Chapter IV

Ich: An Encounter with Ego

“One key to Frost – both the poems and the poet –,” observes Judith Oster, “is his assertion that ‘every poem is an epitome of the great predicament, a figure of the will braving alien entanglements’.” The critic elaborates that the phrase “alien entanglements” suggests “the desires, struggles, conflicts, and results” (1). She adds:

Further, it implies that an encounter with something or some one “alien” or “other” is potentially an entanglement; that any entanglement is with something or someone “alien.” This can include an “alien,” unrecognised, or unwelcome element of the self. (emphasis added) (2)

Frank Lentricchia also sees “the egotism and incipient paranoia in [Frost’s] definition of the poem as a ‘figure of the will braving alien entanglements,’ and in his definition of the existential context of the poet as a place of ‘excruciations’ of ‘black and utter chaos’” (177).

So reading Frost means an inevitable encounter with egotism and its offshoots — namely, conflict, violence and hatred. It is significant to note that critics and biographers like Lawrance Thompson, Donald J. Greiner, Manorama Trikha, Jac Tharpe, and Peter J. Stanlis who probed
into Frost’s private as well as literary life, commonly agree that the poet had a great ego and literary vanity. Peter J. Stanlis, for instance, points out that

There is no doubt that Frost had a great ego and much literary vanity, and that the negative emotional traits found in all men, so emphasised by Thompson, existed in Frost in an intense form, larger than ordinary life. (311)

Interestingly, Frost himself was more aware of his egoism and vanity than his critics and readers. “I’m a mere selfish artist most of the time,” he admitted to Kimball Flaccus, a correspondent, in a 1930 letter. Frost was reported to be so ego-centric a person that he rarely attended lectures given by others (Thompson, *Letters of Robert Frost* ix). He composed a couplet to serve as a rule of thumb in such matters: “I only go / When I am the show.” (qtd. in Thompson, *The Years of Triumph* 424). R. H. Winnick points out that Lawrance Thompson witnessed many instances in which Frost displayed violence of temper when imagining himself crossed or slighted or insulted. This astonished those, says Winnick, who saw him only in the role of the friendly, easy-going, witty Vermont farmer-poet (Thompson and Winnick, xx). In his private life Frost was often accused by his wife of being too self-centred in his attitude towards his children. He was again accused by Leslie, his daughter, of being too self-centred in his attitude towards his wife (Thompson, *Years of Triumph* 495-496). Frost’s mother was also said to
be so anxious about her son’s self-centredness that she taught him that “Self-give and self-sacrifice are the noblest and most heroic of human effort” (qtd. in Thompson, *The Early Years* 376-377).

However, there was a redeeming virtue in Frost’s character: he frankly confessed that he was an egoist and often expressed his regret for the same. “Forgive my selfishness,” he wrote to George F. Whicher (qtd. in Thompson, *Years of Triumph* 214). Furthermore, Frost succeeded in making his egoism a dominant theme of his poetry. Thompson observes that “How to express one’s self and how to defend one’s self became two inseparable themes for him (*Letters of Robert Frost* x). Richard Foster supports this view of Thompson, and points out that “Frost’s periodic fits of extreme guilt over these failings all too frequently took the form of further exhibitions of unattractive egotism.” He adds:

But what is significant for Frost’s art is that these deep-seated feelings of personal guilt, amply justified and rich in their variations, bore true and beautiful fruit indeed in the poems he wrote about those feelings. (356)

One who makes an attempt to read Frost’s poems in the light of Buddhism remembers that as a religion and philosophy Buddhism also is more concerned with man’s egotism than with any thing else. “Self is the theme of all religions,” says Christmas Humphreys, “and enters into all departments of human thoughts.” He continues: “In Buddhism it is
central and paramount, for the goal of the Buddhist Path is Enlightenment, the enlightenment of something which, for want of a better name, I will here call self" (The Buddhist Way 44). “To study the Buddha way is to study the self,” says Eihei Dogen, a 13th century priest and philosopher and the founder of the Soto school of Zen (qtd. in Rudy 106). All these indicate how much importance Buddhism gives to the analysis of man’s egotism. The Buddhists hold that ego is the breeding ground of all sensuous cravings, impelled by which “people break contracts, rob others of their possessions, steal, betray, seduce married women” (Humphreys, The Wisdom of Buddhism 63). Siddhartha, who set out on his voyage of enquiry of the eternal truth of salvation, was not content with any other teaching, however great and ennobling they were, except that one which was concerned with the absolute abandonment of ego. He said to Arada, a famous teacher of his time, whom he approached for spiritual guidance:

I have heard your subtle teaching, profound, pre-eminently auspicious: yet it cannot be final, for it does not teach how to be rid of the person, the supreme self itself. Though the self purified may be termed free, yet as long as that self remains, there is no real abandonment of egoity. Moreover, if the self in its pristine state is free, how did it become bound? I hold that the only absolute attainment is in absolute abandonment. (qtd. in Campbell 271).
The Buddhists do not make any distinction between self and ego. According to Henry Clarke Warren, an English translator of Buddhist scriptures in Pali, both the words “Ego” and “Self” represent the Buddhist “attan.” He points out that “The word Ego usually translates Pali ‘attan’,” and adds that “It is more literally rendered Self” (111). To the Buddhists, ego or self is the centre, the ‘me’, my impulses – the centre from which all actions take place and all our aspirations, our ambitions, our quarrels, our disagreements, our opinions, judgements and experiences take their origin. This centre is not only the conscious self acting outwardly, but also the deeper inner consciousness which is not open and obvious. The Buddhists believe that all the evils emerge from man’s egotism. Paul Carus states that “there is no wrong in this world, no vice, no evil except what flows from the assertion of self” (39).

So the way to salvation, according to the Buddhists, is the annihilation of ego. Paul Carus continues:

The Dharma of the Thathagatha does not require a man to go into homelessness or to reign the world, unless he feels called upon to do so; but the Dharma of the Thathagatha requires every man to free himself from the illusion of self, to cleanse his heart, to give up his thirst for pleasure and lead a life of righteousness. (67-68)

Strictly speaking, the Buddhist “nirvana” is nothing but the absolute freedom from egotism. Paul Carus makes it clear in the following words:
“The extinction of self is salvation; the annihilation of self is the condition of enlightenment; the blotting out of self is Nirvana” (4). Bertrand Russell seems to agree with the Buddhists’ view on self and “nirvana” when he says:

One’s ego is no very large part of the world. The man who can centre his thoughts and hopes upon something transcending self can find a certain peace in the ordinary troubles of life which is impossible to the pure egoist. *(The Conquest of Happiness 57)*

Coming back to Frost, in a number of his poems the major theme is man’s egoism and its manifold evils. “The Code,” for instance, mainly depicts the egoism of the hired man. While unloading hay, the hired man is just asked by his boss to “Let her come,” and the man, injured in his dignity, dumps the whole load on the boss. There is a more startling instance in “The Vanishing Red.” A miller who does not like an Indian’s tone of voice, proceeds to drown the Indian. Evidently, what at most would a normal man swear, makes a Frost character commit murder. Meserve in “Snow” is yet another example of a Frost character afflicted by egotism. He decides to go into a dangerous midnight snowstorm when the Coles offers him shelter for the night. He apparently makes this decision as an assertion of his self because he knows that Cole in particular has a contemptuous attitude towards his off brand religious views. Meserve and other characters of Frost, in fact, represent the...
fierce pride of the New England people. These people will unhesitatingly face death or cause it, as the hired man in “The Code” attempted to do. Pride is the reason why Estella in “The Housekeeper” finally leaves John, with whom she lived, along with her mother, as a common law-wife for fifteen years. The egotism of these three characters is so strong that they fail even to communicate with each other. Says Doyle: “John stands in his little circle and does not see beyond it; Estella stands in hers and sees no more” (126). It is again the pride which causes the Broken one in “The Self-seeker” to refuse to enter a court fight for his legitimate rights. Here as elsewhere an admirable quality may assume a pathological form, as we may feel that it does in “The Lone-striker.” In this poem the worker locked out of mill for arriving late, leaves his job ostensibly to go for a stroll in the woods, but actually to put an end to a kind of an affront to his self-importance.

The most terrible and tragic illustration of this morbid excess of egotism is “Home Burial.” Though the basis of the poem is the death of the first born child, the whole poem seems to revolve around the conflict of egos of Amy and her husband. According to Doyle, the conflict is not by any means one of petty differences: “the clash is deep, pervasive and irreconcilable” (38). Judith Oster remarks that the husband and wife are unwilling to give up any part of their self. The critic adds:
Fierce possessiveness of one's feelings, of one's sense of who and what one is and should be, of one's self conceived role, plays a large part in that disaster, the marriage in "Home Burial." So does a frustrating unwillingness on both their parts to respect along with an inability to understand, what the other partner is feeling. (198)

The wife reacts so vehemently to the husband's digging of the grave that she asks: "Who is that man? I don't know you." Then the husband does not know her either; nor did he know himself, or she herself. The main barrier between the wife and her husband seems to be built by their impervious egos. Generally speaking, ego appears to play a destructive role in Frost's house poems. Frank Lentricchia points out that in the house poems self finds itself surrounded by hostile and malevolent forces, unable to trust in anything but itself. Redemptions are sometimes achieved in the house poems, but they work for one man only, at the cost of severing all human relations, and at the cost of dissolving all objects beyond the self. (61)

"Home Burial" justifies Lentricchia's observation.

It is common knowledge that more than any other religions in the world Buddhism underlines the destructive nature of egoism in human relations. The Buddhists believe that it is egoism that causes duality and divisions which manifest in the form of mutual hatred and ill-will.
“Kalahavivada Sutta” says that “Selfishness gives rise to contentions and disputes, and leads to slander” (qtd. in Allen, Buddha’s Words 32).

Home seems to be the worst breeding place of egoism. The builder of the house, according to The Dhammapada, is tanha – the ego-centric desires (Radhakrishnan 110). That must be the reason why the Buddha advised his disciples to renounce the family life as a pre-requisite to become a “Bhikshu.” In the Buddha’s own words,

Full of hindrances is household life, a path defiled by passion; free as the air is the life of him who has renounced all worldly things. How difficult is it for the man who dwells at home to live the higher life in all its fullness, in all its purity, in all its bright perfection! Let me then cut off my hair and beard, let me clothe myself in the orange-coloured robes and let me go forth from a household life into a houseless state. (qtd. in Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy 436)

To Amy in “Home Burial,” home is suffocating; it is like another burial plot for her. She wants to get out of the house, and opens the door. We get the impression that stifled by the clash of egos, Amy is trying to escape into an open egoless world. Still she cannot, because the bondage of ego is too strong for her to break and liberate herself. Lentricchia endorses this view when he says that Home Burial “is a poem about the
The child is buried; still the ego of Amy waits for burial. The real home burial will take place only when the inhabitants of the home sink and submerge their egos in the grave of humility. That is yet to happen. Amy and her husband still stand at the doorstep. "In a sense," says George W. Nitchie, "the whole poem is there, epitomised in the door that is neither open nor shut" (223).

"The Death of the Hired Man" is another house poem of Frost where one can find the conflict of egos at different levels. The poem presents two kinds of triangular conflicts – the first between Warren and Silas with Mary in the centre, and the second between Warren and Mary with Silas in the centre. The first conflict is indeed the conflict between the egos of Silas and Warren. One can very easily find that Silas’ egotism is repeatedly stressed in the poem. Mary pleads with her husband to let Silas live with respect, because she knows more than anyone else that to Silas his ego is every thing. One learns that it is his

The critic continues:

In the poem’s conclusion [Amy] threatens to leave the house and her husband. But escape is not possible because there is no cure for self ....; no leave taking of these imprisoning fixations on the death of her child which keep her in deep isolation and throw into poignant relief her husband’s futile plea for contact: “Let me into your grief”. (65)
pride that does not permit Silas to seek the help of his brother, a senior bank officer. Further, pride prevents him from appearing before Mr. Warren, and also from seeking apology for deserting him during the harvest season. Silas would die an honourable death than surrender his ego. Mr. Warren also is a man of impregnable egoism. This is evident from his rude remarks about Silas in the beginning of the poem, and also from his obstinate refusal to take Silas back to his service. The clash of egos of these two persons produces much hatred and ill-will.

One remembers what *The Dhammapada* says: “‘He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me’—in those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease” (Radhakrishnan 59). Mr. Warren entertains such thoughts of hatred and dislike against Silas, and he boils with anger. Anger is the offspring of ego, and therefore the Buddha advises his disciples to put away anger by renouncing ego: “Let a man put away anger,/Let him renounce pride” (Radhakrishnan, *The Dhammapada* 131). All the more, ego blinds one’s eyes, and an egoist fails to see his own errors and limitations. *The Dhammapada* says: “The fault of others is easily seen; our own fault is difficult to see. A man winnows others’ faults like chaff, but his own faults he hides as a cheat hides an unlucky throw” (139).

Mr. Warren’s formidable ego makes him deaf and blind to the miseries of Silas. Also he blames Silas as a dishonest and disloyal
servant. But he does not bother to trace and find out his own role in the wrangle with Silas. Silas makes the same mistake; he does not show any concern for his master’s problems; he cares only for himself. He quits his master when his service is urgently needed. His ego is so impregnable that he cannot tolerate even a slight insinuation against him. Mr. Warren and Silas thus build up a wall between them by piling one brick of ego upon the other.

In this first conflict – that is, in the conflict between Mr. Warren and Silas – Mary has only a passive role. At the same time she is not a disinterested spectator: she plays the role of a peace-maker. It is this role that involves her in the second conflict in the poem, namely, the conflict between herself and Warren, with Silas in the centre. Alo Sircar speaks about this conflict as follows:

“The Death of the Hired Man” is the first of Frost’s major dramatic poems, and as in all drama, the action here centres round a fundamental conflict – a conflict of feelings between Mary and Warren, the principal characters in the poem. The conflict is between intelligent people who, though they do not give in or surrender, know that neither of them is completely in the wrong. The conflict is between Mary’s ‘mercy’ and her husband’s ‘justice’ and the world can hardly do without either, however irreconcilable they might appear. (36)
While the first conflict is between two egos, the second conflict is between ego and non-ego, represented by Mr. Warren and Mary respectively. Moreover, unlike the first conflict, as Alo Sircar points out, the second one is “neither bitter nor destructive” (36); it does not produce the venom of ill-will; it creates instead peace and understanding. This is mainly due to the fact that in this conflict no self interest of the characters is involved. “The entire discussion in ‘The Death of the Hired Man’,” says Frank Lentricchia, “turns on Warren’s reluctance ‘to be kind,’ as his wife put it” (62). Mary wants warren “to be kind” not to her, but to the pathetic figure of Silas – very ill, broken in body and spirit. In brief, Warren and Mary are not concerned with their own personal sorrows and misfortunes, but with those of others. In this respect, “The Death of the Hired Man” is distinct from Frost’s other poems. Says Doyle:

Many of his poems present people with sorrows or misfortunes, but only a few show within the poem itself people in the process of concerning themselves with the problem of others. (215)

Mary succeeds as a mediator between her husband and Silas for the important reason that she is not hindered in her mission by egotism. Mary who is free from egotism can easily identify with the sufferings of Silas, and pity him. Pity is, in a sense, subdued ego, and it “makes the world soft to the weak and noble for the strong” (Arnold 131). According
to Buddhism, the primary requirement for love and understanding is the surrender of ego. Says Rhys Davids:

To understand all, says a French epigram, is to forgive all. The Buddhist goes farther; to understand all, is not only to forgive but to give - to give one's self through insight into other's need. (243)

Self is the builder of barriers between man and man. When the self is extinct, one feels, "As they so I; as I so they" (qtd. Allen, *Buddha's Words* 63). Then one's heart overflows with love and compassion for all. After his enlightenment which marked the complete extinction of his ego, the Buddha is reported to have said: "...my heart / Beats with each throb of all hearts that ache / Known and unknown, ...." (Arnold 99). Therefore, the greatest sacrifice that one can do for universal love and brotherhood is the sacrifice of one's ego.

Mary's love and compassion for Silas, and her understanding of Warren's problems is a distinct mark of her selflessness. In fact, Mary's love and understanding of other's problems is born out of her egolessness. As a true lover of peace and understanding, Mary seems to have realised that "Hatred ceaseth not by hatred: hatred ceaseth but by love" (qtd. in Humphreys, *Buddhism* 121). Mary thus wins over her husband with love and understanding; she succeeds in transforming Mr. Warren's hatred for Silas to love and sympathy for him. Her success -
indeed a triumph of egolessness over egoism – is one of the main attractions of the poem. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant highlights the role of Mary as follows:

In “The Death of the Hired Man”, … , the issue is in Mary’s hands. Her voice so gently enforces her compassionate insight that Warren, her husband impatient and unrealising, is persuaded to her view. (421-422)

Warren French contrasts Mary’s selfless and spiritual outlook, transcending all petty barriers in life, with Mr. Warren’s selfish and worldly attitude, creating all the tensions and hostilities around him. He says:

If her husband’s matter-of-fact attitude undercuts all the tensions and hostilities and aspirations of the other characters and reduces man to an existential burden, the wife transcends all those petty barriers and reasserts man’s inherent spiritual participation in something like Emerson’s oversoul. (398)

Mary’s presence in the poem, like the tranquil presence of full Moon¹ against the dark background of the night, provides the readers with a sense of joy and relief in the midst of old age, disease and death. Warren French’s observations about Mary is worth quoting in full:

Mary – bearing the name of the figure who at the beginning of the era brought “The Light” to the world – is a creature of
light. At three moments we see her spotlighted against the surrounding darkness. In the opening line we see her sitting “musing on the lamp flame at the table,” involved not in the terror of the surrounding darkness that might beset many in her situation but rather in the contemplation of the light’s flickering challenge to this dark. (398)

The poet always associates Mary with light – the flickering lamp, the transient silver cloud, and the changing and disappearing moon. He also disassociates her from the dark earth and makes the point of projection into the sky from which the light comes. Indeed she provides a receptacle for the falling light, as though she might actually shelter and preserve it there when it was gone from the sky. Further, she holds a lamp of wisdom unto the men who grope in darkness, she persuades them to light a lamp unto themselves. “Go, look, see for yourself,” she implores her husband. To a Buddhist scholar, Mary who is free from all the shackles of egotism, is “Sambhogakaya” (Rightmindfulness) and “Karuna” (Compassion) embodied. Warren French is right when he says

Recognising along with the husband in the poem the inseparableness of our journey through the dark, we muster all the tough-minded scepticism we can and still strive with the wife to become a part of the light, to make earth a place for love. (401)

Many other poems of Frost focusing on man as an individual represent this human egoism in a number of ways. “Acquainted with
Night" shows the speaker walking alone and lonely, cut off from other human beings and from the universe as a whole. This speaker is almost entirely self-centred and detached. He does not seem to be impelled by pride, but he certainly denies any contact with other human beings. In “An Old Man’s Winter Night” the old man also refuses to have any contact with other human beings. We do not know why the old man is alone, and again we do not know whether the state he reached is the result of his aloneness or the cause of it. We can deal only with the state of his life as we find it. As Judith Oster points out, “With his memory failing him, eroding his sense of purpose, the old man strengthens his ego by a stubborn taciturnity, and he protects himself by scaring away what frightens him rather than by inviting in what comforts him” (95). Locked himself in the prison of self, the old man lives in fear of everything within and without.

All these Frost characters seem to have one thing in common: they form an island unto themselves by erecting barriers of selves between them and their fellow beings. So self is the wall between man and man, and its removal alone can pave the way to universal love and brotherhood. James L. Potter observes thus about Frost’s treatment of human egotism:

This human self-centeredness and the consequent pride, fear, and loneliness are reflections of man’s basic failure to
be realistic about his position in the universe and his relationship with other people. (116)

Frost's concern with the barriers between man and man is perhaps the most dominant theme of his poem "Mending Wall." Here the wall which separates the estates of the poet-narrator and his neighbour can be taken as a symbol of human barriers made of man's egotism. Norman H. Holland speaks about the wall in the poem:

It is a mental wall, though, as well as a physical one, and I read the gaps as making possible a meeting of minds and attitudes as well as lands and bodies. Closing the gaps in the wall means closing off points where the two men might meet physically or mentally. (25)

That the barriers or enclosures in Frost's poetry are associated with the self of man is asserted by Frank Lentricchia. She says: "Enclosures, be they natural or human constructions, tend in Frost to correlate with structures which are entirely mental, often becoming figures for the interior space of self" (60).

It is the wall of man's egotism that creates most of the conflicts in the world. Man's struggle for existence naturally involves conflict of egos, and it produces antagonism. Man against man, business firm against business firm, nation against nation, and race against race - such is the ceaseless cry. It can be found that this hostility among men
grows out of their egoism which builds up walls between man and man, nation and nation, race and race, and so on. So the walls have a universal significance. Frost himself speaks about walls:

Somebody said “What about walls – would n’t you like to get rid of walls?” No, we always have walls – have always had them. While some are being torn down, others are being built up. Whether you want them or not you will always have ’em. (Mertins 353).

Buddhism too recognises that it is the self or ego that erects the barriers within man and without, and it, therefore, invokes man to annihilate his egoism to bring about harmony both inside and outside. Says Christmas Humphreys:

The only barrier which holds us from ‘becoming what we are’ is self, and when the self, the temporary aggregate of passions, fears and prejudices, of hopes and personal desire, has died, even as a fire for want of fuelling, then right and wrong, and all other ‘pairs of opposites’, belonging to the realm of self, will also die. (The Middle Way 93)

William James endorses this Buddhist idea when he quotes Professor Lenba:

When the sense of estrangement, fencing man about in a narrowly limited ego, breaks down, the individual finds himself ‘at one with all creation.’ He lives in the universal self; he and man, he and nature, he and god, are one. (241)
Frost gives an excellent poetic expression to this idea in “Mending Wall.” Though Frost knows that more and more walls are being built now a days and that walls are a reality in the present day world, we have reasons to believe that the poet is always against the walls. He seems to believe that constructing walls is against the law of nature. He proclaims it in the opening line of the poem itself: “Something there is that does not like a wall” (33). Norman H. Holland observes:

It seems to me that Frost is working with an infantile fantasy about breaking down the wall which marks self so as to return to a state of closeness to an Other. To lose the boundary between self and other is to perceive one’s own impulses as a part of the outer world as one’s own. (29)

The poem makes it clear more than once that the wall is unnecessary for all practical purposes. The poet-narrator has pine trees and apple orchard in his estate, and they will never eat the cones under his neighbour’s pines. Further, the poet-narrator wonders: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out / And to whom I was like to give offence” (34). And therefore, to him, mending the wall appears to be an absurd game: “Oh, just another kind of outdoor game, / One on a side” (33).

But the orthodox neighbour is adamant about the wall; he insists on mending the wall every season. He is his father’s good son, and upholds the dictum that “good fences make good neighbours.” It seems
to be his egotism that obstructs him from recognising the truth that walls are against the law of nature. Says Paul Carus: “The thought of thine ego stands between thy rational nature and truth; banish it, and then wilt thou see things as they are”(29). Again, Christmas Humphreys maintains that “One’s duty to one’s neighbour is, from the Buddhist point of view, to forget the differences of self and self in the greater unity which is Mind — only” (The Buddhist Way 136). The neighbour’s insistence on having the wall between the estates, as strongly as possible, indicates indirectly his refusal to shed his egotism.

The neighbour is portrayed as “an old- savage armed” bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top, groping in darkness. His primitive ignorance combined with his ego-centrism makes him gruesome as well as ridiculous both in appearance and temperament. The stone and darkness seem to represent this man’s primitive egoism and ignorance, which seem to complement each other. One remembers that in early Buddhism the two evils — egoism and ignorance — are regarded as the cause of disharmony and discontent in the world. Says Radhakrishnan:

Ignorance in early Buddhism is the cause of egoism, or the I-sense. It makes the individual feel himself to be separate from the rest of existence, unrelated to the order of the world. We cling to our little self, struggle hard to perpetuate it, and continue it through all eternity. (Indian Philosophy 412)
Frost, however, does not seem to be pessimistic about man’s narrow-mindedness and small-heartedness, which are produced by his ignorance and egotism. He always entertains the hope that the mind of man will expand as he grows, and then man will be able to love and understand his fellow-beings better. Marion Montgomery deals in detail with this aspect of Frost’s philosophy. According to the critic, Frost’s view of man’s nature is consistent throughout his poetry. In Frost’s view, each man, in a sense, is a stranger in this world, and so he remains. He is not to question why he is alone. He is to begin the breathless opening and closing of the mind, the hand, the heart and the eye upon the world as he grows. Then he understands more of the world and of his fellow-men. With this understanding comes love which makes him respect and accept differences between men (148).

In “Mending Wall” there is outwardly nothing to suggest that the mind of the orthodox neighbour is expanding, and that he will respect and accept the differences between himself and the poet-narrator. However, Norman H. Holland points out that there are a number of images in the poem concerning the mouth, eating and speech which suggest an oral “nucleus of fantasy” that embodies the desire to destroy all barriers between the self and the outside world – an impulse at the root of much that is consciously expressed in the poem (29).
Discussing this poem, Readcliffe Squires observes that “I suppose that one ought to consider the poem ‘Mending Wall’ as the most important of Frost’s utterances on the score of the relationship between men” (76). The poem mainly deals with the universal theme of love and understanding between men, and suggests in many ways that it is man’s egotism that stands in the way of attaining this goal. This is a favourite theme of the Buddhists who believe that only by dissolving the boundaries of self we can reveal our connection and mutual dependence upon other living beings (Stephan Bachelor 36-37).

Frost’s conviction that everything in nature except man is opposed to wall is perhaps the central theme of his poem “The Cow in Apple Time.” In this farm fable Frost implies with mingled amusement and sadness that the wayward creature’s self injured action personifies one kind of a rebellion of nature against man-made walls. The cow’s scorn for the walls and for their builders is implicit in the opening lines: “Something inspires the only cow of late / To make no more of a wall than an open gate, / And think no more of wall-builders than fools” (124). Caroline Ford maintains that “Frost has nothing but admiration for inspired animals, who try to jump barriers when the opportunity arises.” Squires continues: “Frost’s sympathy for this love of freedom is merely a reflection of his own hate of artificiality and smallness” (41).
A study of the contrast between the cow in the present poem and Brown in "Brown’s Descent" will bring out the pettiness and absurdity of man’s egoism. Although the cow is eager to jump across barriers, there is no such desire in the heart of old farmer Brown during his experience of wall-crossing. Winter ice on a hill makes this typical wall-builder lose his customary sense of dignity, since he is unable to prevent his slide to the valley. Frost brings out the humour of the situation which forces the old man to cross the boundaries he built through habit. Frost laughs uproariously at him as he skids "’Cross lots, ’cross walls, ’cross every thing.” And through him he enjoys laughing at humanity caught off its guard because of its egotism.

Magoon and Lafe, the two characters in “A Hundred Collars” can be compared to the orthodox neighbour and the poet-narrator respectively in “Mending Wall.” Speaking about Magoon, Doyle says that “Here is a man who cannot ‘give’ himself to others under any circumstances” (112). He is always “preoccupied with formidable mail.” The men around him are his friends, and he is on vacation. Yet he holds to his office and his profession. He pretends to talk to the friends, and thus puts on a show of importance. Lancaster, his place, seems to him too narrow to contain a man of his importance. Says the poet sarcastically: “Lancaster bore him – such a little town / Such a great man” (44). Magoon lost his genuine contact with nature and his fellow men, and he lives in the narrow world of his own scholarly speciality. He
is so obsessed with his academic scholarship that he always introduces himself with his qualifications. Entangled in a world of his own making, he is afraid of any other world, here Lafe's world. He considers Lafe to be woefully an unequal match in conversation.

Lafe is just the opposite of all that Magoon stands for. He is part of his surroundings. He loves people, and is loved by them. "You see I'm in with everybody, know 'em all. / I almost know their farms as well as they do," says he (49). He loves not only his friends and neighbours, but also the stranger (Magoon) in his room, though the latter does not respond. While Lafe likes conversation, Magoon speaks very little. Lafe is again frank and free from needless suspicion, but Magoon is non-committal and fearful. These differences between them are indeed the differences between a liberal-minded man and an ego-centric one. One feels that it is the personal conceit of Magoon that builds up the barrier between himself and his fellow-men, and his personal conceit is projected in the poem by contrasting it with the liberal nature of Lafe.

The protagonist in "The Most of It" can be treated as a companion of the neighbour in "Mending Wall" and of Magoon in "Hundred Collars." Here is another ego-centric person who thought that "he kept the universe" and who refuses to establish communication with his fellow-men. In the world of make-believe what the protagonist hears is nothing
but an echo of his own voice. He is solitary, and his solitude is perhaps mainly responsible for his egoism. Says Dorothy Judd Hall,

   His solitude, on the one hand, has inspired unwarranted egoism; he imagines himself as stage-manager on the cosmic scene. On the other hand, it has ensnared him in a solipsistic trap; he hears from the wings only the “mocking echo” of his own speech. (Robert Frost 95)

One can also argue that it is the egoism of the protagonist that makes him solitary. As Russell observes, “Vanity, when it passes beyond a point, kills pleasure in every activity for its own sake, and thus leads inevitably to listlessness and boredom” (The Conquest of Happiness 17)

   What the man in “Most of It” cries out for is “counter-love, original response,” but “nothing came of what he cried,” except a “great buck” which “powerfully appeared, / Pushing the crumpled water up ahead, / And landed pouring like a waterfall, / And stumbled through the rocks with horny head, / And forced the under bush” (338). What the reader makes of this crashing “embodiment” is a crucial point. Robert Pack says:

   The poem’s enigma is whether to regard embodiment as a kind of incarnation or revelation, or merely as a physical phenomenon that has occurred “some morning” by chance. (14)
Pack adds that "The way the buck 'forced the under bush' resembles the way the image of the buck enters the mind of the man who is watching," and that "It is as if the buck gets born in the mind of its perceiver" (15). Pack's observation makes clear that the buck is a creation of the protagonist's mind. Just as the protagonist hears his own voice, what he sees is in the image of the buck is his own ego. As Dorothy Judd Hall points out, "the animal projects sheer bestial strength – crashing, splashing, pushing, stumbling, 'pouring like a waterfall' and 'forc[ing] the under bush'." The critic continues: "yet the force is not totally unknowable; the buck 'embodies' relentless energy, and as a type of 'revelation,' manifests creative and destructive powers at loose in the universe" (96). Again, Robert W. French says: "The speaker was asking for 'counter love'; but this 'embodiment' of a great buck, if it is a sign of anything is a sign of 'power' "(160). Putting these two observations together, one gets the impression that the buck represents most appropriately man's ego with all its terrifying powers. "Will is the most destructive thing," says J. Krishnamurthy (57), and he adds later that "Will is the very essence of violence" (77). One recalls the following lines from The Light of Asia:

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The sin of self, who in the universe
As in a mirror sees her fond face shown
And crying 'I' would have the world say 'I'
And all things perish so if she endures. (156)
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The protagonist in “Most of It” is a typical modern man who is not an individual at all in the right sense of the word. An individual is one who is indivisible in himself, not fragmented. But the modern man is fragmented, broken up, and so he is not really an individual. His self is split. The protagonist and the buck can be taken as the two fragments of the same ego; they seem to represent the duality of self. So long as self acts in fragments, it creates chaos and violence. In short, it is the duality of ego that causes disorder and destruction, and more than anything else, it destroys love, peace and understanding among men. As long as the ego exists in fragments, there will be no genuine love and compassion. The protagonist cries out for counter love, but he does not get it. The reason is obvious: his fragmented ego gives him an illusion of duality, and he fails to see the oneness of the universe. Until one realises the oneness of existence, one cannot attain the bliss of love, and that oneness can be attained only through the annihilation of ego. Says Krishnamurthy:

Do you want to know from your heart what love is? Has it not been the human cry for millennia to find out how to live peacefully …. That can only come into being when there is the real sense of “non-me”…. (80)

It is this selfless love that enables the couple in “Two Look at Two” to communicate with the other beings, and obtain counter love from nature. As Mario L. D’ Avanzo observes: “As the alpha and omega, the
love relationship between man and wife is a prerequisite to the natural
correspondence and counter love with the paired buck and doe” (82-83).
The critic continues that “Love alone makes perception more than just
mechanical; through the heart we radiate value into the things seen”
(83). D’Avanzo points out that “the couple prepare for the
 correspondencen (82). “Love and forgetting might have carried them / A
little further up the mountain side,” says the poet (229). The poet
perhaps implies that forgetting – most probably the forgetting of self – is
what makes love worthy and enduring. The couple are united by this
selfless love, and therefore, not only can they stand together safe and
secure in darkness among rock and washout, but they can also see the
doe and the buck — nature’s darlings — even beyond the man-made
“tumbled wall with barbed-wire binding.” Even animals can easily
recognize man’s selfless love. There was no fear in the eye of the doe
when it saw the couple, and it passed “unscared” along the wall. The
buck was also friendly to the couple. Judd Hall points out the difference
between this buck and the buck in “The Most of It”:

The contrast in attitude between this creature [the buck in
“The Most of It”] and the buck in “Two Look At Two” is
enormous. In that “visitation” the male deer, while
“antlered” and of “lusty nostril” views the lovers “quizzically
with jerks head.” If “unscared,” he is surely tame, mildly
curious. In “The Most of It” the animal projects sheer bestial
strength — crashing, splashing, pushing, stumbling,
“pouring like a waterfall” and “forc[ing] the underbush.”

(Robert Frost 95-96)

The contrast between the two bucks perhaps brings out the difference between man’s egotism and egolessness: while the buck in “The Most of It” represents the brutality of egoism, the one in “Two Look At Two” stands for tamed egotism – tamed and made benevolent by love. This love, unstained by egotism, takes away the barrier between the couple and the animals, and thus they could see and understand each other. “Two had seen two,” says the poet, and he concludes: “This must be all’. It was all.” To the poet, this correspondence between man and man, and also between man and nature is the greatest and the most ennobling of all experiences, and it becomes possible only through the annihilation of man’s egoism. In this context it is worthy to note that as a poet Frost succeeded in establishing such a correspondence with all things “both great and small” in nature. Says Untermeyer:

Like Coleridge, Frost believes: “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small.” Frost’s love of things “both great and small” includes birds, dogs, wood-chucks, cows and horses. He does not even draw the line at insects. Some of his shrewdest and most delightful – and most sympathetic – poems are about ants and fireflies and spiders and even hornets. (Robert Frost’s Poems 195).
A student of Buddhism remembers that on the day following the Buddha’s Enlightenment there grew a friendship among various creatures in the forest where he sat and meditated. In Edwin Arnold’s words,

... in Ran and jungle grew that day
Friendship amongst the creatures; spotted deer
Browsed fearless where the tigress fed her cubs,
And cheethas lapped the pool beside the bucks;
Under the eagle’s rock the brown hares scoured
While his fierce beak but preened an idle wing;
The snake sunned all his jewels in the beam
With deadly fangs in sheath; the shrike let pass
The nestling finch; the emerald halcyons
Sate dreaming while the fishes played beneath,
Nor hawked the merops, though the butterflies—
Crimson and blue and amber—fitted thick
Around his perch; ...(170)

On that day, says Edwin Arnold, Devas in the air cried, ‘It is finished, finished’ (170). It is obviously the ego of the Master that is “finished,” because ‘Nirvana’ or Enlightenment is often described as the extinction of ego (Carus 4). One feels that it was this extinction of ego that reflected in nature in the form of love and friendship among the creatures which were on other occasions hostile to each other.

A different manifestation of man’s egoism appears in “The Bear” where, in the words of James L. Potter, “man is represented as caged in
the universe, alone, and almost completely absorbed in himself" (116). Like the buck in “The Most of It,” the bear is also a representation of man’s ‘alter ego,’ but the bear, being a ridiculous figure does not evoke in our mind any kind of dread or fear. “Because of his pointless busy-ness [sic],” says Potter, “[the bear] is a figure of fun like the ants in ‘Departmental’ – ‘A baggy figure, equally pathetic / When sedentary and when peripatetic’ ” (116). Frost’s intention here seems to be to ridicule man’s egoism rather than to portray a gruesome picture of it, as he does in “The Most of It.” Perhaps, what Frost implies here is that a man of egoism evokes in us more laughter and sympathy than fear and hatred.

Like the bear, an ego-centric person imagines that he is a dictator of the world around him, and revels in his might and mastery; but he seems to forget the fact that he is only a prisoner in the world of his own making. His is a highly fascinating world of material abundance. Still, it is a prison, and a man of wisdom like Siddhartha finds it suffocating, and escapes from it at the earliest. At the time of his departure from the palace, Siddhartha says: “For now the hour is come when I shall quit / This golden prison where my heart lives caged / To find the truth.” (emphasis added) (Arnold 102).

The bear in the cage indulges in many ill-tempered and idiotic activities: she draws the tree above her as if it were a lover, kisses it, and let it snap back upright in the sky. The ego-centric person also, like the
bear, behaves erratically and irrationally. All day he fights a nervous inward rage. His mood rejects all his mind suggests. He paces back and forth, and never rests. According to the Buddhists, it is man's egoism that makes him crazy. Says Paul Carus: "The consciousness of self dims the eyes of the mind and hides the truth." He continues: "It is the origin of error, it is the source of illusion, it is the germ of evil "(4).

The self-centred man is a loner; he avoids the company of his fellow-men, as we have seen in the case of the protagonist in the poem "The Most of It"; and furthermore, he fails to recognise the inherent unity of life. "He almost looks religious, but he is n't," says the poet about the bear. Etymologically, the word religion derives from the Latin "religare" which means "to bind" or "to tie." A true religious man, therefore, should associate his life with the life of his fellow men. Buddhism too advocates this harmony and co-operation. Says Radhakrishnan:

To say that each individual is outside of the other is a half-truth. There is also a vital and organic union of all beings. The development of this uniting consciousness or the attainment of fullness of knowledge, peace and joy is nirvana. (Indian Philosophy 430)

Nothing can give comfort and happiness to the bear who looks always restless and agitated. Neither religion nor science can be of any help to him; neither Plato nor Democritus can provide him with a convincing answer to his intriguing questions. A Buddhist scholar can
argue that until he surrenders his self, the bear — and all the ego-centric persons for that matter — can never find a solution to the problem of mental agony. Says a Buddhist hymn: “Yet highest bliss enjoyeth he / Who quits the pride of ‘I am I’ ” (Carus 40). And therefore, the Buddhists regard self-surrender as the highest achievement of man. The Buddha once told a military general called Simha: “Great is a successful general, O Simha, but he who has conquered self is the great victor” (Carus 133).

The desire for exclusive possession is a characteristic nature of an ego-centric person, and it is well demonstrated in Frost’s poem, “Paul’s Wife.” Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant sums up the theme of the poem thus: “‘Paul’s Wife’ concerns metaphorically a man who refuses to share socially his spiritual possessions — in this case a wife who may not even be named by others without offence and vanishment” (266).

Paul was a mystery to all. “Every one had been wrong in judging Paul,” says the poet. Still every body knew for certain that “Paul was what’s called a terrible possessor,” and that what made Paul a terrible possessor was his unrestrained passion for his wife. “Owning a wife with him meant owning her / She was n’t anybody else’s business” (196).

That Paul was a man of impregnable ego is evident from the various versions about his life. He just fled from the person who asked
him about his wife. The question every where was why Paul objected to being asked this civil question. One version was that he married a wife who was not his equal, and that he was therefore ashamed of her. He was a hero, and to match him she should be a heroine which she was not — she was some half-bred squaw. We are not told whether these versions are right or wrong, but all of them bring to light Paul’s egotism. Everything contributed to the growth of his self-centredness. People always looked upon him as a mysterious stranger, and therefore, they did not bother to get acquainted with him. No wonder, Paul remained ungentle and unsociable.

One has reasons to believe that Paul’s desire for exclusive possession of his wife stemmed from his egoism. As the Buddhists maintain, “Self begets selfishness. There is no evil but flows from self. There is no wrong but what is done by the assertion of self” (Carus 5). Self dims the senses, and misleads men. A selfish man fails to see the reality. In his introduction to The Dhammapada, Radhakrishnan observes that “To be egoistic is to be like a rudimentary creature that has grown no eyes. It is to be blind to the reality of other persons” (31-32). Paul, the egoist, grew so insensible that he neglected all other duties except that to his wife:

He was all duty to her in a minute:
He had to run right off to look her up
As if to say “That’s so, how is my wife?”
I hope she is n't getting into mischief.” (191)

Paul is portrayed as a man of immense physical strength. “He'd been the hero of the mountain camps” (191). He was so strong that “he had slipped the bark of a whole tamarack off whole”(191). Everyone heard how he thrashed the horses on a load that would not budge, until they simply stretched their rawhide harness from the load to camp. There were many more stories about Paul's Herculean adventures. Had he turned a murderer, he would have been a terror, but he never stopped to murder anyone who asked questions about his wife.

Paul's unusual physical strength smacks of his primitive egoism. He reminds us of the orthodox neighbour in “Mending Wall” who carries a stone like an “old- savage armed.” We are not sure whether it is their overwhelming physical strength that made these characters egoists, or the vice versa. The relation between man's physical strength and his egoism is yet to be proved, but what makes these men ungentle and unsocial is nothing but their sordid egoism, and their egoism seems to become all the more gruesome because of their inordinate physical power.

The version of Murphy, a colleague of Paul, about the origin of Paul's wife is perhaps the most interesting part of the poem. According to Murphy, “Paul sawed his wife out of a pine log.” Murphy claims that
he “saw the lady born.” Once there appeared a hollow pine in the yard. Every one thought that this miracle happened due to the mysterious presence of Paul. Therefore, the sawyer asked Paul to take a jack knife and open it. After work that evening, Paul cut the pine to see if it was empty. He found something inside it which looked like pith. Taking it out, Paul put it in the pond to see how it would respond to water. Then it was gone. Later, “it slowly rose a person; rose a girl.” Her heavy and wet hair appeared like a helmet on her head. She leaned on a log, and looked back at Paul. Then she caught her first breath with a gasp and laughed. She climbed slowly to her feet and walked off talking to herself or Paul who took her around the pond.

This reads almost like a fairy tale. However, this version about the origin of Paul’s wife signifies that she, fair and mysterious, is a creation of Paul himself. One can argue that Paul’s wife is a creation of his own ego. The long narration of Murphy as to how Paul’s wife emerged from the pine wood perhaps illustrates how ego evolves from one’s personality.

The argument that Paul’s wife is a visible manifestation of Paul’s ego has the following evidences to support it. Firstly, Paul’s wife has no identity of her own; she is known after him. The poet calls her “Paul’s wife” and “his creature.” Secondly, Paul and his wife were so inseparable that Murphy always saw them together. Murphy saw them falling in love across the twilight pond. Again,
More than a mile across the wilderness
They sat together half-way up a cliff
In a small niche let into it, the girl
Brightly, as if a star played on the palace
Paul darkly, like her shadow. (195)

So Paul and his wife were like an object and its shadow respectively. All
these indicate not only that Paul's wife was a sheer projection of his own
personality, but also that like the buck in "The Most of It" and the bear
in the poem of that title, she too is Paul's 'alter ego.'

We are told that Paul's wife was a girl of mysterious beauty and
elegance. Murphy reported that like an angel, the girl spread light and
lustre around her. The all-absorbing and unearthly beauty of his wife
made Paul her slave and prisoner. He became easily a victim of desire or
what the Buddhists call "asakti" which is an element of ego. Says
S.S.Barlingay, a Buddhist scholar:

It (desire) is colourful, it is tasteful and man feels a strong
aptitude to have it. This element is called 'asakti.' Jains call
it 'parigraha.' But what is important to understand is that
all these are elements of ego. (Studies in Buddhism 174)

Paul's ego-centric passion for his wife distorted his senses, and so
he behaved very abnormally. He discarded the company of his fellow
men. He became a loner. His solitariness helped only to strengthen his
egotism. He disappeared from one place to another when somebody
asked him about his wife. In short, Paul resembled a hunted animal in his erratic manners and behaviour. *The Dhammapada* says: “Men who are pursued by lust run around like a hunted hare. Held in fetters and in bonds they suffer and suffer again” (Mascaro 84).

The poem seems to raise before us a very complex question: Is a man’s love for his wife so harmful and destructive to him? Before answering this question, one has to examine Frost’s attitude towards love, especially love in marriage. Judith Oster observes that “Frost needed human relationships, particularly needed love and marriage – in life and the poetry – to help create,” and she adds that Frost is a great poet of love” (219). Again, Poirier calls Frost “our greatest poet of married love since Milton” (qtd. in Oster 219). To Frost love and marriage was a source of creative energy, and not a cause of self-destruction as in the case of Paul. What was wrong with Paul’s love for his wife, one feels, was his egoistic attachment to her. Edmond Holmes, a Buddhist scholar, says:

> Desire in itself is not evil. It is desire to affirm the lower self, to live in it, cling to it, identify one self with it, instead of with the universal self, that is evil. (qtd. in Humphreys, *Buddhism* 91-92)

The Buddhists believe that real love emerges from egolessness, and that it is the ego which breeds hatred and suspicion. It is only when the egos
of the persons in love melt and merge with each other that they experience the bliss of oneness — the full ecstasy of love. As Russell maintains,

love is able to break down the hard shell of the ego, since it is a form of biological co-operation in which the emotions of each are necessary to the fulfilment of the others’ instinctive purpose. *(The Conquest of Happiness 30-31)*

With the ego getting submerged, personal love soars to the ethereal heights of universal love, and then one becomes capable of loving both his intimate ones and the others alike. This does not mean that sublimation of love will reduce the intensity of personal love; where as, it will ennoble and strengthen personal love. Siddhartha tells his wife Yashodhara: “... that I loved thee most / Because I loved so well all living souls” *(Arnold 93-94)*.

Paul in Frost’s poem perhaps feared that sharing his love with others would decrease the degree of love for his wife, and so he always confined himself to her world. A Buddhist would advise him thus:

*True love is void of self and suffering*
We have not found it yet
Open the doors.
*(Humphreys, Buddhist Poems 21)*
The poet’s comparison of Mary to the moon is fascinating, though it has nothing to do with the main argument of the poem. While her husband goes to into the house to find the hired man dead, Mary sits outside to “see if that small cloud/Will hit or miss the moon.” The narrator reports: “It hit the moon”(40). The significance of the moon image in “Acquainted With Night” and “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” the poems already discussed, is also not properly understood and assessed. “The moon in ‘Acquainted with Night,’” says Ninam Bayam, “proclaims nothing relevant to man, only that the ‘time is neither wrong or right’”(145). For one who makes an attempt to read Frost’s poems in the Buddhist perspective, the image of moon in these poems are extremely interesting. He remembers that the image of moon occurs frequently in Buddhist literature, especially in connection with the Buddha’s life. For example, the Buddha was born on the full-moon day of the month of Vaishak. It was in a full-moon night again that Siddhartha made his Great Renunciation (“Mahaparinirvana”), and left his home and country in search of a solution for the universal problem of suffering. Further, it was on the midnight of the full-moon day of Vaisakh that he attained “Nirvana.” The Buddhacharita says that young Siddhartha was like the moon. It celebrates that “Some [women who saw Siddhartha in his chariot] opined from his benignity and gravity that the moon came down to earth in person with his rays veiled”(Asvagosa 66). The image of moon in the Buddhist works appears to signify the Buddha’s love, compassion and enlightenment. Like the calm, cool and tranquil moonlight, the Buddha’s message of love and kindness illuminate the world in darkness, and heals the hearts of men in distress. Coming to Frost, a Buddhist feels that the presence of moon in his tragic poems serves to tranquilise the bitterness of the situation.