not hesitate to probe deeply and offer explicit statements of his findings. But as he approaches the boundary between things of this world and the next, that thin line "beyond which God is", his approach is more timorous. (Frost 141-2)

But a close reading of his poems reveals that this is not so. Most of his Nature Poems are contemplative in mood and therefore, mystical in character. Nature inspires and motivates the poet in him. Perfection is hard to achieve. Even if Nature achieves it, it does not last for long. An eight line lyric "Nothing Gold Can Stay" illustrates this. Nature's first green is gold but it is the hardest hue to hold. It holds only for a short time. Change is inevitable in the scheme of things. Thus the fall of man was
unavoidable. Dawn has to give way to the harsh reality of day. Whatever is pure, innocent and simple cannot stay. This perception, culminating in an understanding of the transience of the universe is essential for spiritual growth. It is this wisdom that makes his poems essentially mystical.

Nature holds its own secret that goes beyond man's intellect. "A Passing Glimpse" gives us a pleasant picture of the flowers the poet often saw from a passing car or train. They are gone before he can even recognize it. He tries to name those flowers but fails. No vision of the ideal can last long. May be the truth is that "Heaven gives its glimpses only to those/ Not in position to look too close" (248).

"The Pasture" is a short poem that serves as a prologue for A Boy's Will. Perhaps it held a special value for the poet because he used this as an introduction to his collected edition and The Complete Poems. On the surface level the poem is simply an invitation:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long—You come too. (FP 1)

But critics point out that this apparent invitation to the reader contains many levels of meaning. The preparations to clean the pasture spring are noteworthy. The poet has to rake the leaves, most probably dead and
decay leaves, away. Then he has to wait and watch for the water to clear. In one's search for the Eternal Truth and Wisdom what is dead and decayed should be swept away. The real Truth will then reveal itself.

Ronald Bieganowski in his study of “The Pasture” points out that the poem “conveys the movement toward an inner life” (31). He asserts that the poet invites the readers to “come too” as a “spiritual companion” (31). Frank Lentricchia maintains that “The Pasture” deals with “a type of salvation”. He elaborates:

And salvation means, in Frost’s world, that particular moment when “mature,” self-conscious, and complex awareness is suppressed, and when single, naïve vision - a return to the Edenic innocence of unself-consciousness within a physically soothing pastoral scene - is encouraged. In the redemptive moment - and in Frost it is often not much more than a moment - we transcend our isolation and the perplexities of our human condition, as we are released from the “siege of hateful contraries”. (25)

Thus Nature provides him with an insight that helps him to penetrate deeper into the mystery of his own being. A spiritual illumination about the life of man thus comes from the life of Nature. It is a revelation, mainly a self-revelation. As Donald J. Greiner correctly notes: “Faced with
an experience which has traditionally ended in elegy or prayer, Frost turns it into an opportunity for knowledge” (232).

3.6. Frost’s Humanism

Nature, for Frost, is filled with paradoxes. This paradoxical character of Nature is a pointer towards the paradoxes in man. Man creates barriers around him. He can survive if he accepts Nature with all its paradoxes and inconsistencies. Apparently Frost considers Nature as “a little more in favour of man” (FP 349). Philip L. Gerber comments:

In keeping with his legacy from Emerson, Frost visualizes man always cradled within nature, totally immersed in environment. Nature is first of all the open book with lessons on every page awaiting the sensible reader. The need for self-reliance and individualism becomes apparent to the least perceptive....Beyond this, man learns his limitations, another lesson for survival. What man can do and cannot do; where he is allowed to stray and where he is prohibited; the length, breadth, height and depth of his domain: these recognitions must be absorbed...Frost illustrates man’s refusal to accept decreed limits. (Frost 132-3)

Even in the midst of terrible sorrows, life can be faced fearlessly if one has faith in God. “Bereft” is a Nature poem where the speaker
willingly admits that he has no one left but God. The sorrow and the loneliness felt by him get reflected in the dismal landscape. The somber clouds and the hissing leaves that blindly struck at his knee complete the picture of isolation. Therefore, he says:

> Word I was in the house alone

> Somehow must have gotten abroad,

> Word I was in my life alone,

> Word I had no one left but God. (FP 251)

When everything around him turns hostile he still has God with him. This ray of optimism, though not explicitly stated, can be found in many other poems. Salvation is possible only when one has absolute faith in God. Man might feel that many injustices had been done to him. But he should go on with courage, “To overcome the fear within the soul/ And go ahead to any accomplishment” (FP 521). God’s mercy will assuage all the injustices imposed upon him:

> And I can see that the uncertainty

> In which we act is a severity,

> A cruelty, amounting to injustice

> That nothing but God’s mercy can assuage. (FP 520)
Thus Frost’s God is one who deeply cares for man “and will save him, no matter how many times or how completely he has failed” (qtd. in Montgomery 145).

A life of harmony can be attained only if one can rise above one’s limited egocentric view of life. In “A Minor Bird” the poet describes how he tried to drive away a bird that sang by his house all day. He even clapped his hands to scare it away. But then he suddenly realised:

The fault must partly have been in me.

The bird was not to blame for his key.

And of course there must be something wrong

In wanting to silence any song. (FP 251)

Harmony and poise can thus be attained by accepting one’s own faults, by expanding one’s mind, so as to accommodate “a minor bird” to the totality of the world.

“Two Look at Two” is one of Frost’s best Nature poems that explore man’s mysterious relationship with Nature. A young couple, out for an evening walk, has climbed part way up a wooded hillside when “they were halted by a tumbled wall” (FP 229). Besides, it is getting dark and they can go no further the “failing path” because it would be dangerous, so they say, “Good night to woods.” But their journey does not end there. A doe and after her a buck appear on the other side of the wall,
stare at them and pass on unscared. The couple dare not stretch a proffering hand, for it would break the spell. They feel:

“This must be all.” It was all. Still they stood,

A great wave from it going over them,

As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor

Had made them certain earth returned their love. (FP 230)

In the world of existence, everything is a mystery. To solve the mystery, one must become a part of it; accept it. When the couple accepts the world of Nature as it is, a gift of understanding comes. They feel certain that the “earth returned their love.” A contemplation of mystery becomes a way of knowledge and the pursuit of complete knowledge reveals the discernment of a mystic.

According to John F.Lyden “For Frost, nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself. It represents what one might call ‘human situation’ ” (Pastoral Art 162).

The quality of revelation is another feature of mysticism in poetry. “Desert Places” is one example for this. Man, in his surveillance of Nature becomes more enlightened. During the winter when the snow falls, everything takes a deserted look. A feeling of isolation engulfs the poet when he looks around him at the lonely fields covered with snow. But then he suddenly realises that the deserted places on the earth or in the sky
between the stars cannot frighten him. The reason is simple: he has his own desert places to scare him and it is more frightening.

Lionel Trilling’s assessment of Frost as a “terrifying poet” compels the readers to take a second look at Frost’s poems. Truth can be apprehended only if the terrifying aspect of life is also taken into consideration. “Frost’s lyrics,” Greiner emphasizes, “are now often read as fearful expressions of darkness, alienation and uncertainty” (213). “Storm Fear” vividly portrays this alienation. It pictures a man, his wife and child gazing at the blizzard outside. As time passes the man becomes more and more concerned about his family’s safety. Their isolation becomes complete as cold creeps in and the fire dies out. The storm still rages on. The father is now doubtful whether they can escape unaided. Whether they survive or not the reader is left uncertain to conclude. But the helplessness of this small group against the elements of Nature is truly terrifying. John F. Lynen aptly remarks:

Admittedly he can and does enjoy nature. His flowers, trees and animals are all described with affection, yet 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. (Pastoral Art 149)
Though Frost is often plagued with doubts about the harmony that can be attained between man and the universe, he is never a poet of despair. Nature, of course, has her hidden truths that attract him. He remains fairly taciturn about the visionary gleam that Wordsworth sang of. But at the same time he is acutely aware of the complexity of the universe. He subtly uses the technique of understatement. How insignificant man is in the total scheme of things is powerfully illustrated in poems like "On Going Unnoticed", "The Most of It" and "Once by the Pacific". Occasionally the poet does have a glimpse of the ideal, but the ideal remains a dream. An evasion or withdrawal into that world cannot last for long. Reality has its own worth and finally "We love the things we love for what they are" (FP 119).

3.7. Diction and Style in Frost's Poems

Of the many factors attributed for the popularity of Robert Frost, a chief one may be his disinclination towards modernist experiments. He never belonged to the experimental groups out to invent new language and new forms. He was not ready to discard the metre, rhythms and traditional rhymes. He was equally against all kinds of abstractions in poetry. If he ventured to any experiments at all, they were very careful and entirely personal.
Frost's poetry is well known for its 'deceptive simplicity.' This simplicity has been the central question of his poetry since the publication of his first anthology, *A Boy's Will*, approximately a hundred years ago. In fact this simplicity and familiarity of language and poetic action help to establish a peculiar relationship between the poet and the reader. The bald statement of his poems seems to discard possibility of ambiguity or 'immeasurable depths,' which immediately attracts the readers. But ultimately the reader reaches the depth or newness of the theme as well as approach. This achievement might have been the product of exquisite craftsmanship.

Frost once said in an interview in "The Paris Review" that in the literary circles he was once referred to as: "Oh, he's that fellow that writes about homely things for that crowd, for those people" (7). This is perhaps a befitting description of his poetic principles and of his readership. Frost's language was not merely simple and direct, it was a spoken language as opposed to a written language; it was colloquial and vernacular. The tone also is conversational, casual and intimate.

A very special feature of his poetry is the variety of the tones of voice. He says of his concept of a poem:
And the things you can do in a poem are various. You speak of figures, tones of voice varying all the time. I'm always interested... in the way I lay the sentences in them. I'd hate to have the sentences all the same in the stanzas. Every poem is like that: some sort of achievement in performance. (Paris Review, 30)

Frost has woven a very complex system of symbols and images around his poetry that the critics are unanimous in calling him an intricate craftsman. His poems employ a language of subtle suggestions quite befitting to mystical poetry. His symbols and images are drawn from the most common and familiar objects around life. But their suggestive quality is accounted for the mystical depth of his poems.

On the superficial level the reader feels quite comfortable with the symbols and images because what he encounters is roads in woods, brooks, farm walls, trees, birds, stars etc. But as a great master of concentrated symbolic vision, Frost skillfully makes use of them to convey the transcendental Reality of life. About twenty of his poems deal with astronomy. He was preoccupied with the question of 'our place among infinities.' Thus the stars symbolize the desire of the poet to comprehend the eternal mysteries of the universe: "O Star (the fairest one in sight), /
We grant your loftiness the right / To some obscurity of cloud—"(FP 403).

Light, in his poems, is a symbol for life, its order and meaning. When this order and meaning fade, darkness envelops earthly existence or being. Darkness, night and winter, predictably, stands for death. Thus "An Old Man’s Winter Night" contains very profound musings on life and death. The faint light highlights the meaninglessness of the old man’s existence: “A light he was to no one but himself / Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what, / A quiet light, and then not even that” (FP 108).

A road that diverges in a wood takes the poet to metaphysical reflections on life, its influences and inevitabilities: “way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back.” (FP 105). Path and traveller are the favourite symbols of the Mystics. The predicament of choices and the mystery of life are picturised here.

The neighbour in the “Mending Wall” is narrow-minded and conservative. So it seems to the poet that: “He moves in darkness as it seems to me,/ Not of woods only and the shade of trees.” (FP 34). Darkness, here acquires the darkness of symbolic meaning.

The water running down the brook becomes the symbol of life and vitality. Snow is described as reflecting the light from heaven and winter
becomes a symbol for death. The wood is his most recurring symbol for the unknown as well as the temples of Gods.

3.8. Conclusion

Robert Frost's poems bear the stamp of the agony, the confusion of the modern world. He is a mystic poet, not in the ordinary sense of the word. Unlike other Nature Poets, he sang not about the harmony between man and Nature. He perceives something that comes in between the harmonious relationship between man, Nature and God. Nature, for him, is the ladder to reach the Ultimate Truth. He differs from other poets in the fact that he has an abiding sense of reality. It provides profound insights into the value and limitations of the relationship between man, Nature and God.

Yvor Winters may try to classify him as a spiritual drifter; Malcolm Cowley might criticize him for not reaching out toward society. But a serious study of Frost's poetry will lead one to the conclusion that his impressions of the universe around him are more humorous, more compassionate and more humble than others.

Frost is acutely aware of the defects and drawbacks of human beings in perceiving the infinite. But the poet persists in his effort to communicate the incommunicable. He realises that when the gulf between man and Nature is bridged, a mystical vision of the Ultimate Reality is possible.
Whenever there is a veil between man and Nature, the yearning for complete perception intensifies. Even if one may not achieve complete knowledge, the effort, the struggle to achieve it, is sublime and infinitely noble.