Chapter - II

An Ecological Affirmation:

Nature’s Resistance to Narrative

“Where is the literature that gives expression to Nature?”

(Thoreau in “Walking”)

The relationship of human with the non-human world, if we go by Christopher Manes’s contention, has only recently become “an express theme in the environmental debate” and what has emerged out of “the environmental debate” is the fact that “nature is silent in our culture” (15). Michel Foucault, as Manes points out, has shown that “social power operates through a regime of privileged speakers” and because in literate societies “the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (15) and also because, “for human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another” (16), it is easy to envision the kind of relationship the human beings share with the non-human world in the present time.

But what sort of relationship does Frost envision between the human and the non-human world in his poetry? Does he, in his poetry, accord nature a status that is in compliance with an ecological vision? What is the implication of the importance that he accords to nature? This is what will be explored in the present chapter.

Given his upbringing and the literary tradition he followed, Frost, in his poetry, expresses his yearning to know the Universe. Frost was a Swedenborgian, who came to believe that “the divine must manifest itself only in the physical world, and the knowledge of the physical world was the knowledge of God” (Harris 14). He
started reading nature as “a text of revelation”, which is a “crucial metaphor... transmitted from the seventeenth century to Frost chiefly through Emerson and Thoreau” (Bagby 10). Frost’s early perception of the natural world, thus, had a theological strain. He started reading natural facts as symbols of spiritual facts. But does a sacred initiation towards nature ensure that it will be treated accordingly? Aikin, while talking about Environmental Revelation, says that

... there are right and wrong ways to come to know nature’s value, and the right way is characterized by experiences of awe or ceremonial feelings of reverence. Once we comport ourselves in the right way toward the natural world, its value is revealed to us. The wrong way to comport oneself is characterized by the hubris, presumption, and exploitation characteristic of most Western philosophical and scientific models for knowledge.” (26-27)

Some ecocritics may not agree with it, but still the feeling of reverence, with which one approaches nature, can be conducive in forming the “ecological vision” of a person and so has been the case with Frost. Like the Keeper in A Masque of Mercy (513), he wished to “be lost in the woods / Than found in church” because

Some may know what they seek in school and church,

And why they seek it there; for what I search

I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch;

(“A Star in A Stoneboat,”173, 43-45)
Frost believed that there was a time when God could be seen in all things and if now man fails to see “sun-smitten slime / Again come to life and crawl off,” he must not “scoff.” The speaker should remain optimistic that

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.

(“Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight,” 266, 17-20)

Heaven does give “its glimpses,” according to Frost, but, it gives it “only to those / Not in position to look too close (“A Passing Glimpse” 11-12). Frost warns the people beforehand that when the revelation does occur, they should not “be afraid of size,” because, as the fact emerges in *A Masque of Mercy*,

If even the face of man’s too bright a light

To look at long directly (like the sun),

Then how much more the face of truth must be.

We were not given eyes or intellect

For all the light at once the source of light—

For wisdom that can have no counterwisdom. (515, 583-588)

Bagby has detected in the *Masque* an example of “the conventional theological argument that the source of truth must be ‘accommodated’ to human perception” and he asserts that Frost also found “the distance between human beings and the source of
revelation as spiritually and epistemologically functional” (19). That is why, Frost sought in nature a “design” that could bring him near to “the divine” (“Accidently on Purpose” 425).

Frost’s initiation into the world of nature, thus, had theological thrust, but it does not mean that he adopted an attitude of reverence towards physical nature. His main aim was to reach to the bottom of “Nature” and for that he was willing to go to any extent:

If, as they say, some dust thrown in my eyes
Will keep my talk from getting overwise,
I’m not the one for putting off the proof.
Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
And blind me to a standstill if it must. (“Dust in the Eyes” 265, 1-6)

All the efforts in Frost’s life were directed towards getting through “nature” an insight into “Nature.” His corpus of work is dotted with the poems which bring out his deepest desire to know “the face of truth” (A Masque of Mercy 515). He was like the people in “Neither Out Far Nor in Deep,” who

... along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day. (301, 1-4)
But

They cannot look out far.

They cannot look in deep.

But when was that ever a bar

To any watch they keep? (301, 13-16)

The efforts of the people, who keep a watch on the sea, turning their back towards land, may be called futile and man’s curiosity to know his place in the world may also be laughed upon, as it happens with Brad McLaughlin in “The Star-Splitter,” but man never gives up his quest. Man can go to any extent like McLaughlin, who “mingled reckless talk/Of heavenly stars with hugger-mugger farming” and

... burned his house down for the fire insurance

And spent the proceeds on a telescope

To satisfy a lifelong curiosity

About our place among the infinities. (177, 16-19)

There is nothing wrong if he wants to know whether man has a dignified position in this universe:

Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights

These forces are obliged to pay respect to? (11-12)

There is nothing wrong even in his taking help of the telescope [science] which he finds is “A weapon in our human fight” (24).
To some extent, science in the form of Darwin’s theory of evolution came to help man out of the precarious situation and people, who were, according to Christopher Manes, placed at “the apparent zenith of evolution by virtue of his brain size, self-consciousness, or some other privileged quality,” began to use the *scala naturae* “to justify humanity’s domination of nature,” so much so that it came to be believed that “the emergence of Homo sapiens stands for the entire saga of biological adaptation on the planet, so that everything that came before takes its meaning, in Baconian fashion, from this one form” (23). For a technological culture which is “transfixed by the presumed supremacy of intellect over nature,” Manes finds, “human evolution is evolution for all intent and purposes” (23). However, Frost’s thought did not gel with such a culture, as is shown in “Accidently on Purpose.”

Till Darwin came to earth upon a year

To show the evolution how to steer.

They mean to tell us, though, the Omnibus

Had no real purpose till it got to us.

Frost was not ready to buy this argument:

Never believe it. At the very worst

It must have had the purpose from the first

To produce purpose as the fitter bred:

We were just purpose coming to head.

He was sceptical:
Whose purpose was it? His or Hers or Its?

Let's leave that to the scientific wits.

Grant me intention, purpose, and design —

That's near enough for me to the divine. (425, 9-20)

The biologists, according to Christopher Manes, have recognised that human beings are not the "goal" of evolution: "As far as scientific inquiry can tell, evolution has no goal, or if it does we cannot discern it, and at the very least it does not seem to be us" (22). Frost, too, was never taken in by this illusion. He kept himself engaged in the pursuit of truth about the universe and man's existence.

Frost, as Bagby finds, had a substantial knowledge of contemporary science and he was also aware of the "limitations that it [science] entails for the reading process in his times" (18). The limitation of science in exploring the world puts man in a very pathetic situation. In contrast to "the uncaged progress of the bear" in the poem "The Bear,"

Man acts more like the poor bear in a cage,

That all day fights a nervous inward rage,

His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.

He paces back and forth and never rests

The toenail click and shuffle of his feet,

The telescope and the microscope — "Two instruments of nearly equal hope" — together help stretch his imagination far and wide. And, if ever,
... he rests from scientific tread,

’Tis only to sit back and sway his head

Through ninety-odd degrees of arc, it seems,

Between two metaphysical extremes. (269, 13-25)

Man sits back and with his “eyes (if any) shut”, “at one extreme agreeing with one Greek / At the other agreeing with another Greek,” he presents himself as a figure which is “equally pathetic / When sedentary and when peripatetic.” It is all due to his failure to find out his real position in the universe.

In “Lost in Heaven,” the speaker, trying to identify the constellations in a cloudy stormy night, wonders about his place in this universe:

Seeing myself well lost once more, I sighed,

“Where, where in Heaven am I? But don’t tell me!

O opening clouds, by opening on me wide.

Let’s let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me.” (295-296, 9-12)

But it is rarely that he wishes to be lost in his “heavenly lostness.” Most of the time, he is desperate to know the truth. The heart aches

... to seek,

But the feet question “Whither?”

The seeker of truth realizes

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season? ("Reluctance," 30, 19-24)

The man continues with his quest. His efforts bear no fruit, as he complains in "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight":

When I spread out my hand here today,
I catch no more than a ray
To feel of between thumb and fingers;
No lasting effect of it lingers. (266, 1-4)

He finds no answers to his questions in turning and looking

... back up at the sky,

Where we still look to ask why

Of everything below. ("Afterflakes"303, 1-5)

It has been too long, he admits in “Astrometaphysical,” that

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

Till I have reeled and stumbled

From looking up too much,

And fallen and been humbled

To wear a crutch. (388-89, 1-8)

Then, failing to find answers to his questions, he throws a challenge to heaven in “Pertinax”:

Let chaos storm!

Let cloud shapes swarm!

I wait for form. (308, 1-3)

Frost found the world full of chaos and his art was a means for him to make meaning out of that chaos. While addressing the students at Amherst College, he said: “The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small, man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?” He added that “Nature does not complete things; she is chaotic. Man must finish, and he does so by making a garden, building a wall, or writing a poem.” Art, according to him, served “life by clarifying reality” and “every form that fulfils its commitment” was to him “to the particular degree of its fulfilment an example of prowess in performance” (qtd. in Isaacs 59, 48). Now, this effort of Frost may be seen as an act of establishing man’s domination over nature. But, it is not so. In “Lucretius Versus the Lake Poets” Frost
admits in the subtitle: “Nature I loved; and next to Nature, Art” (SB 393). While talking of form and the making of form, Frost said, “The world ... not only admits of it, but calls for it. We people are thrust forward out of the suggestions of form in the rolling clouds of nature. In us nature reaches its heights and through us exceeds itself” (qtd. in Bagby 38).

Frost used his art “to ‘read’ the meaning implicit in objects and scenes encountered in the natural world” (Bagby 11). In the process, he realized that the natural world is not the mere emblem of God, it is substantial. “The substantial world of nature,” according to Handley, “is placed a priori to language. Poetry responds to things; it does not create them” (209). Frost, in his poem, “The Aim was Song”, also asserts the fact that natural things are not linguistic construct; they existed even before man got the skill [language] to write about them.

Before man came to blow it right

The wind once blew itself untaught,

And did its loudest day and night

In any rough place where it caught. (223, 1-4)

Nature existed on its own terms long before man appeared on the scene and then man acquired the skill to express the natural objects through his songs. “The conversion of natural wind into song,” according to Charles Berger, “marks a triumph of human scale and meaning” (72). But that does not in any way deny the existence of wind.

Man realized the importance of language in giving form to nature. It is “a need on our part to convert things to human scale,” as Berger writes (71). Frost also found that language was necessary so that the phenomena of nature may become
comprehensible to man. Nature is expressed in different terms but that, according to Frost, cannot deprive nature of its real existence. Frost seems to bring it out very clearly in “The Rose Family”

The rose is a rose,

And was always a rose.

But the theory now goes

That the apple’s a rose,

And the pear is, and so’s

The plum, I suppose.

The dear only knows

What will next prove a rose.

You, of course, are a rose—

But were always a rose. (246, 1-10)

Frost, Bagby finds, “insisted that a natural fact or sign ‘translated’ into human music or language is something distinct from nature” ((37). The natural objects may be used as symbols but that could not take away their significance.

Similarly, in the poem, “Does No One At All Ever Feel This Way in the Least?”

So far inland the very name of ocean

Goes mentionless except in baby-school
When teacher’s own experience fail her
And she can only give the class a notion
Of what it is by calling it a pool
And telling them how Sinbad was a sailor. (447, 37-42)

Despite the fact that the teacher’s inexperience makes her commit the folly of calling
the ocean “a pool,” it cannot take away the enormity and the ferocity of the ocean that
Frost has described in “Once By the Pacific”

The shattered water made a misty din.

Great waves looked over others coming in,

And thought of doing something to the shore

That water never did to land before. (250, 1-4)

Frost acknowledges the importance of language to get to the bottom of natural
phenomena but at the same time he knows that stretching the language too far also
takes essence or real meaning out of a thing. In “The White-Tailed Hornet,” what the
poet says about the white-tailed hornet, who mistook the nailhead for a fly, is true
about a poet who

... had been at his poetry, comparing

Nailhead with fly and fly with huckleberry:

How like a fly, how very like a fly.

But the real fly he missed would never do;
The missed fly made me dangerously skeptic. (278-279, 45-49)

He himself would never have committed such a mistake knowingly because

I have a mind myself and recognize

Mind when I meet with it in any guise.

No one can know how glad I am to find

On any sheet the least display of mind.

(“A Considerable Speck,” 358, 30-34)

This does not mean that Frost did not know what games mind played in giving form
to the natural phenomena. Poetry, Frost knew, is an art and things are never said straight; the mind plays its game. Mind plays an active role in giving form to nature; sometimes it overpowers nature, but most of the time it is lost in nature. In his essay “Education by Poetry,” Frost writes, “Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed” (qtd. in Link 183). Thoreau, according to Raglon and Scholmeijer, “spent a lifetime pressing metaphor into expressing his sense of the wild, bending language almost as far as it can be bend” (252). But Frost recognized the limitations of language.

Frost himself relied heavily on metaphors. But after using them, he also realized how they, at times, failed in describing the natural phenomena. He found a weakness in personifying things in nature: “We are really disregarding the Thing itself and making it masquerade in false clothing” (qtd. in Harris 31). He also rejected
symbolism as “too likely to clog up and kill a poem,” rather he preferred synecdoche (Senst 7). He preferred to call his poetry Emblemism, keeping in with the theological tradition that had an influence on him to a considerable degree (Bagby 40).

Frost accepted the limitations of language. He realized the fact that certain phenomenon of nature could not be put in words, and so it’s better to leave them thus. In “A Hillside Thaw,” the speaker, who knows the countryside well, feels puzzled when he could not describe the natural phenomenon of that particular day:

To think to know the country and not know

The hillside on the day the sun lets go

Ten million silver lizards out of snow! (237, 1-3)

He tries to put his experience of the natural phenomena in words but realizes his limitations:

As often as I’ve seen it done before

I can’t pretend to tell the way it’s done. (237, 4-5)

Frost shows in his poetry that it is hard to express certain natural phenomena in words. This can be seen as the failure of language because language attempts to impose its logic on the natural world and construct reality, but it fails. But such is not the case. The poet’s failure “to tell” how a natural phenomena takes place is not the failure of language alone. It speaks of the power of the natural world; nature has the power to resist literary imposition. “Far from shaping the reality, when language fails to impose its logic on the world and thus fails to construct reality, such failures should
be seen not as the failure of the power of language but instead as ‘nature’s powerful resistance to our narratives’” (Raglon and Scholtmeijer 251).

Raglon and Scholtmeijer have called those authors less talented “who expose the clumsy underpinnings of language and who impose linguistic experience on the world” (250) and, according to them, “The best stories about nature are those that have sensed the power of nature to resist, or question, or evade the meaning we attempt to impose on the natural world” (252). Frost does use language to give form to nature but he knows the limits of language. He does not impose linguistic experience on the world by giving it merely symbolic or metaphoric roles in his poetry. Rather, he builds into his poems allusions to nature’s resistance to narrative.

This shows that Frost recognizes the substantiality of physical nature in his poetry. For Frost, if Laurence Coupe’s words can be borrowed, “nature needs human minds to achieve ‘self-realisation’,” but, at the same time, it is “something ... already there, asking to be actualised or understood” and “Language plays a crucial role in human sense-making,” according to Coupe (General Introduction 2). So, for Frost, language became a tool that helps man to give form to nature, but nature that is already present and which needs imagination or language to give it form. For him, “there is never any question of the world’s not being there, or of discourse overwriting any surface.... imagination does not generate the world out of itself but responds to a nature that, encircling and transcending mind, engages us creatively” (Klein).

But the substantial natural world aborts all of man’s efforts to establish communion with it. In “Iris by Night,” the two seekers of knowledge of nature, who were also friends, were “vouchsafed the miracle” that nobody else had ever witnessed

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and the speaker alone was left alive to tell but still nature succeeded in withholding its secret

A wonder! Bow and rainbow as it bent,

Instead of moving with us as we went

(To keep the pots of gold from being found)

In the poem “Desert Places” also, the snow that along with the night is falling fast does not let out its secret, rather it is

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow

With no expression, nothing to express. (296, 11-12)

Once the seeker, in “For Once Then Something”, did get an opportunity to discern “beyond the picture”, but he lost it, perhaps because

Water came to rebuke the too clear water.

One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple

Shook whatever it was lay there at the bottom,

Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?

Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. (225, 11-15)

The natural world erases all the possibilities of human beings to have a clear picture of nature.

Frost wonders why the communion, which his predecessors could establish with nature, had snapped in his own time. “The vegetable text itself,” according to
Bagby, “presumably, has changed little since the time of Emerson and Thoreau,” but, if its language was now incomprehensible to man, Frost in his poem admits that it must be some fault on man’s part (22):

How anyone can fail to see

Where perfectly in form and tint

The metaphor, the symbol lies!

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

Oh, slow uncomprehending me

(“A Missive Missile”327, 33-38)

Frost finds that there is something wrong in man’s perception to read nature. “A Minor Bird” is a fine example of man’s acceptance of the fact that there is something wrong in his attitude towards nature. The speaker in the poem didn’t like a bird singing by his window all day and when he could not bear its sound anymore he clapped his hand and shooed it away. The speaker admits that there was nothing wrong with the sound of the bird and “the fault must partly have been in me”

And of course there must be something wrong

In wanting to silence any song. (251, 7-8)

The seeker of truth in the poem “For Once Then Something” never got anything other than what the water gave him

... back in a shining surface picture

Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs. (225, 4-6)

He was taunted by others for “never seeing / Deeper down in the well” and kneeling “at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light.” Was there something really wrong in the way he sat near the well or was something wrong in the attitude with which he approached the well?

If man fails in his communion with nature, it means that the right approach towards nature is missing. Frank Stewart has put it in his book *A Natural History of Nature Writing*. “What we always see when we look at nature is our own eyes looking back at us, filtering and altering what we choose to perceive, what we emphasize or ignore, what questions we ask and pursue” (qtd. in Phillips 4). Man’s interaction with nature, as Frost also shows in his poetry, is influenced by his subjectivity.

Subjectivity of man, as Manes has found, is the cause of the present ecological crisis, which has forced nature into silence. He writes that “... it is within ... vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis ....” (16). Subjectivity of man has forced nature into silence, according to him. The status of nature as a speaking subject, as Manes points out may seem alien in the Western literary tradition but it is not so in animism, “a sophisticated and long-lived phenomenology of nature” that believes that animals and even “inert” objects are “articulate and intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with human” (17-18). In the medieval period, according to Manes, animism as a coherent system broke down and he has attributed the reason for its breaking down to literacy and Christian exegesis (18). Exegesis, according to him, swept all things into the ambit of divine meaning by establishing “God as a transcendental subject speaking through
natural entities, which, like words on a page, had a symbolic meaning, but no autonomous voice” (20).

But such is not the case with Frost. Buell has noticed that Frost had begun to write “lyrics about solipsistic projections of human vision onto nature” (The Environmental Imagination 199). Frost, as Bagby has found, at times, could not avoid the pitfalls of subjectivity and anthropocentrism, but there are instances in his poetry that he disliked both and tried to be as vigilant not to let his subjectivity hamper his fruitful interaction with nature.

Human beings try to impose upon nature their own meanings. This is hinted at in the poem “The Generation of Men” where all those by the name of Stark had come together at Bow, a “rock-strewn town,” in New Hampshire seeking “ancestral memories.” One of the speakers feels that a brook “in such a wild descent” “ought to give a purer oracle” but the other speaker feels that

“It’s as you throw on a screen:

The meaning of it all is out of you;

The voices give you what you wish to hear.” (78, 135-137)

The seeker of truth in the poem “For Once Then Something” also never got anything other than what the water gave him

... back in a shining surface picture

Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,

Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs. (225, 4-6)
He was taunted by others for “never seeing/Deeper down in the well” and kneeling “at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light.” But was something really wrong in the way he sat near the well or was something wrong in the attitude with which he approached the well; he came to the well with his preconceived notion and that is why water also gave back to him what he intended to receive from it.

Frost finds that man tries to find in nature meanings which are not actually there, as in “A Patch of Old Snow” (110), he tries to find out in “the patch of old snow” “the news of the day I’ve forgotten”. He even tries to get a meaning out of the unintentional act of the crow in “Dust of Snow” (221). And though it was only March, in the poem “A Boundless Moment” (233), both the bird and the speaker are deceived by looking at “a young beech clinging to its last year’s leaves,” that it was “the Paradise-in-Bloom” and thus assumed that “such white luxuriance of May” was for them in March. But the truth had to be realized in order to move on, though the speaker accepts that he lives “in a strange world, / Myself as one his own pretense deceives.”

Man definitely lives in a strange world where he thinks that every phenomenon in nature takes place for him. Man always tries to judge everything through human standards which, Frost feels, is utterly wrong. Man attaches too much importance to change and loss and wants that nature should join him in his sorrow. The census-taker in the poem by the same name, “The Census-Taker,” comes on errand to a house which is “not dwelt in now by men or women” (174, 6). He feels disappointed to see that

... every tree up stood a rotting trunk

Without a single leaf to spend on autumn,
Or branch to whistle after what was spent. (175, 17-24)

Nothing in nature grieves over things that are “spent.”

The persona in the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” also feels disappointed seeing the change of seasons in mythic light instead of merely as a process of nature.

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (222-223, 1-8)

The sorrow for the house which was fully destroyed in fire except for its chimney, in “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” brings out the same foolishness of man. The house had gone down though it had brought again “to the midnight sky a sunset glow.” The barn “was left/To bear forsaken the place’s name.” But it is highly anthropocentric for men to find in the murmur of the bird “the sigh we sigh/From too much dwelling on what has been”. It is only humans who dwell on bygone things for long, but for the birds, there was really nothing sad in

… the aged elm, though touched with fire;

And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a strand of wire (242, 18-20)

For them “the lilac renewed its leaf” and “they rejoiced in the nest they kept.” The speaker concludes that

One has to be versed in country things

Not to believe the phoebes wept. (242, 23-24)

And being well conversant with nature means to acknowledge that humans and nature exist on different planes. The lesson that man must learn is that “the solicitude such things [the natural things] ‘feel’ is not for human beings” (Bagby 184).

But man does not learn his lessons so easily. He commits this grave mistake again and again. He thinks that everything in nature is for him alone and everything in nature gains meaning through its usefulness to man. Man, in his arrogance as well as ignorance, commits such mistakes which are harmful for nature. “There are Roughly Zones” illustrates it very well. The people in this poem had brought a peach tree far away from its native place. Now, while sitting inside and talking of the cold outside, they fear that the peach tree might not be able to withstand the rough weather. Then why did they bring the peach tree so very far north?

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind —

That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?

You would say his ambition was to extend the reach

Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.

Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,

There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed? (305, 7-13)

So, “roughly zones” always determine the relationship between nature and man in Frost’s poetic world.

Nature, as depicted in Frost’s poetry is also not all sublime and good. He has many a time openly presented nature which is fearful. What dreadful picture of nature could be presented by Frost than the one he presents in “Design,” where witnessing the drama of death and destruction, he concludes, “What if design govern in a thing so small” and what if there is no design which could control this death and destruction.

Frensoke points towards the fact that, “Nature’s ferocity and cruelty don’t even have the handy moral language that human ferocity and cruelty have. Instead, nature is vacantly pitiless, inertly savage, indifferently bad” (134) but “the possibility that nature has real qualities like these — is currently unthinkable” in ecocriticism, according to Frensoke (134). However, Frost has presented such a picture of the natural world.

In “Our Hold on the Planet,” the people asked for rain and their wish was granted neither in the form of a gale that flashes and roars nor in the form of flood that bids people to be damned and drown.” “It gently threw us a glittering shower down” again and again till they began to “doubt the just proportion of good to ill” and they realized that

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 favour of man,
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least (349, 12-16)

It is not that nature is against man; nature is indifferent towards man. Nature exists on a different plane than man and man must acknowledge this. As long as man does not accept the distinctiveness of nature, successful communion between the two is not possible.

Man in his arrogance makes fun of the sea in the poem “Does No One At All Ever Feel This Way in the Least?”

And now, O sea, you’re lost by aeroplane.
Our sailors ride a bullet for a boat.
Our coverage of distance is so facile
It makes us to have had a sea in vain.
Our moat around us is no more a moat,
Our continent no more a moated castle. (446, 13-18)

Grind shells, O futile sea, grind empty shells
For all the use you are along the strand. (446, 19-20)
Man does not realize that the ocean has nothing to do with human beings and their taunts.

The ocean had been spoken to before.

But if it had no thought of paying heed

To taunt of mine.... (447, 31-33)

If seen realistically, what Dick tells Pike in “From Plane to Plane” about his interpretation of the sun is true about all things in nature:

He bestows summer on us and escapes

Before our realizing what we have

To thank him for. He doesn’t want our thanks.

He likes to turn his back on gratitude

And avoid being worshiped as a god. (408, 127-131)

It doesn’t make any difference to things in nature that in which human terms they are being interpreted. Man is as foolish as the boy in “At Woodward’s Gardens” who

... presuming on his intellect,

Once showed two little monkeys in a cage

A burning-glass they could not understand

And never could be made to understand.

They could never be made to understand because they exist in a world which is different from ours. Poirier finds in Frost’s poem “The Wood-Pile” (101) “the
acknowledgement of nature as a realm wholly independent of human need or even
human perception,” and, according to him, “‘The slow smokeless burning of decay,’...“induces a kind of awe” (qtd. in Link 195). Frost, as Lynen also finds, “views nature
as essentially alien” and “instead of exploring the margin where emotions and
appearances blend, he looks at nature across an impassable gulf” and “what he sees on
the other side is an image of a hard, impersonal reality. Man’s physical needs, the
dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death, the limits of his ability to know
and to act are shown in stark outline by the indifference and inaccessibility of the
physical world in which he must live” (Ch. 5). Nature, for Frost, as Charles Simic,
too, has noticed, “is opaque, inert, mute, and often malevolent. Nature transmits no
message. It is a realm of endless ambiguity” and “Nature is oblivious to us” (qtd. in
Bagby 129).

When nature is placed in “in the domain of the imponderable,” the narrative
form opens up in which “nature can remain ambiguous, enigmatic, and resistant to the
imposition of human meaning-making exercises,” according to Raglon and
Scholtmeijer, but “This is not to say that nature is hostile to humanity but that it exists
on its own terms” (260-261). This is what is revealed when Frost’s poetry is closely
scrutinized. It reveals a non-human world that exists on its own terms and conditions,
remaining indifferent to human interventions and resisting all human efforts to give it
form. It is the skill of a good writer, according to Raglon and Scholtmeijer, that he
revivifies and renews our experience of the world (250) and makes available to us
“nature’s incandescent strangeness” (249). Frost has been successful in presenting
before his readers such a real picture of the natural world. Roberts French writes: “If
Frost’s poetry insists on anything... it insists on the impenetrable barrier between man

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and Nature: we live in a world that we cannot know, for it will not reveal itself; and yet we yearn for some sort of communion” (qtd. in Link 193).

But, how is the communion between nature and man possible when they exist on a different plane, and nature, as Frost has found, is also indifferent to man? Many critics have raised their cudgels against Frost for his failure to find the truth. “Revelation”, as Porter says, “is engagingly immanent in Frost..., but it is habitually denied.... Because revelation... does not really come, Frost’s is a poetry of aborted communion” (qtd, in Bagby 129). The study of Oster about Frost summarises, “In Frost, moments of relationship, of peace and harmony, are not only rare gifts but ... cannot be expected from nature”; “we see man seeking but only seldom finding harmony between himself and nature” (qtd.in Bagby 129).

Frost’s defence seems to be the wisdom that he gained after his failure to elicit any favourable response from nature: “Wisdom is enduring it exactly as it is; courage is being familiar with it in the right proportions; temperance is the skill to let it be; and justice is the knowledge that between it and you there will always be a lover’s quarrel, never to die into cold silence and never to be made up. The main thing is the mutual respect (Doren 44). Nature, according to Frost, should be treated as a force that exists on a different plane than human and its otherness should be acknowledged as well as respected. Only then the foundations for a healthy communion between the two can be laid. The attitude of man should be like the persona in the poem “New Hampshire” who given a choice, “wouldn’t be a prude afraid of nature” but at the same time he would be like the man who

... knew too well for any earthly use

The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
And never overstepped it save in dreams. (171, 378-380)

In the poem “Come In,” the dark woods with the music of the thrush is attracting the wanderer, but he decides that

I would not come in.

I meant not even if asked,

And I hadn’t been. (334, 18-20)

If the wanderer does not want to enter the woods, he hasn’t been invited also to do so. He has been wise enough to realize that the thrush’s song is not for humans.

For the communion to be successful between man and nature, man must also realize that the communion may come in any form. It may come as “the embodiment” in the form of “a great buck” and “that was all” in the poem “Two Look at Two,” where “a tumbled wall/ with barbed-wire binding” seems to separate humans and woods; the lovers sigh

This is all,…

Good night to woods”.

But as they are about to turn back, the lovers see a doe:

A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them

Across the wall, as near the wall as they

She saw them in their field, they her in hers.

The lovers found
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour

Had made them certain earth returned their love. (230, 38-42)

Bagby has also found in this poem “an archetypal moment in Frost; the human and
the animal, each remaining in its own proper ‘field’ are nonetheless able to have a
genuine encounter across that wall of demarcation” (170). The “original” response
that lovers here appreciate a non-human, perhaps the one Deep ecologists are looking
for according to Manes.

Deep ecologists see environment as a complex system of many forms of life,
none of which can dominate another. Therefore, language, which is considered to be a
faculty possessed only by “man” and which has been blamed for silencing nature
because of the dominance control model, according to them, should not be allowed to
work as an agent to dominate the world other than that of humans. Respecting the
intrinsic value of every species, their otherness should also be respected. The Deep
ecologists’s search for a “language of ecological humility,” which is “free from
directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, post-
humanist perspective,” (17) is perhaps an answer to the failed communication with
nature.

Frost in his poetry seems to suggest that the communion may come in a
language unknown to man. A poet, like all human beings, makes efforts to hide
behind “light words” but desperately wants to be found out and finally

...in the end

We speak the literal to inspire

The understanding of a friend. (“Revelation” 19, 6-8)
But what if the other person with whom one seeks communion does not speak in the same language? Frost in his poetry acknowledges nature as a speaking subject but it speaks a language incomprehensible to man. That is why he finds that man is foolish to expect the star to speak “Fahrenheit” or “Centigrade.” “The external world,” as it emerges out in Frost’s poetry, is not “a realised will, — a double of the man” (Bagby 20). Therefore, Frost is not content with “the mocking echo of his own voice” “From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake”. For a long time he was under a misconception that:

He thought he kept the universe alone;

For all the voice in answer he could wake

Was but the mocking echo of his own (“Most of It,” 338, 1-3)

But when he realized the difference as well as indifference of the natural world, he wanted to

... cry out on life, that what it wants

Is not its own love back in copy speech,

But counter-love, original response. (338, 6-8)

Perhaps, the original response Frost is looking for implies recognizing the non-human world as “alinguistic agents” and according them importance as non-human others. Bennett, in his review of Gilcrest’s Greening the Lyre, finds that Gilcrest “questions the undue self-confidence of those ecopoets and ecocritics who seem to believe that they can speak for nature” (208). Bennett’s review clarifies that “despite ecocriticism’s laudable motivation for extending language and agency to
nonhuman subjects,” ecocriticism, as suggested by Gilcrest, “should focus on the radical democratic possibility of recognizing ‘alinguistic agents’ without trying to make them just like us” (209). Jhan Hochman also forwards a proposition:

If Green cultural studies has to become an effective politico-cultural tool in the service of nature and culture, it will need to study not only how to ‘become’ nature... It will need to pull back and grant these beings and entities unromanticized differences, an autonomy apart from humans, a kind of privacy and regard heretofore granted almost exclusively only to those considered human.” (193)

“Man’s ability to speak,” in Haywards opinion, is “One human trait which has traditionally been taken as the ground for according humans a privileged moral status” and this, according to him, “has imposed a stark asymmetry on the human-nature relationship” (Hayward 32). Language inevitably constructs oppressive attitudes. This, as Manes finds, is amply demonstrated by Michel Foucault, who believes that “social power operates through a regime of privileged speakers” whose words are taken seriously. As opposed to it is the discourse of the meaningless which is often silenced. It is language, as we know, that has given human advantage over everyone and everything that constitutes the non-human world. Human beings dominate the non-human world. Ecologists do not generally seek to deny the distinctiveness of specifically human faculties, and capacities, but what they insist is that such specificity need not automatically be conceived in terms of superiority; it is this which they condemn as human chauvinism or speciesism” (Hayward 32).

In the domination-control model, according to Aikin, “humans pose questions to nature but in their own vocabulary and for their own agendas, and nature is put on
the rack and forced to talk” (32). And then nature is forced to talk not in its own
language, which man in his arrogance has forgotten that nature possesses and makes it
speak in his own language.

domination and control epistemology make it clear that those
practitioners of it cannot be argued with, since to do so would be to
play their game. And as such, once in the epistemology of domination
and control, the objections cannot even be raised. As a consequence,
one can’t even explain to the domination-controllers their errors, since
they are deaf to them. The only proper response, it seems, is to bring
them to silence. (Aikin 32).

Frost, in his poems, has raised the question why everything always has
something to do with human beings? He asks the speaker in “Stars” why he feels that
the stars in the sky congregate

As if with keenness for our fate,

Our faltering few steps on

To white rest, and a place of rest

Invisible at dawn — (9, 5-8)

The poet asserts that the stars congregate

... with neither love nor hate,

Those stars like some snow-white

Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight. (9, 9-12)

What, he finds, is even more foolish on the part of human beings is to expect from the stars to

Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, “I burn.”
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.

(“Take Something Like a Star”403, 7-14)

In “One More Brevity,” the persona, however, seems to have realized this absurdity. He tried to talk to the dog but he eventually found that “‘Twas too one-sided a dialogue.” Man, truly, as Christopher Manes has found, is “the only soliloqust in a world of irrational silences” (25) and he assumes his dominance over all the other forms of life on this earth.

Frost, in his poetry, has given a powerful presentation of nature. Nature, for Frost, is not a linguistic construct, which, according to Raglon and Scholmeijer, “when pushed to its logical conclusions reveals a disturbing human arrogance and one sidedness” (251). Language, as Seamus Heaney has also found and the study of Frost’s poetry also shows, “to some extent molds our impressions of reality to conform to existing oppressive tendencies” but, Heaney finds that “the best literature is simultaneously at work forming countervailing gestures that frustrate the inclination
to be content with common expectations and complacency” (249). Frost has formed such a “countervailing gesture” in his poetry by showing nature’s resistance to narrative. He does not even display the weaknesses, which Raglon and Scholtmeijer find associated with “more overt and superficial constructions of the natural world” (253). In the process, he also recognizes and acknowledges that nature has a language of its own, though, he admits, it is incomprehensible to man, and, thus, he “revivifies and renews” the reader’s experience of the “nonhuman” world.