Chapter

Prevalence of the Pastoral Element in Frost's Poetry

The most commonly held view about Robert Frost's poetry is that it is primarily pastoral. There is no doubt that much of it has a rural background, country-folks, rural occupation and other activities. There are poems which deal with apple-picking, gum-gathering, birch-swinging, mowing, hay-collecting and other rural activities. Frost's characters are rural people and his language is simple and colloquial. His poetic world is noticeable for the absence of city folks and city life, factories, trains, buses and human traits which are essentially urban. In his poetry, there is a faithful portrayal of the life lived in New England, the region in which he lived and was intimately familiar with. No wonder, he is called a regional poet.

But in a wider sense, Frost is not merely a pastoral poet. The local colour is important in so far as it forms a definite backdrop and sets a familiar tone and mood. Frost has explored wide and manifold ranges of being by viewing reality within the mirror of the natural and unchanging world of rural life. Pastoralism is a technique with Frost to illuminate the universal ramifications of a particular scene and incident, and to illustrate the eternal longings in the heart of man in a particularized situation. But in the strict classical sense, he is not a pastoral poet. In the classical pastoral poetry written by Virgil and Theocritus, there is a harmony between man and nature. In Frost's poetry there is no such harmony. It is only in the modern sense of the pastoral - that any work that contrasts simple and complicated life and
gives preference to the former is pastoral – that we can think of Frost as a pastoral poet.

Pastoral poetry, in the traditional sense, deals with the simple life of shepherds and other rural folk in a natural setting. It was Theocritus, a Greek poet of the third century B.C., who originated the tradition of the pastoral. Virgil later imitated Theocritus in his Ecologues. The poets who followed Virgil established many conventions of pastoral such as the natural settings, the shepherd piping his flute or meditating the rural muse, pleading for love, and grieving over the beloved’s indifference, so on and so forth. Such conventions made the pastoral, mechanical and artificial. In recent times, the word ‘pastoral’ is used for any writing which contrasts simple and complicated life and shows preference for the simple.

Frost’s poetry has the spirit of the pastoral if we take into consideration the fact that it deals primarily with rural life. The countryside to the North of Boston, a part of New England, provides a proper setting. In any study of the pastoral, the rural setting and the rural people cannot be ignored. In most of Frost’s poetry, the rural setting is obvious. But nature, as in all pastorals, remains in the background.

In ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, there is an obvious spirit of the pastoral. The scene is beautifully depicted: the woods are ‘lovely and deep’, the tufts of snow are gently falling, a light breeze is blowing; and there is almost total calm and quiet. But this scene helps project the point of view of the Yankee traveller. Like all rural people, he cannot stay for long in idle contemplation. As a practical man, he wants to do his assigned work before taking rest. In poems like this, the setting and the point of view are
both important. In ‘Birches’, nature is mainly used as a scene. There is a beautiful description of birches ‘loaded with ice’ that cracks in the warmth of the sun and falls on the ground like heaps of broken glass. But the swinging of birches is used to portray the Yankee former’s wish to go ‘upward’ in search of noble ideals and then again to come back, as ‘Earth’s the right place for love’.

Frost is chiefly concerned with the rural people and their world. His poetry, directly or indirectly, deals with the beliefs, ideals, traditions, customs and habits of the rural folk. The Yankee people believe in such virtues as honesty, simplicity, reticence, realism, optimism and the capacity to work hard. In ‘Mowing’, we find that the typical Yankee former advocates the idea of sweet labour – ‘the fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows’. He does not want undeserved wealth. He is of the opinion that a labourer finds the greatest pleasure in doing work. In ‘Mending Wall’, the reticent farmer who believes – ‘Good walls make good neighbours’ – projects the Yankee’s belief in privacy, the sense of possession and individualism. The farmer in ‘Blueberries’ is thrifty as he feeds his entire family on blueberries. ‘The Death of the Hired Man’ records the fact that the rural folk give much importance to self-respect. It is the pride and self-respect of Silas, the old farmer and that alienates him from his rich brother, and finally costs him his life. In ‘Home Burial’, we find a Yankee farmer who is extremely realistic and practical. He takes the death of his son as another inevitable fact of nature, unlike his wife who hates him for his indifference. In ‘The Code’, we learn that the rural workers do not like to be taught how to work as they know their work and do it with complete dedication and honesty.
It is in the rural setting and the use of the rural world that we may think of Frost as a Pastoral poet. But there are some essential features of the pastoral that are missing in his poetry such as harmony between man and nature, unqualified glorification of rural life, and the proper attitude towards work.

In the traditional pastoral, the shepherds and the other rural folk do not look upon nature as something remote and inanimate. They consider nature as a benevolent force. Nature rejoices in their joys, and grieves in their griefs. Animals grow gentle as they listen to the sounds of their flutes. In the Yankee countryside as portrayed by Frost, however no such harmony between man and nature exists. In ‘The Most of It’, for instance, the speaker wants an original response from nature, and not the reflection of his own love. But the thing which comes out from the world of nature, a buck, is all that he gets. He comes to the conclusion that nature is incapable of giving any intimate and personal response. Nature is remote and impersonal. In ‘Two look at Two’, there is a clear barrier between the world of nature and the human world. The couple and the pair of buck share no communion. In ‘The Mountain’, the Yankee farmer underlines the lack of harmony between man and nature as he views the mountain as an obstacle to the growth of the village:

‘We were but sixty voters last election,

We can’t in nature grow to many more:

That thing takes all the room’
Whereas the traditional pastoral glorifies rural life, Frost's poetry depicts rural life in a down-to-earth manner. The realistic note is struck most vividly at the ends of ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The charm of the rural scene cannot deter a determined traveller from reaching his destination. The life of the rural people is not idyllic. It is not a picture of total peace, harmony and contentment. The Yankees are not free from evil and wicked desires, impulses, jealousies, and prejudices. In ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, the farmer named Warren is arrogant and stubborn, and does not listen to the requests of his wife to take back their old farm-hand Silas. In ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’, the speaker portrays the two tramps, the wood-choppers, in very poor light:

Out of the woods two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps).

He considers the wood-choppers as sub-human creatures who remain dissatisfied with whatever job they do. In ‘The Code’, we find the Yankee farm-hands extremely touchy about their self-respect. Even a casual remark about how to do better work is enough for them to get offended and even kill the one who seems to question their integrity.
In the traditional pastoral, the rural people hardly do any real work on the farm, their real occupations being singing and love-making. This is not so in the rural world portrayed by Frost in his poetry. Here the Yankees take pleasure in doing work. The farmer in ‘Mowing’ believes in, and does hard work which is its own reward. The rider in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, too, prefers work to rest.

It is obvious, then, that Frost’s poetry has the spirit of the pastoral, though it lacks some essential features of the classical pastoral. It depicts in vivid detail the rural scene and the rural world of the north of Boston where the poet lived himself as a farmer for many years. It is not in the depiction of the rural scene but in its treatment that we find the real greatness of Frost as a pastoral poet.

Frost’s pastoralism is highly individual and unique. This uniqueness of his pastoral art arises from his ability to write of rural life from the point of view of an actual New England farmer. He does not write from a superior plane, as one who is above and beyond, but as one who shares the life of the rustic, his thought processes, and his way of looking at things. The adoption of the rustic point of view enables him not only to portray rustic life as it really is in itself, but also to contrast it with the life beyond the urban life, the complex life lived in the city. The earlier writers of the pastoral constantly stressed the parallelisms and contrasts between the simple and innocent life in the countryside, and the more sophisticated and artificial life of the court. Such parallelism and contrasts are also provided by Frost by juxtaposing the simple country life, and the complex, artificial life in the city, so that the one serves as a commentary on the other. His New England, like Arcadia, is a
distinct plane of existence portrayed in such a way that a comparison with the outer world is always strongly implied. It is isolated from ordinary experience, a society with its own folk ways, customs, and ideals, a locality with its own distinctive landscape. Like the old pastoralists he emphasizes the uniqueness of his rural world. It is an agrarian society isolated within an urbanized world, and its country folk are separated from the modern reading public by a gulf of social, cultural and economic differences, nearly as broad as that dividing the swain of the old pastoral from the courtly reader. He sets his rural world apart by stressing its distinctly local traits and portraying Yankee life as quite different from that in the cosmopolitan urban society. And, as in the old pastoral, awareness of differences lead to a recognition of parallels. The more unusual and remote that his rural New England appears, the more effectively he can use it as a medium for the symbolic representation of realities in other areas of experience. Thus in The Pasture, the poet established a comparison between the pasture and the outside world. The reader has to admire the pasture as a world better than his own because it is more natural, more neatly organised and more meaningful, but he is also aware that it is a plane of existence inferior in many respects to that on which he lives. ‘The contrast between the country and the town which we have noted in pastoral poetry is clearly the essential element in the design of this poem. It is not that country life is superior to city life, but that each life has its own values and distinctive features. In Birches, we are told about town side baseball, but as the boy in the country is too far from the city to learn baseball, he plays alone riding the birches, ‘down over and cover again’. Thus, Robert Frost prevents a new kind of pastoralism in his poetry
distinct from the older variety yet having elements that have a typical pastoral twang to them.

**PASTORAL TRADITION**

Traditionally, pastoral poetry deals with the life of rustic folk like shepherds etc. living in a rural setting. The origin of this genre of poetry was found in the writings of Theocritus in the third century B.C. who was later imitated by Virgil in his Ecologues. There were many followers of Virgil who established many pastoral conventions as the piping of flutes by shepherds and the lovers pining for their beloved etc. The pastorals of Theocritus are idyllic and dramatic while Virgil’s pastorals are decorative, personal, political and allegorical. Spenser’s Shepherd’s Calendar indicates the moral intention of the author Milton’s pastoral is personal and allegorical while Wordsworth’s pastoral poems reveal his pantheism and mysticism.

The pastoral genre can best be defined as a particular synthesis of attitudes toward the rural world. One might call this a point of view which is not to be found in every age, and among all poets, atleast, it is rare today. However, pastoral has had its periods of vigorous growth—notably during the cultural ascendancy of Alexandria, the age of Virgil, and the Renaissance. Pastoral comes to life whenever the poet casts himself in the role of the country dweller and writes about life in terms of contrast between the rural world, with its rustic scenery and native, humble folk, and the great outer world of the powerful, the wealthy, and the sophisticated. Though rural life is the subject of the pastoral, it is not seen in and for itself: the poet always tends to view it with reference to the more sophisticated plane of experience upon which both he and his audience live As W.W. Greg states the matter:
“What does appear to be a constant element in the pastoral as known to literature is the recognition of a contrast, implicit or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization.... Only when the shepherd—songs ceased to be the outcome of unalloyed pastoral conditions did they become distinctively pastoral. It is therefore significant that the earliest pastoral poetry with which we are acquainted, whatever half-articulture experiments may have preceded it, was itself directly born of the contrast between the recollections of a childhood spent among the Sicilian uplands and the crowded social and intellectual city-life of Alexandria.  

The purpose of pastoral is not simply to render a set appraisal of the country. The contrast between town and country is an ever-vital principle of poetic organization, for the relation between the two is felt to be complex. Though urban life is obviously superior in wealth and formalized knowledge, the country has its own special values. Pastoral plays the two against each other, exploiting the ambiguity of feeling which results in a show of contrasting images, and drawing attention to the resemblances beneath the obvious differences.

William Empson, in his stimulating book, English Pastoral Poetry, defines pastoral very convincingly as a mode of restabling for the refined classes the sense of solidarity with the common folk. He writes:

“**The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something

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fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). From seeing the two sorts of people combined like this you thought better of both; the best parts of both were used. The effect was in some degree to combine in the reader or author the merits of the two sorts; he was made to mirror in himself more completely, the effective elements of the society he lived in.”

Pastoral has an important place in American ideology. The puritan pursuit of renewal through rebellion against ecclesiastical corruption often invokes the pastoral longing of perfection through simplicity. Thomas Jefferson’s praise of the way of agrarianism echoes Greek ideals even if his prophetic fear of the destruction of agrarian life sounded prophetic Hebraic chords. Shortly after his collected poems were published in 1930 (for which he received his second Pulitzer Prize), Frost affirmed the relationship of his poetry to a fundamental pastoral idea, the praise of rustic over urban life.

Pastoral has been recognised as a mode that encompasses many genres including poetry. Its mythic contents have been shown to include the search for a peaceful and beautiful landscape, the dialogue and singing of shepherds, and the praise of contemplation over work. If we adhere to strict definitions than Frost definitely appears out of place: his landscapes are often barren, his shepherds seem to be rather tough farmers, and contemplation always appears threatened and mingled with hard labor. Is Frost, then, satirizing the pastoral? Not if we recognize that pastoral literature

has been filled with irony from the beginning and that its ideals of innocence and perfection are often seen through the lens of experience and failure. Frost plays on these old tensions and adds to them in ways that encompass more modern concerns about work, play, class and gender in the context of a modern democracy. His poetry depicts retreat rather, than escape from universal chaos as a way to reflect upon and strengthen the self. The poems often poke fun at the pretenses of urbanity and sophistication. But they also reveal the brutal and sinister qualities of country folk, deflating romantic fantasies of natural innocence and virtue. Frost’s characters embody more ‘ragged individualism’, as he liked to call it, than rugged individualism, they dramatize ‘the paradox that you become more social in order that you may become more of an individual’. The pastoral in Frost represents the power of the social to save the individual from the excesses of isolation as well as the power of the individual will to resist what he called ‘alien entanglements’.

Retreat is a crucial topos of the pastoral mythology. Renato Poggioli offered an engaging definition of pastoral as ‘a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through regeneration but merely through retreat.49 The speaker of Frost’s ‘One Step Backward Taken’ feels his ‘standpoint shaken. In the universal crisis; and asserts that ‘with one step backward taken. I saved myself gaing.’ The figure of retreat or perhaps, ‘backward motion to the source’, primordial and original, can be found throughout Frost’s work. Frost insisted, however, that “retreat should not be considered escape but ‘pursuit’ and that life was ‘a pursuit of a
pursuit of a pursuit of a pursuit.”50 But the seeker in Frost becomes disillusioned by both fear and the interminable chain of longing; no landscape provides innocence or happiness except, perhaps, ‘a momentary stay against confusion’, as we find in the figure of the cord of maple decaying in a swamp in the Wood-pile’. Two poems that frame his complete oeuvre, ‘The Pasture’ and ‘In Winter’, reveal the importance and complexity of retreat in his work. Frost used ‘The Pasture’ as the prefatory poem for his complete Poems (1949) and he announces his retreat to the pastoral source:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear I may)
I sha'nt belong—You come too'.

Innocent and inviting, it seduces and lures the unsuspecting reader into a troubling journey, a retreat in search of clarify but which is haunted by the fragility and brevity of experience. Frost made the parenthetical phrase of ‘The Pasture’ into the title and epigraph of his final book in the clearing. The last poem in that volume provides a haunting coda to a whole mythology of pastoral retreat:

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.
I mark a maple for my own
And lay the maple low.
At four O'clock I shoulder axe

And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.
I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow.

The philosophical stance of pastoral poetry has often been associated with Epicurus and Epicureanism, a life of unreflective and simple pleasure free from torment and fear. This Epicurean philosophy informs Lucretius' great poem De Rerum Natura, but here the sense of pleasure becomes complicated by science, a science that abolishes fear of the supernatural even while it leads to a sense of the demands and limitations of the natural, material world.

Frost's own relationship to his readers and to his characters may also reflect pastoral conflicts. Though he often seemed an off handed farmer philosopher, it was a posture that was calculated to fool his reader. He wrote that 'it takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling/ To get adapted to my kind of fooling.' Frost's poetry while it seems to possess a democratically appealing simplicity and clarity also embodies extraordinary sophistication and learning. A superb student of classical literature in the original Greek and Roman, Frost spent two years at Harvard studying philosophy, literature and geology. He was a tireless student of botany and astronomy. It should not be surprising that Frost creates meaning in a dialogue with his predecessors – Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Marvell, and Wordsworth as well as by
his insights into his neighbors in rural New Hampshire and Vermont, in an outdoor schooling. As a chicken farmer, his neighbors were no doubt suspicious of a man whose primary interest was poetry.

The depiction of ‘country things’ in Frost often involves both experiences and observation as well as literary and scientific feats of association. Pastoral and georgic tradition merges in Frost’s imagination. Clear definition of these two genres is difficult but still useful. The term ‘ecologue’ denotes dialogue between shepherds. It often is associated with a retreat into a natural landscape into a colloquy free from labor and strife. ‘Georgic’, taking its name for the Greek word for farmer, connotes a tradition that begins in Greece with Hesiod’s Works and Days and continues into Rome in Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura and Virgil’s Georgics. The emphasis in those works is on labor, knowledge (scientia), and struggle. He combines the colloquy of pastoral with the didactic and the scientific that characterizes georgic. To be sure, works in both modes have rarely proved to be pure. The blend of pastoral and georgic in Milton’s poetry is crucial to any understanding of Frost. Milton’s early masque Comus was a favorite of Frost’s and he called it ‘the greatest poem of Puritanism’. The tension between a sensuous existence and the demands of discipline, labor, and government find expression in that masque and throughout Milton’s poetry. In Paradise Lost, ‘perfect’ Eden is a place that demands labor and care; the future is borne out through the dialogues of Adam, Eve, Satan, and Raphael. It is also important to recall the figure of Comus himself, a sophisticated rhetorician and reveller who masquerades as a harmless villager. This kind of pastoral trickster appears frequently in Frost Lafe of ‘A Hundred Collars.’
Baptiste of ‘The Ax-Helve’ (a poem also inspired by Thoreau’s French-Canadian woodchopper of Walden) or the farmer of ‘The Code’, all playful and sensuous but also threatening and subverting the unsuspecting around them. In ‘Snow’, we are confronted with a baffling minister named ‘Meserve, whose maddening rhetoric requires hard work to find ‘the snow white beneath the frost.’ In Frost’s world the fool enters to confound hierarchies of ethics and values, the American fantasy with both agrarian life and with nature and wilderness, and to help us comprehend the range of suffering in all ranges of life.

If it has been difficult for some to see Frost in the rather serious context of Virgil, Marvell, and Milton it has much to do with Frost’s subtlety and his extremely sly humor. Frost often appears to many the uncritical advocate of country and nature, as did Thoreau, another American pastoralist whom Frost greatly admired. But Thoreau, of course, can be relentlessly ironic. While appearing to praise the reality of nature (placing him in the tradition of the georgics and of Lucretius), he can wink at us with the suggestion that even ‘reality’ is a construct: ‘Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous.’

Frost has said that he first heard the ‘sound of speech’ in poetry while reading one of Virgil’s eclogues. No one can say whether it was the first eclogue or not, but it might well have been, for in ‘Build Soil’ ‘A Political Pastoral’ he has written a parody of Virgil’s poem. In Frost as in Virgil, Tityrus and Meliboeus are an aged poet and a distressed young farmer, and they discuss the farm problem of the great depression much as their ancient counterparts talked about the economic plight of farmers in Latium. Frost
transforms the Virgilian nostalgia for country life into a manifesto for regionalist self-reliance. The poem is not one of his best, but it is important, because it indicates not only the poet’s consciousness of his ties with the pastoral tradition but the link between pastoral, the sound of speech and dramatic poetry.

A truly rustic poet could not manage a maneuver of this sort. His knowledge would be circumscribed by the bounds of the rural community and if the folk ballads which have come down to us are any evidence, he would be much interested in idealizing his own world but would strive to look beyond it to the great world of wealth and heroic action. The pastoralist must of necessity be a man of sophistication writing for a sophisticated audience, for to yearn for the rustic life one must first know the great world from which it offers an escape. The pastoral refrain, ‘Come away’, must be taken, then, in a special sense. The poet may insist that it is desirable to be poor and humble or that one is better off without the advantages of city culture, but when he invites his audience to return to the innocent rural way of life this is hardly a call to action. It is rather an invitation to recognize that Arcadia manifests universal realities in the purest simple forms, and to measure the world one knows by this ideal world.

That Frost’s dominant mode is pastoral may at first seem doubtful, because the conventions so characteristic of this genre are not to be found in his verse. The unhappy shepherd, the fair shepherdess, the wandering flock, the daisies and violets, the greensward dance, the flowery wreath and oaten pipe represent a cluster of motifs which can be traced in the tradition from Theocritus to Pope and beyond into the nineteenth century. So prominent are
the conventions that one may suppose they are an essential element of pastoral form. Part of the pleasure which the old pastorals offer is that of recognizing the familiar images as they appear, just as another part consists in noting how skillfully the poet handles the traditional devices of dialogue, singing contest, and lament.

Frost stands outside of this tradition, and to understand his pastoralism we must recognize that the conventions, while typical of the genre, are not a necessary part of its poetic structure. Pastoralism, as the term is generally used, signifies two related but not identical things. It refers to a particular group of poems forming a distinct tradition and also to a kind of poetry possessing a certain fundamental form. The two meanings are inextricably bound together in the public mind, because it is assumed that only the works in line of descent from Theocritus are true instances of the genre. This identifying of the genre with the tradition results from the belief that the conventions are the very core of the pastoral. A moment's reflection, however, will show us that this is not so. Consider the many poems which make use of the conventional machinery but are quite different from the pastoral. Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and Arnold's 'Thyrisis' are two clear instances. In the great ode Wordsworth does no more than suggest a parallel with pastoral, while his 'Michael', which (beyond the protagonist's occupation as a shepherd) contains nothing conventional, is a genuine eclogue. The pastoral images of 'Thyrisis' seems curios brought home from a literary excursion, and although Arnold often reverts to them as if by an effort of will, their main function is to serve as points of departure into lush passages of nature poetry. The conventions are not the true basis of pastoral, but an
outgrowth of something deeper and more fundamental. Pastoralism requires an established myth of the rural world, and the conventions gradually developed through tradition belong to the myth of Arcadia. They are formalized symbols whose function is to evoke an imaginative vision of this world. But Arcadia is not the only version of rural life, and it is possible for a poet to write true pastorals within the context of some other mythic rural world.

Frost's reasons for working outside the frame work of pastoral conventions may be best explained with reference to the decay of the Arcadian myth to which they belong. When Frost began to write, the pastoralism of tradition had long since gone-disappeared with a finality which defied the most strenuous efforts of the nineteenth century to revive it. By the early eighteenth century there had been a marked change in prevailing attitudes towards rural life, and one may note that the death of the old pastoral closely coincides with the advent of modern science and the humanitarianism it fostered. ‘Lycidas’ is the last great traditional eclogue in the English language, yet even in this poem the form seems on the point of dissolution, as if Milton found he could make the conventions work only by treating them in a skeptical and self-conscious way. Pope’s pastorals written in his youth, represent the last attempt which can be termed as success, and this but a partial one.

The decline of pastoral resulted from the dwindling of belief in the old myth as a new attitude toward rustic life gradually took its place. With the emergence of a scientifically oriented mentality, the public began to take a more matter-of-fact view of rural conditions. Where the old pastoral had
portrayed the rural world as an image of all levels of experience, there was now an increasing tendency to see the country in and for itself; and judged by the standards of literal truth. Pastoralism persisted through the eighteenth century in popular art because of its appeal as a pretty, romantic legend, but one need not take its decadent stage too seriously. By this time the new interest in actual rural conditions had isolated the country and thereby destroyed the very spirit of the genre. The shepherd swain had formerly been a symbol of human nature, but the actual peasant in his ignorance and bondage could not be, and the concept of the natural man was transferred to the primitive and the child.

Edmund K. Chambers writes in the introduction to English Pastorals. “When Theocritus descriptions of Sicilian shepherds were transformed to other lands, they naturally lost all such realistic element as they possessed and took on the character of mere convention. The habitual life of the slopes of Etna could only be fantasy in the meadows of Kent, or even upon the plains of Lombardy.”

Chambers has aptly remarked that, “Our modern literature is intimate with the woods and fields, conversant with the dwellers therein. You might gather a philosophy and a natural history of the peasant from George Eliot and Thomas Hardy alone. But the ideals of the past are the illusions in the eyes of the present, and serve as a rare survival or a conscious anarchism, the fine old art of pastoral has given way to newer thoughts and imagination.”

3. Edmund K. Chambers, English Pastoral (Blackies Sons Ltd. 50, Old Bailey, London; Glasgow, Bombay) pp. 33-34
4. Ibid, P. 47.
Frost’s pastoralism was different from conventional pastoralism, it was neither Arcadian on the one hand nor it was a simple descriptive type of pastoralism as indulged in by English poets from the eighteenth century down to A.E. Houseman.

Frost did not adhere to the old pastoral conventions and traditions. When Frost started writing pastoral poetry, the arcadian myth was not to be seen, it had withered and decayed and the pastoral traditions were also extinct. Thus Frost had to devise other means for writing poetry. The modern science was developing and it completely changed the outlook of man toward the rural life, and man now began to take interest in humanitarianism, the resultant of science, industry and technology. The disappearance of pastoral traditions gave birth to a new outlook, and developed a new attitude towards rural life.

Frost abandoned old traditions and conventions of pastoral poetry and discovered a new and realistic basis for examining the rural ways of life. Whatever he achieved as a pastoral poet adds one more feather to his cap. John F. Lynen says that, “Frost discovered a new myth of rural life. As a poet, Frost matured late, his early verses reveal a constant searching for an idiom and a subject.”

ELEMENTS OF PASTORALISM IN FROST’S POETRY

The structure of Frost’s most representative and important work is essentially that of the pastoral. No good poet writes by formula, and the

variety of Frost’s verse both in subject and technique should not be ignored. Not all of his poems are pastorals; indeed, only a minority belongs within the genre. Nevertheless, there is at the center of his work a characteristic design which pastoralism most effectively defines. One has to describe the pastoral mode, which has in varying degrees determined the form of his verse his many non pastoral poems will become more understandable when this is done, for we will then be able to see how several other important aspects of his writing are traceable to the central design of pastoral. The concept of pastoral reveals the unity in the diverse elements of Frost’s art; it should also enable the reader to look beneath the simple surface of the poems and recognize the really difficult problems of interpretation to be found there.

The claim that Frost is a pastoral poet may not appear surprising to many readers, for since the beginning of his literary career commentators have spoken of his verse in terms of pastoralism. In an important early review Lascelles Abercrombie wrote:

“Poetry in Mr. Frost exhibits almost identical desires and impulses we see in the ‘bucolic’ poems of Theocritus. Nothing so futile as a comparison of personal talent in meant by this; but for general motives, the comparison is true and very suggestive. Poetry, in this book (North of Boston), seems determined, once more, just as it was in Alexandria, to invigorate itself by utilizing the traits and necessities of common life, the habits of common speech, the minds and hearts of common folk.”

The same idea has often been echoed by other writers, and it is now not unusual to hear Frost casually referred to as a pastoral poet and his poems likened to eclogues. In studying Frost’s pastoralism we must recognize that it is an art which did not and could not have developed within the old framework. As a matter of fact one of Frost’s earliest poems shows very clearly how remote the conventions of pastoral were from his own interest. In ‘Pan with us’ he uses the imagery of Arcadia to symbolize all the genteel poetic styles which were dying out during the period of his literary apprenticeship.

We must note that by the time Frost wrote his pastorals, New England had become urban and industrialized. The consciousness of similarity of humanity everywhere and the gap between the rural and the urban can be marked in *Birches*. Frost writes about some boy bending birches in rural background away from the town:

I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows
Some boy too far from to learn baseball,
whose only play was what he found himself

Frost indicates that life in the countryside and in the town has its own features or values.

Frost’s pastorals may sometimes be taken as an interpretation of Frost’s personal life. They may be taken as some kind of equivalent to his life. Frost had himself participated in the pastoral life of New England and so
he as the farmer of actual life and a man of the countryside may be located in his poetry. The Road Not Taken may be given an autobiographical interpretation. The poem indicates the choice between two roads. These roads may be suggestive of Frost’s dilemma of staying in America or going to England; or they may be suggestive of the alternatives before Frost – the choice between the ‘profession’ of poetry (the road ‘Less travelled by’) and some other worldly profession. Frost chose to be a poet — a conscious choice on his part. In the poem Frost writes that ‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.’ He looked at one for long and then took the other.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear.

In his treatment of the pastoral Frost displays a classicist’s devotion to form and a realist’s interest in experience. He uses the pastoral scene for viewing reality. Frost as a realist does not let his pastorals become idylls. There is no glorification or idealisation of rural life in his pastoral poems, for he believes that the natural world is not necessarily better than the human world. We mark in his poems the exaltation of the humble activities of the country folk and also a consciousness of the tragedy of their lives. The common experience of mowing is presented in a characteristically truthful and imaginative manner in the poem of the same name. In ‘Out-Out’ the tragedy of the boy is shown against the realistic rural background: the sister of the boy is there to tell him about super and at that very moment the buzz saw snaps at the boy’s hand:
His sister stood beside then in her apron
To tell them ‘Super’. At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what super meant,
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap.
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting.

The tragedy is intensified with the boy’s cry ‘Don’t let him cut my hand
off / The doctor, when he comes.’ Frost brings out the bitter truths of rural life
and shows man’s struggle for survival. The happy sad blend of his pastorals
is in keeping with his conception of poetry as the wisdom of a combination of
the happy and the sad. He evokes real experience by focusing attention on
the fact itself. Regarding the pastoral lyric. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy
Evening by Robert Frost, Lynen has aptly remarked that “Stopping by
Woods is one of his first pastoral lyrics. The great value of New
Hampshire is that it illustrates the pastoral design of Frost’s poetry. It
show us that his rural New England is a world of symbol and that his
method as a regional poet is that of exploring the other words of
experience through this word.”7

Frost's poetry about rural life is significant beyond the realistic
presentation of realities in other areas of experience. A pastoral poem of
Frost can suggest different levels of values and ideals, as in the case of
Mending Wall. The poem apparently refers to repairing the wall as a
physical barrier between two farms. On a higher plane it refers by implication,

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to the significant theme of all kinds of barriers between man and man—racial, religious, political, national economic etc. The suggestive rural world in a Frost poem indicates the obliqueness of the art of Frost. The pastoral episode expands to cover a complexity of meaning. This reminds us of Frost statement that he may be called a synecdocist. Frost moves from the observation of a pastoral scene to the symbolic meaning. Birches begins with an observation (‘When I see Birches bend to left and right.’), but ultimately shows man moving from illusion to reality through the experience of life.

In his pastoral poems Frost presents facts, not idyllic escape from current life. Birches suggests retreat in the words ‘I’d like to get away from earth awhile’, but this retreat is for the sake of analysis and cannot be dubbed as an escape. The persona immediately adds that he would come back to the earth and participate in life with a renewed vigour. The poem indicates the charm of escapism but stresses the needed return to earth:

.............Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.

Frost is a synecdochist because the particular fact in his poem has universal implications and is related to essential human predicament. The pastoral scene in Frost has always a corresponding human situation. Nature in his poetry represents the whole world of circumstances. He is a metaphysical poet too since the simple fact in a Frost poem entails a mystery. The simple fact of a man stopping between the woods and the lake in Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening become emblematical of the charm and mystery of life and the world, its effect on man, and man’s
determination to keep his promise of performance. *The Road Not Taken*, beginning with a reference to two roads in a yellow wood, ultimately shows man vexed by the problem of choice and taking a conscious choice.

Frost as a pastoral poet may seem to be a regional poet because he presents the people, the climate, and the topography of New England in his poems. In *Two Tramps in Mud Time* he presents the vagaries of weather in New England. A title like *North of Boston* contains an obvious regional reference. On a wider scale Frost may be called an American regionalist, for he displays an American way of expressing attitudes. These attitudes are expressed in the American pragmatic accent with reservations of tone that imply moderate lessons. This kind of temper has its relevance to the New England equilibrium within himself. *Birches* and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* suggest that human adjustments are essential in life. *Mending wall* also deals with the problem of adjustment, whether it is with good fences or without walls. The display of determination in the face of adversities is also a New England virtue having universal relevance. This virtue is suggested through a kind of stimulating stoicism in *West Running Brook*. Man shows himself best in going by contraries and against the stream.

*It is this backward motion toward the source.*

*Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in*

*... ... ... ... ... ... It is most us.’*

The moral note and the reticence are also streaks of New England Calvinism in Frost’s pastoral poems such as *Two Tramps in Mud Time* or
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening or Birches. The moral is sometimes explicit and at other times implicit. Two Tramps in Mud Time teaches the moral of the fusion of avocation and vocation, of love and need. Birches teach the lesson of becoming a swinger of birches i.e. man maturing through the experience of life. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening implies the moral of action to fulfill one’s duty. However, Frost does not teach any dogma in his pastoral poems. In a Frost poem, nature itself is not a moral phenomenon. Frost brings out the reality of life and the moral has a relevance to the reality. Frost’s pastoral can suggest spiritual elevation, as in Directive: The speaker in the poem urges men to back out of all that is too much for us and to try to become ‘whole again beyond confusion.’ The moral in a Frost poem is integral, far Frost combines ethics and an esthetics.

The traditions of Pastoral poetry are not a new thing in European literature. They are quite old and they are particularly found in poetry and these traditions have crept into English poetry since the days of Renaissance. There is no doubt that Frost is a pastoral poet but some critics are of the opinion that pastoral traditions and conventions are not present in his poetry. We have to examine this statement although in the opinion of Lynen it is not necessary for a poet to be bound by such traditions. He can evolve his own method to write pastoral poetry.

What is Frost’s pastoralism? He seeks an escape from the hard and harsh actualities of life of this world, and this desire of his gives birth to pastoralism. We find in Frost’s poetry an escapist’s tendency to withdraw himself from the fret and fever of this world by going to the rural world. In doing so he does not neglect the present world. He also does not plead that
one should return to the soil. His escape from the modern world is an artistic perspective. Through this medium he tries to examine the complexities of the urban world. He considers this escape a standard by which he can evaluate the world and in this context he tries to analyse the reason of obscurity and confusion all over the world. People may say that through this process, Frost indirectly deals with the complex problems of modern life.

If we read the pastoral poetry of Frost, we may lose ourselves in the pastoral world of Frost to such an extent that we may not be able to appreciate the realistic aspects of his poetry. Pastoralism is very closely related to romanticism. In Pastoralism, the poet idealizes and glorifies everything. Even the ordinary scenes appear to be tinctured with imagination. Frost was a realist and he based his poetry on realism. The pastoral element of Frost is full of suggestiveness.

From the very beginning of Frost’s poetic career, his critics and commentators have spoken of him as a pastoral poet. They have commented on his verse in terms of pastoral poetry. So we can claim that Frost is a pastoral poet. Frost’s dominant mode become the pastoral. But we may have our doubts about this mode because the pastoral conventions are an essential element of pastoral poetry. Frost works outside this tradition. If we want to understand Frost’s pastoralism, we must know that conventions are not a component part of poetry however typical they may be pastoralism, infact, means two things related to each other and not identical things. It is related to a particular group of poems which have a distinct tradition and it is concerned with that kind of poetry which has a certain fundamental form.
The conventions do not form the true basis of pastoral poetry. These emerge from something deeper and more fundamental. Pastoralism needs a myth relating to the rural world and conventions that are developed through tradition and are closely related to the arcadian myth. They are symbols and they tend to create an imaginative vision of the world. But since Arcadia alone does not provide the vision of rural life, therefore a poet can possibly write true pastorals outside the arcadian world, embracing some other rural world full of myths.

Since the arcadian myth had decayed when Frost started writing so he wrote his pastorals not in the context of established pastoral conventions. In Frost's literary period the pastoralism of tradition had disappeared long ago and it was rather difficult for poet's writings in the nineteenth century to continue the old tradition of pastoralism. In the eighteenth century people developed a different attitude towards rural life and when the old pastoral died they assumed a humanitarian outlook.

When we study the pastoralism of Frost we can easily judge that his pastoralism as an art would not have developed if he had written within the framework of old conventions. It is clearly reflected in one of his poems that the old conversations of pastoral were far removed from his own interest. In one of his poems entitled ‘Pan with Us’ he uses the arcadian myth to symbolizes all the poetic styles that were passing away during his literary training period. Frost shows in this poem that Pan throws away the oaten pipes:
There were pipes of pagan mirth
And the world had found new terms of worth
He laid him down on the sun burned earth
And raveled a flower and looked away—
Play? Play? What should he play?

The question asked in the above line is directly related to the verse. When the pastoral traditions had died away long ago, how could Frost write a poetry essentially pastoral in character? There is a simple answer to this question if we distinguish between pastoralism as a kind of poetic form and pastoralism as a tradition. It was the tradition that had passed away and not the form and this form continued to be a potential. This potential was realised in the poetry of Burns and Wordsworth’s Michael and in some of his lyrics. Frost is a pastoral poet like Burns and Wordsworth but his achievement in pastoralism is quite distinct from these two. His success in pastoralism is the result of his discovery of a new and realistic basis through which he examines the rural scene within the structure of pastoral.

The old pastoralists laid emphasis on their rural world, Frost also does the same. This rural world is an agrarian society completely separated from the urban world and the country people are quite different from modern educated persons since there exists a gulf between them and these differences are so vast that the swain of the old pastoral is divided from the country reader. This awareness of class distinction forms a very important part of traditional eclogues and it is quite important in Frost’s pastoral also. Frost regionalism is another means for creating remoteness. He sets his rural
world apart by emphasizing its local traits and depicting Yankee life as quite different from that of the urban. Lynen says, “The more unusual and remote from everyday life his rural New England appear, the more effectively he can use it as a medium for the symbolic representation of realities in other areas of experience.”

Although Frost extracted ‘The Pasture’ from North of Boston and placed it at the beginning of his collected works in 1930, it fits well with North of Boston and it fits in ways that commentators have overlooked because they have been charmed by its alluring idyllic surface. In particular Leo Marx and John Lynen have made much of the poems as a pastoral invitation. Yet despite the presence of pastoral retreat, Frost’s speaker is a less convincing ‘Swain’ then Lynen would have us believe, and the retreat he contemplates is not as idyllic as Mark indicates.

While ‘The Pasture’ can be linked with the traditional invitation lyric found in the Idylls of Theocritus, the eclogues of Virgil, and such Renaissance Pastorals as Marlow’s ‘The Passionate Shepherd to his Love, Lynen and Marx neglect the voice of the speaker and thus miss some crucial undertones. The poem is not at all a simple invitation, and neither of their summaries does it justice: the poet invites someone, perhaps a person he loves, perhaps just a friend, to come with him and see the glimpses of delicate beauty to be found in the pasture.

‘The Pasture’ introduces a more complex speaker than these summaries suggest. To be sure, he has the pastoral inclinations Lynen and

Marx ascribe to him; but the texture of his invitation is not without some faintly discordant notes of uncertainly and self consciousness:

I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
   I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
   (And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
   I shan’t be gone long – You come too.
I’m going out to fetch the little calf
   That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young
   It totters whe she licks it with her tongue.
   I shan’t be gone long – You come too.

This persona is less self-assured and less forthright than the speaker imagined by Lynen and Marx. He is sincere and wants very much to be joined in his pastoral venture; but his invitation is particularly poignant because of its tenative, apologetic quality. After expressing his intention of going to clean the spring, he soon displays an awareness that the outing may be suspect at least by some standards.

Finally, after the speaker’s hesitation and disingenuousness about what he wants to do (no invitation is made in the first three—and-a-half lines), there comes the abrupt, earnest, bashful ‘You come too.’ The smooth pentameter gives way to an irregular final line – prosodic testimony to his uneasiness. Of course, pastoral symbolism is important to the poem. But unlike the conventional swain, Frost’s persona is unsure of his approach to the experience he contemplates. He is dubious about the propriety of his invitation, yet the disavowals and evasive ambiguities of his utterance show that he hopes to elicit not just an affirmative response, but an understanding and appreciative one.
Hints of defensiveness and indecision in ‘The Pasture’ arise from the speaker’s sensitivity to the disparities between what he assumes are widely accepted norms and his own values and desires. After introducing this conflict subtly in North of Boston’s initial poem, Frost explores it more thoroughly in the rest of the collection. In an environment that encourages prudent impassivity and constructive action, his persona wants primarily to see, to contemplate, and to appreciate. Both stanzas of ‘The Pasture’ make this clear. He cleans the spring because he wants to watch the water clear, and he fetches the calf because it looks so young and delicate to him. These motives are devoid of practical, agriculture purpose. The pasture spring, we should remember, does not provide water for the farm house; nor is there evidence that it needs cleaning. Such springs, after all, are for the livestock, animals capable of brushing the leaves aside for themselves and hardly as concerned as some people might be about the water’s clarity. Very faintly, from the speaker’s hesitant tone, we may sense an undercurrent of guilt: perhaps, if pressed, he might confess that the pasture spring should be left to nature and the calf to its mother. At some point, nature worship becomes a violation of nature.

Readers may interpret the pasture spring as symbolic of inspiration, purity, or regeneration and the calf as suggestive of newness, fragility, innocence, or youth. But Frost’s persona does not explain the significance of what he sees. The precise features of the moments of reverie and contemplation implied by ‘The Pasture’ are left undefined and this adds to the poem’s effectiveness as an introduction to North of Boston. The speaker invites us to join him in his study of the regional environment, but we
must go on his terms. Rather than inviting us into a pastoral world, he asks us to share his exploration – a much more uncertain and ambiguous experience. ‘The pasture’ does not promise, nor does North of Boston provide, the moral lessons and didactic social commentary of conventional regional literature. It would be a mistake to expect that the stone walls and woodpiles, the farms and mountains, the hired men and farm people will be interpreted or explained to us. We must go, as Frost’s speaker goes, to observe and reflect on rural New England.

‘Mending Wall’, the first poem in North of Boston’s table of contents, is linked to ‘The Tuft of Flowers’ by the epigraph. Compared with the simple ‘menwork together’ philosophy of the early poem, however, the speaker’s attitude toward fellowship in North of Boston is speculative and irresolute, more in keeping with the tone of ‘The Pasture’. The narrator of ‘The Tuft of Flowers’ spoke with considerable authority about fellowship. Despite physical and temporal separation, he found a deep spiritual bond with the unseen but ‘kindered’ reaper. The speaker in ‘Mending Wall’ finds no such kindred spirit. Ironically, although he and his hidebound neighbor ‘work together’ to repair the wall, the poem conveys a disquieting sense of incompatibility, of working ‘apart’.

The love of nature and of beauty is everywhere threatened in Frost by the demands of environment and economy. ‘Rose Pogonias’ from ‘A Boy’s Will’ gives praise to this colorful but rare and delicate bog orchid. The speaker and his companion cease from their labors to pick the orchid, ‘thus we bowed us in the burning / As the sun’s right worship’, an interesting addition to the pastoral tradition of rest from labor and indulgence in
contemplation at the noon day hour. This poem echoes and reverses Marvell’s ‘The Mower Against Garden.’ in which the mower seems to attack the isolated and artificial garden which man ‘first enclosed within the gardens square. A dead and standing pool of air / And a more luscious earth for them did knead / which stupefied them while it fed. Marvell’s tulip breeding gives way to Frost’s natural bog:

A saturated meadow,
Sun-shaped and jewel small,
A circle scarcely wider
Than the trees around were tall,
Where winds were quite excluded,
And the air was stifling sweet
With the breath of many flowers,
A temple of the heat

Hence nature creates these rare objects of beauty; their presence reflects a larger, encompassing natural that includes human labor and technology. In both Marvell and in Frost, the care for the flowers and the garden will mean ‘the sweet fields lie forgot.’

The tension between the pursuit of pure beauty and the demands of the ordinary rituals of life finds powerful expression in ‘A Prayer in Spring’, in which the speaker hopes not to think too much about the ‘uncertain harvest’ but hopes to ‘keep us here/All simply here in the springing of the year’. Love here is the procreative love associated with Venus and not the wild eroticism of Bacchus. It avoids the imprisonment of passion but insists on an eros that fosters continued blossoming. ‘Too Anxious for Rivers’, a
later poem makes references to the legendary torment of Lucretius, the poet who professed liberation from passion, unable to cope with lust because of the torment caused by a potion given to him by his wife Lucilia.

‘The Oven Bird’ remains one of the greatest poems on the tension between the human and natural world, a tension that has long been part of pastoral poetry. If one regards pastoral as an embodiment of creature on an equal plane with humans in nature, Frost’s apparent anthropomorphism in the poem greatly complicated the tradition. The reader is lured by the speaker to the oven bird, ‘a singer everyone has heard’. But this singer, we learn, ‘knows in singing not to sing,’ and what he ‘says’, particularly in the setset, remains disturbing:

And comes that other fall we name the fall
He says the highway dust is over all
He would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

The optimism into which we were lured in the octave, the sound ‘that makes the solid tree trunks sound again’, gives way to a tentative skepticism. The bird ‘knows’ and the question that he frames in all but words’ reveals a consciousness and voice, ‘all but words,’ may also suggest that the human is at best a minor addition to the vast non-human world. What he knows should be the sadness left unsaid, not unlike the whisper of the scythe in ‘Mowing’. The fact that ovenbirds build their nests on the ground, exiled from heights in
the trees, and feel ‘the highway dust is over all,’ reflects a lament over the way progress moves despite the consequences to individuals, the instability of any moment of perfection giving way to inevitable change.

Frost’s conception of himself as an ‘Old Testament Christian’ also gives us an insight into the Biblical aspects of Frost’s pastoral thought. Jesus himself is, of course, a great pastoral figure, a lowly figure embodying the highest power. So was King David, the shepherd boy and youngest of Jesse’s sons, who became king and was also a poet. But it was just the incarnatory thrust of spirit into matter, of the high into low that held so much power in Frost’s imagination. In the brilliant late poem ‘Kitty Hawk’, Frost delights in the subversive and heroic venture that produced the fall into matter:

‘Pulpiteers will censure
   Our instinctive venture
Into what they call the material
   When we took that fall
From the apple tree.
   But God’s own descent
Into flesh was meant
   As a demonstration
That the Supreme merit
   Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.’
Frost took care to distinguish materialism from materiality, and his mode was to emphasize that a passion for matter and the world is more admirable than any attempt at transcendence. The wit of the phrase ‘that fall / From the apple tree’ highlights the tension between the old Biblical story of origins and the modern theory of our possible descent from arborial creatures.

‘After Apple-Picking’ is the only lyric or poem that ‘intones’, as Frost said, in North of Boston. Stories from the old and New Testaments merge in this pastoral lyric of penetration into matter and acceptance of limitations and of labor. Elegiac in tone, it seems quite overtly to address the virtues of work in the orchard. The speaker loves the sensuous attraction to the beauty of the apples ‘Stem end and blossom end / And every fleck of russet / Showing clear.’ But all of the contemplation is connected to a dramatic mythology of seeking after completion after perfection, a movement ‘toward heaven’ through the tree, through the technology of the ladder, and the passionate preference of ‘picking’. Paradise, a word of Persian origin that means walled-in, was derived from the attempts to cultivate apples, hard work at the least.

The fact of waste and of superfecundity is Frost’s version of Thoreau’s ideal that in ‘wildness is the preservation of the world.’ In ‘The last Mowing’, ‘the meadow is finished with men. Then now is the chance for the flowers / That can’t stand mowers and plowers.’ Here and ‘After Apple Picking’, the lure and sensuousness of the flowers and apples is cultivated and loved beyond their value in the market place and worth much more. But the pursuit of aesthetic perfection, even beyond the demands of survival and environment comes to a loss. Even in ‘The Last Mowing’ as in ‘Spring
Pools’ fragile, reflective beauty lasts only a moment in the general competition that will produce trees.

It is obvious, then, that Frost’s poetry has the spirit of the pastoral, through it lacks some essential features of the classical pastoral. It depicts in vivid detail the rural scene and the rural world of the north of Boston where the poet lived himself as a farmer for many years. It is not in the depiction of the rural scene but in its treatment that we find the real greatness of Frost as a poet.

THE PASTORAL WORLD OF ROBERT FROST

Glorification of rural life has been a leading characteristic of the pastoral. The swain (the rustic) is pictured as leading not only a life of idyllic happiness, but also as being ideally pure and innocent. Frost’s treatment of rural life, on the other hand, is characterised by down-to-earth realism. He does not idealise the rustic and his life; rather he presents him as he is with all his instincts and impulses, jealousies, loves and hatreds, with all the sordid details of the life he leads. Except for the brief period of his stay in England, Frost was himself a farmer all his life, from early boyhood down to his ripe old age. Poetry was his vocation, but farming was his avocation. He combined the two, and this gave him an intimate knowledge of the life of the farmer, and hence arises the veracity and truthfulness of his depictions of rural life. His people are always busy with some solid-work, whether it is apple-picking, mowing, or mending wall. In After Apple Picking, the man who falls asleep, after picking apples, dreams of nothing but apples. His dream is nothing fantastic, it is expressive of his pre-occupation with the
concerns of real life. In Mowing, the scythe voices the poet's own realism when it whispers, 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows.' One must work, one must do one's duty, one must keep one's promises, for it is only in such work that real happiness to be found.

Frost depiction of the rural and pastoral life is quite realistic. He recaptures the tone of rustic speech, portrays rustic characters, brings out the vicissitudes of rural life, represents the manners and morals of the country folk, and paints a faithful picture of the life and activities going on in the rural areas of New England. He does not adopt a romantic view of pastoral life or depict the rural world in a romanticized manner. He paints rural life as he has seen it actually exists, without giving it an excessive colouring of imagination. His realistic pictures of rural life may be found in poems like 'Birches', 'Home Burial', 'The Black Cottage', 'Blueberries' and others. In Birches, he shows the village boy playing alone the game of swinging birches, because he does not have the facility for games like baseball that are played by boys in the cities. The tramps in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' are realistically portrayed too. 'Mending Wall' and 'An Old Man's Winter Night' are based on real situations too.

Unlike so many pastoral poets, Frost does not glorify rural life or regard it as much better than urban life, as Wordsworth tends to do. Frost presents the rural life as it is with all its joys and sorrows, enjoyments and struggles, productivity and starvation, domestic life and isolation of individual, natural beauty and social obligations. He has shown man living in a hostile universe and struggling against inimical forces of nature and society. Silas in
'The Death of Hired Man' suffers much and dies of old age as well as the insensitiveness of his master. Frost's descriptions and portrayal of rural life is quite authentic, real and individual because it is based on his actual personal observation and is not merely a matter of the adherence to some convention.

Frost owed much of his poetic reputation to his identification with farming. His mannerisms and the years he had spent farming in New Hampshire seemed to guarantee that his poems were a uniquely authentic vision of a pastoral existence in which man is ‘closer to reality’ and ‘independent of complicated social structure’ of urban society, because he ‘earns his living from the soil.’ As Professor George Whicher, who saw him give his first reading in Amherst in 1916, later recalled. “Frost was dead set not to appear either academic or literary. He was all farmer. When it came my turn to speak with him, we spent an animated ten minutes discussing the healthful properties of horse-manure.”

Actually, as Frost was sometimes quick to admit he was never a very successful farmer. He was a part or full-time teacher for five of the ten years he lived in Derry, and after he established himself as a poet in 1915 he held a great many appointments as an English professor or poet-in-residence. However, he was often unhappy with academic life, and when his difficulties became critical on several occasions he resigned and retreated back to his farm in Vermont (or New Hampshire).

14. George Whicher, Morning at 8:50 (North Hampton, Mass’'. The Hampshire Bookshop, 1950), P. 35
When he first began to try to earn his living as a poet in 1913, his dream was to start his literary career in London and then retire to a New England farm where he could write and 'live cheap'. By November of the next year, his desire for recognition and financial security led him to amend this dream significantly. “I should awfully like a quiet job in a small college,”\(^\text{15}\) he decided, where he could receive some honor for what he had achieved as a poet. In 1916 when he had returned to America and New Hampshire, he told a reporter that he was a good teacher and a poor farmer, but he disliked teaching because it did not allow him time to write and because he hated “academic ways”.\(^\text{16}\) A decade later after he had taught at Amherst and Michigan he complained half jokingly that colleges kept intruding on his 'pastoral serenity' by offering him teaching jobs. “I want to farm,’ he said, ‘... Amherst, Dartmouth Bowdoin and Connecticut Wesleyan are going to give me a living next year for a couple of weeks in each of them. The rest of the time I shall be clear away from the academic, feeding pigeons, hens, dogs, or anything..... for the pleasure or profit to it”.\(^\text{17}\) However, 1930 when he was worried that his collected poems would not be well received and that his poetic career had been eclipsed by Robinson’s, he complained to Louis Untermeyer. “I don’t want to be called a farmer...

\textbf{What am I then? Not a farmer – never was- never said I was”.}\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{16}\) The 1916 interview is quoted in Lawrence Thompson Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston 1970) p.67


These letters as well as many incidents in Frost’s life suggest that he needed both the simple, ‘pastoral serenity’ of farming and the more complex milieu which he inhabited as a professor or poet-in-residence. He needed both the relative isolation and the simplicity of rural life and honors and financial security which academic appointments gave him. However, it was not easy for him to reconcile the very different values represented by these two ways of life.

Frost never forgets for long the ‘wearisome condition of humanity’, the hardness and bitterness of rural life, as well as of life elsewhere. Misery, disillusionment and frustration, and emotional isolation are facts, and the poet does not shut his eyes to these unpleasant aspects of life. His rural world is not a conventional Arcadia, or a dream world, into which one may escape for a time from the sorrow and suffering of life. Rather his rural world is a microcosm of the macrocosm, a symbol and representation of life at large, with its joys and pleasure, but also with its heart-aches, fever and fret and weariness. It is a world in which the hired-men neglected and isolated, ‘come home’, to die, and in which the death of a tender child leads to quarrels and alienations between husbands and wives. It is a world in which man lives in a hostile environment and suffers and struggles against heavy odds. He may occasionally forget the hard reality, and fly into a realm of fancy, but such flights are only momentary, and the poet is soon back to earth. Earth is the proper place for him, for love, as well as for work. **Birches** is a poem which perfectly expresses the poet’s swing from fact to fancy and from fancy back to fact. In Frost’s poetry we do not get a fanciful glorification of rural life, but a realistic rendering of the human condition on in the rural
context. And it is this realism which imparts such universal significance and
appeal to the poet’s treatment of life in New England countryside. Frost’s
poetry appeals even to those who are not familiar with New England, are not
interested in New Englanders, only because it deals truthfully with hard facts,
facts which are common to life in all ages and countries.

Frost’s pastoralism is highly individual and unique. This uniqueness of
his pastoral art arises from his ability to write of rural life from the point of
view of an actual New England farmer. He does not write from a superior
plane, as one who is above and beyond, but as one who shares the life of
the rustic, his thought processes, and his way of looking at things. This
adoption of the rustic point of view enables him not only to portray rustic life
as it really is in itself, but also to contract it with the life beyond the urban life,
the complex life lived in the city. The earlier writers of the pastoral constantly
stressed the parallelisms and contrasts between the simple and innocent life
in the countryside, and the more sophisticated and artificial life of the court.
Such parallelisms and contrasts are also provided by Frost by juxtaposing
the simple country life, and the complex, artificial life in the city, so that the
one serves as a commentary on the other. Thus in The Pasture, the poet
establishes a comparison between the pasture and the outside world. The
reader is to admire the pasture as a world better than his own because it is
more natural, more neatly organised, and more meaningful, but he is also
aware that it is a plane of existence inferior in many respects to that on which
he lives. ‘The contrast between the country and the town which we have
noted in pastoral poetry is clearly the essential element in the design of this
poem. It is not that country life is superior to city life, but that each life has its
own values and distinctive features.
Frost's interest in and treatment of the pastoral world may often be taken to be a sign of his escapist tendency or of his desire to find an escape from the materialistic trends of the modern urbanized and industrialised world. Like Wordsworth, Frost seems to prefer the calm and rustic life to noisy and complex urban life. He does not present the life of big cities, as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden have done. He concentrates on the life in the rural areas of a particular region (New England) which he knew so well, because of having himself lived in its pastoral surroundings. However, his aim in presenting this life is not merely to fulfill his desire for an escape from the urban world. He does so in order to highlight its charms in contrast with the ugliness of industrialised urban life which he seems to abhor. Moreover, he finds in rural life a vantage point from which to observe and examine human life as a whole. The condition of pastoral life has been adopted by him largely as a medium for viewing the reality of human condition in general. “If Frost’s regional poems are at fault because they are remote from the main problems of their time, then the great pastorals of the Renaissance can be condemned on the same ground. To appreciate Frost’s modernity, we must have some knowledge of the special advantage which the pastoral vision offers. We must recognize that in some respects the retreat to a remote rural world can provide the most trenchant analysis and the most subtle evaluation of the world the poet seems to be escaping from.”

Robert Langbaum is wrong when he suggests that Frost renders nature and keeps away from the preoccupations of the present-day world. Rosenthal says about Frost's mind and poetry.

“The kind of mind at work in his poetry is neither that of a New England farmer nor that of a romantic rediscoverer of land. It is what Yeats called ‘the modern mind in search of its own meanings.”

Poems like Mending Wall and The Road Not Taken deal respectively with the modern themes of human barriers and human choice. The oblique art of Frost brings out the complexities in his poetry. Frost’s use of the epithet ‘synedochist’ for himself also suggests his modernity. In Birches. Frost uses the modern image of ‘heaps of broken glass to sweep away’ for the shattered crystal of ice. The simplicity in a Frost poem is deceptive and suggests various levels of meanings, as in Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. The poem refers to a New England traveller and his promises and on a higher scale it refers to man, life and the world. The language of Frost’s pastorals is realistic and suggestive.

Frost’s pastoralism is that of a normal person’s interpretation of his environs and its inhabitants as he saw it. He represents the New England pastoral may of life reduced to its Lowest, barest jessentials. His repeated use of woods in his poems and plays was indicative of an alternative way of life of loneliness of isolation. His play ‘A Way Out’ written in 1917 was Frost’s Harshest portrayal of how limited and limiting New England moral life could be. The character of Asa Gorill represented an aspect of Frost’s life

which he was dissatisfied with and wished to change. Analogously, Frost may have implicitly rejected his earlier, simple pastoral existence by becoming a professor of English but for the rest of his life he continued to cultivate the persona of the New-England farmer poet, proud of his regionation who regarded his New York and Boston contemporaries with tolerant amusement. In spite of the bleak aspect of his own pastoral way of life, the poet wanted nothing more than to be a part of it. In fact, he saw himself as ordinary. He very clearly stated “That’s what's the trouble with me I like my school (Amherst) and I like my farm and I like people. Just ordinary you see”.

In this way he was able to create a unique though difficult synthesis between farming and academic life that is between the pastoral and the urban side of his personality. Yet in the end, it is his pastoralism that remains in the mind of the reader, his adherence to a particular region and his representation of the Yankee Character.

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