Chapter

LOCAL MILIEU IN FROST'S POETRY

Frost is a great regional poet. The region north of Boston forms the background to his poetry. Its people, its scenes and sights, appear and reappear in successive poems, and impart a rare continuity and unity to his works. It is this particular region that Frost has made his own. He loved it and knew it intimately, and this first hand knowledge makes him interpret it so realistically and accurately. Above all, Frost is the poet of the rural New England. He knew every part of this limited world, and he renders it in words with a brilliant, off-hand ease. His characters are all New-Englanders, and he has succeeded in capturing the very tone, diction, idiom, and rhythm of Yankee speech. He writes of a particular region, but from the particular he constantly rises to the universal and the general. He writes of the joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds, of the simple Yankees, but he also shows that such joys and sorrows, loves and hatred are common to all humanity.

We know that the reader without questioning accepts Frost’s premise that the real truth about a locality is to be found in its rural life and not in the urban. Why do we assume so? Lynen aptly remarks, “The basis of this assumption is the belief that man, in his natural and healthy state, is originally related to his environment, and therefore that human nature is the purest and most understandable where we find it in the most direct and simple relation to its physical setting.”

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Hence regional poetry it is the locality that shapes the man. The more the poet deals with the local aspects, the more they are reflected in the human character. The urban life is in no case trustworthy. Since the very inception of civilization there is distrust for urban life. And this distrust has always given an impetus to the pastoral art and it is this distrust that is expressed in the regionalism of Frost, Since Romanticism came into vogue, the educated persons started believing that urban society is artificial and therefore unnatural. Lynen remarks, “Because Frost draws upon the environmentalistic and primitivistic tendencies in modern thought, his poems enlist literal acceptance of myth.”

Lynen continues, “The mythic nature of Frost’s New-England can best be seen in the unity and stability. The region, as he depicts it, is not just a place. It is a world coherent and complete within itself. The New-England of Mending Wall is the same New England we find in Birches the New-England of the Code is the New-England of Stopping by Woods, Home Burial, The Star Splitter, An old Man’s Winter Night. The Cow in Apple Time all exist within a single world.”

Frost depicts in this poetry the vision of a country life. Frost knows if one has to paint a faithful and honest picture of country life, then one is not required to find out the local traits but one must use these traits in such a way that they symbolize universality.

53. Ibid, p.36-37
It seems that there are two ideas that constantly work in the mind of Frost. The first denotes a strong tie between the mind of an individual and the land. It is one of the characteristics of his poetry that he seems to have derived from the Romantics. Perhaps he learnt from Wordsworth the technique of establishing a sort of correspondence between the human mind and landscape. John F. Lynen observes, “The clear, frank gaze of the Yankee ‘Persona’ is related to the chill air of England and his strength of mind to its rugged terrain in the same subtle way that Michael’s courage and dignity are related to the grandeur of lake country mountains.”54

The second dominant idea is related to this. Since the Yankee mind reflects the landscape, this type of mentality seems to be closely related to the landscape. This sense is present in every Yankee character of Frost. It is something that is above their individual characteristic, it is something which surmounts personal traits but never relegates them into the background. This may be named as regional ethics, but it also has certain ways of thinking and certain ideals which are more-philosophical than moral for example it shows special respect for the rights of individuals or their attitudes towards work. This ethic may be given other names viz. virtues, honesty, sincerity and industry. According to Lynen, “The practical with the ideal, the human and psychological with the natural and physical. And this after all is one of the main objectives of Frost’s regionalism.”55

55. Ibid, p.138
There is a wide difference between the regional ethics of Wordsworth and Frost. Although Wordsworth is the portrayer of a particular locality, his relation to it is that of an individual. He minutely examines his own experience and with the help of it he reveals the basic processes of the mind. It can be safely pointed out that in the poetry of Wordsworth there is only one fully developed character, the character of the poet himself. Lucy, the old Cumberland Beggar, The Leech Gatherer, Michael and others form the parts of the landscape where Wordsworth has tried to paint complex characters, he has miserably failed. This failure of Wordsworth can be compensated for by other valuable achievements of his but it does show how much he differs from Frost in pictorial qualities. The ‘Persona’ is very important in his poems. We find in the lyrics of Frost the voice of a person who speaks not for himself but represents the whole community. The identity of this person depends on his membership in it. This is the reason why Frost moves from the lyrics mode to the dramatic, whereas Wordsworth does not do so. The regional ethics become instrumental for communication between characters because they share it. Furthermore, it helps in expressing their personal emotion. The way in which he has painted New-England as a pastoral myth is shown vividly in New Hampshire. The very title of the poem shows that it is a description of New Hampshire and it is true also in one sense. But the truth is that a good poem cannot just be a full and complete account of the area the poet wants to describe. Frost is interested in the rural spirit of the place, and thus in the end he portrays it as a point of view or mental state. This mental state is identified with his own because the speaker is the poet himself and
hence he assumes the role of a regional spokesman. Lynen remarks, “There are four divisions in this poem. The first division defines the regional ethics the second describes New Hampshire as a world in itself, the third evaluates the world as a subject for art, and in the fourth part is illustrated as to how it serves the poet as a means of dealing with reality.”

John F. Lynen has aptly remarked, “Frost starts by arguing the thesis that only in New Hampshire do people take a reasonable view of wealth. His method is one of broad caricature. One senses that New-Hampshire, by its very barrenness, offers a purer way of life and fosters a finer response to experience. Frost has written the central fact of his regionalism that it presents the world of rural New England not for its own intrinsic interest, but as a symbol of the whole world of human experience.”

In Darwinian evolution we find that an individual is differentiated by his environment and surroundings but it is quite different in Frost's environmentalism. He, instead of being shaped by his local surroundings shapes them so as to serve his own purpose. In this connection, Frost remarks, 'I make a virtue of my suffering/ from nearly everything that goes on around me.' But this is paradoxical because he is simultaneously recognizing the importance of his environment. It serves as a medium to Frost through which he tries to portray reality. Frost assumes that a sound literature must

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57. Ibid, p.143.
essentially depict the suffering. He shows pessimistic tendencies in many respects and seems to believe that sorrow is an unavoidable part of human experience. But the experiences that he shows are of the people that inhabit that particular area that he was familiar with. It is in this that Frost presents the local milieu to the maximum applying the microcosm to the macrocosm the local to the universal and his depiction of the Yankee comes out as a masterly portrayal of the true American son of the soil.

**RUSTRIC FOLK AND YANKEE MANNERISMS SEEN IN THE POEMS**

The Yankee manner, for which Frost has been so often and so deservedly praised, is something more than a mere technical achievement. Every poet, of course, must find or create his idiom, and Frost’s, when he finally achieves it in the poems of *North of Boston*, is an amazingly subtle mode of expression. Everyone must be impressed by his evocative sense of language and delicacy in handling tonal effects. But expressiveness is not its only value. What is more important is Frost’s ability to make the language itself function as an image. His Yankee manner is not only a way of speaking; it is the symbol of a mode of thought by representing the thought process of his Yankee speaker, it becomes a means of picturing the regional world itself. Lynen has remarked on this “Frost's achievement as a stylist is due to his ability to transform the style itself into a symbol. His Yankee manner is not only a medium of expressing regional attitudes; it has also an image of them.”58

But there are further reasons why Frost followed Emerson and Wordsworth in his particular consideration of folk speech. This language has intrinsically two elements in common with poetry: proverbial or epigrammatic turns of phrase, and a natural musical cadence. The very limitations of a small vocabulary and of expressiveness in folk speech force the speaker into direct statements shaded by those tones of voice which convey the peculiar intensity of emotion and thought. And from the beginning, all art has been amplification and sophistication of those deeply felt expressions. Poetry thus finds revitalization when the creative imagination summons up experience fresh from life, and experience which has not been evoked in quite the same way before. And Frost in turning back to this perennial source of inspiration was eager to break away from the threadbare subjects and tones of poetry: from the wonderful, the beautiful, the heroic, and the eternally sublime. The quest for new subject matter and for new treatment of it led him to listen to all the tones of life with a new consciousness that any aspect of life could be a fit subject for poetic treatment if its vitality could be recreated in poetic form.

The preceding chapters have offered an overview of Frost’s New England poetry and the developmental process through which it took shape. If the conclusion seems to be that the power of his regional art gradually lessened, this fact should not keep us from appreciating the triumphs that make his work one of the great accomplishments and one of the great treasures of early twentieth-century American literature. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the characteristic of his most distinguished New-England poetry. Produced over a span of four decades and exhibiting a wide range of poetic forms and techniques, these
compositions nevertheless evince a fundamental unity that is artistic rather than merely regional.

The trouble with Frost’s adoption of a Yankee identity is that it falsified a deep tension arising from his position as an outside observer of a rural world in many ways closed to an outsider. Having established his reputation as New England’s farmer poet in 1915 he made literary use of his regional pose for the first time in *Mountain Interval* and embarked on the strenuous round of personal appearances, lecture tours, and academic positions that occupied and supported him for the rest of his life. His remarkable decline in creativity during the three or four years after the publication of *Mountain interval* is attributable not just to the excitement and unfamiliar demands of being a celebrity, but to an underlying doubt and dissatisfaction about his seemingly successful role as the Yankee poet.

Years later, in an unrhymed sonnet titled ‘The Fear of God’, Frost evinced uneasiness about rising ‘From Nowhere up to somewhere, / From being no one up to being someone’; surely he was most aware of his own rise during the period after his return to New Hampshire. He had only been back a half year—*North of Boston* was just making its way onto the bestseller lists—when he began to disclose his restiveness. Reflecting on his days in Gloucestershire in a letter (17 July, 1915) to his British friend John Haines, he speculated, “Next thing you know I shall be reversing my machinery and writing of England from America. What would my friends all say to that? Shall I be allowed to write of anything but New-England the rest of my life?”

motivation. It was Frost himself, not his friends, who insisted on the Yankee mask, and it was only his own concern for his reputation that ‘allowed’ or disallowed his artistic freedom. It would be an oversimplification and a psychological distortion to suggest that Frost suffered from a split personality; it would even be unfair to such a complex man to place too much emphasis on any single polarity or opposition in his character. Yet, given the attention that has been paid to his association with New-England, there is a definite need for recognition that his identity as a Yankee farmer was counterbalanced by a persistent uneasiness about his tendencies as an outsider. For although the role of the rustic was appealing, it was in many ways uncongenial to Frost, and not just because of his background as a California-born, mill-town-raised, college-educated poet. Deeper, temperamental factors made him uncomfortable and dissatisfied with the farmer’s life. He was not as practical, as down-to-earth, or as hardy as he would have liked; nor, when compared with the familiar Yankee farmer who appears in New England regional literature did he possess the composure, the impassivity, or the single-minded sense of responsibility associated with the role. Above all, where the conventional Yankee farmer was dogmatic and wedded to tradition (like the neighbor in ‘Mending Wall’), comfortable with common practices, fond of apothegms and folk wisdom, and distrustful of new ideas and speculative questioning, Frost was a complex, frequently equivocal metaphysician, given to analysis, evolution, and contemplation, and incapable-like Brad McLaughlin in ‘The Star-Splitter’-of either satisfying or dispelling his ‘lifelong curiosity / About our place among the infinities.’

If the region resists definition, the character of its people is still harder to identify. Apparently, the New Englander is qualified as much by spirit or
personality as by residence. Paradoxically, however, this spirit does not include a definite sense of allegiance. The Yankee is often characterized as an idiosyncratic and equivocal type, who, if asked, might maintain that no one has ever belonged in New-England, not the original colonists, not even the Indians who came before them. From this point of view, Yankees are eccentrics more than anything else, aliens wherever they may be.

Robert Frost is a regional poet. He has, in his poetry, portrayed the actual life of people living in New England and New Hampshire. Rapid growth of industry had completely changed the complexion of the life in the villages. Industrialization had a great impact on the life and attitude of the village folk. Frost depicted their bleak life in his poetry.

He sympathetically understands the psychology of the village folk. He tries to enter the innermost recesses of the heart and mind of village folk and like a realist he depicts their sentiments and feelings. By doing so he does not only depict the village folk living in the area of New England but embraces the entire humanity. He points to different types of characters, characters leading a life of frustration, isolation and loneliness and the characters who inspite of their bleak life possess sweetness of temper and vigour. Lynen speaking about the dramatic work of Frost has aptly remarked, ‘through his dramatic works he represents the solid Yankee virtues, the common sense the shrewd perceptiveness and subtle tact which raise New England above the rest of the country.’

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There is no romantic flavour in the portrayal of Frost's characters. He studies village life with accuracy and precision. The characters of Robert Frost face many problems e.g. defeat and frustration. Frost, while talking about the defeat and frustration of his characters, gives another picture of these characters. He shows despite their ill-luck, these characters have the courage to tackle the problems in their own way and they fight with them as best as they can. Robert Frost sympathises with these men and admires them. He extends a hand of friendship to them and does not consider them inferior. He treats them on equal level.

Though Frost's characters belong to the rural area of New England, and are gifted with many regional traits and characteristics, Frost portrays their fundamental traits and by doing so he touches on the permanent and universal values of life. He has shown how these characters have fought against their hard life. Through these characters, Frost has built up a picture of entire humanity. Frost has not only dealt with the people of New England, but through them he has portrayed the entire humanity's struggle for existence.

Frost does not romanticise the rustic characters portrayed by him, as Wordsworth often does, nor does he present starkly realistic portraits of men as Hardy does. He employs realism in the portrayal of his characters; but this realism is different from that found in Hardy. Frost avoids presenting a utopia or idealistic picture of these people's lives, or bringing out only their gloomy and depressing aspects. Even while presenting the dark and evil aspects of this life and career, he does not present an utterly dark picture. He tries to
depict his characters and their life after purging them of the ills that beset them. His realism is of a refined sort. Frost shows a rare psychological insight and sympathetic understanding in the portrayal of his rustic characters. He presents their essential features without letting their rough exterior conceal what lies inside.

**West-Running Brook** (1928) also reveals Frost’s tendency of contemplation and philosophical symbolism, visionary temper, and treatment of social and psychological themes. The title of the book has an apparent reference to nature, but it implies philosophical symbolism. The brook mentioned in the poem runs west whereas all other brooks in the country run east. There is a particular quality in this brook: ‘It must be the brook. / Can trust itself to go by contraries...........’ This tendency is indicative of Frost’s trust in individual self. Frost indicates that a man discovers himself and shows himself best in going by contraries. Thus he brings in the stoic theme of resistance and self-realisation. Thus Frost shows himself to be a kind of self-conscious philosopher. It is in the same volume that we read contemplative lyrics like *Tree at My Window* and *Acquainted with the Night*. There are visionary poems like *Directive* in this volume. Frost shows his feeling for the inner being and feelings are revealed in *A Minor Bird*:

‘And of course there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any song.’

Frost reveals the significance of the psychological states in *Tree at My Window*, although the poem refers to an object of nature. This is done by drawing an implied parallel between the outer and the inner. Lyric appeal is marked in the monologues and dialogues of this volume.
R.L. Cook quotes Frost as saying, “Literature begins with geography’, and ‘the land is always in my bones’,” but Frost's relationship to that geography and land has often been obscured. Wylie Sypher, in his provocative Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature, clearly establishes that, from the Wordsworthian point of view, landscape reflected, or was the symbol of, the state of the poet’s own consciousness, a reflection of his mood. This view became the psychological picturesque in romantic art, a way of seeing nature as the sympathetic mirror of the poet's emotions. Aligned with this view was the Wordsworthian notion of time’s passing, that as man grew older the natural objects reminded him most vividly of his early relationship with them in the keen 'unconscious' state of youth where objects and man seemed divinely unified in a state of grace.

His objective characterizations of those rural New Hampshire men and women, whom he had learned to know and love during years of living among them, quite naturally grew out of his search for the most satisfactory subject matter which might enable him to practice his principles concerning the posture and the sound of sense. How could he better apply those theories than by giving poetic form to the epigrammatic and idiomatic thoughts and emotions of those down-to-earth and unaffected country folk who Emerson had referred to as ‘rude poets of the tavern hearth?  

Robert Frost deals with the simple, rural New Englanders. The intellectuals and other complex characters do not come within the preview of

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his art. He deals exclusively with people living in a particular region. He depicts realistically their peculiar, regional characteristic, but he also reveals their basic humanity. From the particular and the individual, he rises to the permanent and the universal. He uses his regionalism to look at life beyond and depicts the universal traits of human nature. His Yankee face the problems of farmers everywhere: adverse weather, shifting prices, loneliness isolation. They may wear American-made overalls and speak with a downcast accent, but they are fundamentally ordinary men and women, confronted with the need to make a living and to adjust to conditions which sometimes seem intolerable. Frost captures their peculiar idiom, their folklore.

Despite such uncertainties, general opinion has it that Yankees are an identifiable group. But identifiable as what? It is common to think them plain, simple, down-to-earth folk, yet reputable sources have also labeled them shrewd, devious, and unpredictable. And there is additional disagreement about their social tendencies: some regard them as outwardly warm and affable, while others brand them dour and unsociable.

We have heard much of Yankee ingenuity, but we are not likely to know whether it is motivated by dedication to work or by mere laziness. It might come from perseverance and careful planning, or it could bespeak serendipity and sudden flashes of genius. Furthermore, even if we accept contradictions and paradoxes as part of the legendary New Englander’s quaint perversity, we must choose between those commentators who point to an underlying optimism and those who argue that a fundamentally pessimistic outlook is more typical. The farmers emphasize rustic wit and types who savor the comic side of life; the latter find Yankees cold and humorless, living stoically at the best, desperately at the worst.
So much controversy and confusion about Yankee character is a serious hindrance, especially when Frost’s critics—antagonists and apologists alike—seem unwilling to recognize its existence. The problem is further compounded by the absence of reliable definitions of New England poetry. Everyone agrees that Frost wrote it, but in all the vast critical literature devoted to him it is impossible to find systematic analysis of the generic features that distinguish an actual New England poem. One is hard put to say whether a given poem is or is not a genuine specimen. Of course, Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinsons are considered leading exponents of the tradition, and Emerson, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson are oft mentioned nineteenth-century forbears. But there are many famous works by famous Yankee poets: Bryant’s ‘Thanatopsis’; Emerson’s ‘Concord Hymn’ and ‘Brahma’; Whittier’s ‘Barefoot Boy’; Longfellow’s ‘Hiawatha’ and ‘The Village Blacksmith’; Dickinson’s numerous lyrics; Lowell’s vision of Sir Launfal and The Biglow Papers; Holmer’s ‘Old Ironsides’ and ‘The Chambered Nautilus’; and Robinson Tilbury’s ‘Town verse’. Questions about the relationship of such poems to one another to a local culture, and to a New England literary tradition are not easily answered. Scholars have been understandably reluctant to confront these issues or suggest methods by which they might be approached. Commentary on Frost’s regionalism, for example, often founders on the lack of a New England setting in well-known pieces like ‘The Trial by Existence’, ‘Departmental’, and ‘All Revelation’. These may be New England poems, but certainly not of the same sort as ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, ‘New Hampshire’, ‘The Need of Being Versed in Country Things’, ‘The Birth Place’, and other works that deal more overtly—and, we may think, more typically for Frost—with the countryside north of Boston.
Many of Frost’s New England poems after 1915 involve a ‘wise person’, directly or indirectly, in the guise of a Yankee sage (‘Birches’ and ‘Christmas Trees’, are the earliest of such poems); but ‘Mending Wall’ does not encourage the reader to regard either the speaker or his neighbor as a source of absolute wisdom. Frost’s unassuming comment that the poem simply contrasts two types of people demonstrates his awareness that the strength of the piece lies in its dramatic conflict (and in the characterization, requisite for such conflict) rather than its philosophy.

The conflict in ‘Mending Wall’ develops as the speaker reveals more and more of himself while portraying a native Yankee and responding to the regional spirit he embodies. The opposition between observer and observed—and the tension produced by the observer’s awareness of the difference—is crucial to the poem. Ultimately, the very knowledge of this opposition becomes itself a kind of barrier behind which the persona, for all his dislike of walls, finds himself confined.

But at the beginning, the Yankee farmer is not present, and the persona introduces himself in a reflective, offhanded way, musing about walls:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.’
The reader of ‘Christmas Trees’ soon learns that the poem expresses the experience and sentiments of an unmistakably rural figure. It is the Yankee farmer both in voice and manner who says:

..............there drove
A stranger to our yard who looked the city,
Yet did in country fashion in that there
He sat and waited till he drew us out,
A-buttoning coats, to ask him who he was.

Not only is this speaker knowledgeable about ‘country fashion’ but he also has the country-man’s assumptions about anyone ‘who looked the city.’ Furthermore, Frost draws on rural speech patterns. The farm family comes out ‘A-buttoning coats’ rather than—in a more convention location—‘buttoning our coats’.

In ‘The Mountain’, this simple Yankee’s attitude towards the mountain is one of complacency. He knows that is the enemy of the village and says:

‘We were but sixty voters last election.
We can’t in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!’

And yet he does not care to reclaim it and conquer it for man's use. He has heard that there is a fascinating brook on the top of it, ‘always cold in summer, warm in winter’, but he has never troubled to climb the mountain and see it for himself. He has climbed the sides of the mountain, ‘deer hunting and trout fishing’, but has never cared to go up to see the strange brook or enjoy the sight of the world around from its top.
Frost’s imagery is typically Yankee in character. It is provided from personal observation of the world around. For example, the vapourising from a stream is likened to an ox’s breath:

‘One of the great sight going is to see
Is steam in winter, like on ox’s breath.

And the houses at the bottom of the mountain are said to look;

‘Like boulders broken off from upper cliff,
Rolled out a little farther than the rest.’

Before beginning the main narrative, the poet dramatizes the code by means of a brief story told in dialogue. The scene is a meadow at the time of hay making, where three men are working desperately to collect the hay before an approaching storm. One is a city-bred farmer, the other two, his Yankee hired hands. All of a sudden one of the Yankee throws down his pitch fork angrily and leaves for home. The farmer cannot understand why he has quit, and so the remaining hired man, realizing that his boss is ignorant of Yankee ways, explains the conduct of his companion. Half an hour before, the farmer had said something about their taking pains. He had meant nothing by this; he was only thinking out loud, but the Yankee took his remark as an implied reproach:

He thought it meant to find fault with his work.
That's what the average farmer would have meant.
James would take time, of course, to chew it over
Before he acted: he'd just got round to act.
Though this Frost brings out the wide gap between the words used by
city folk and by Yankees. Words necessarily do not mean the same to both
thereby creating misunderstanding at times.

The link between style and meaning is the character of the person
who speaks Frost’s lines. What Frost has said of poetry in general applies
with especial force to his own work:

“A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence.
Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they
are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save
them is the speaking tone of voice some-how entangled in the words
and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.”\textsuperscript{63}

His ability to catch the infections of Yankee speech springs from this
sense of the dramatic. In his poems one hears the speaking voice and knows
that the language is genuine, because the speaker is dramatically conceived.
Frost came closest to explaining his actual method of composition when he
said that he begins a poem by imagining “\textit{the tone of someone speaking
and as the form of a simple meter.\textsuperscript{64}}

His attitudes, his moral sense and, indeed, his whole mentality
dramatize the regional world and therefore function as symbols to represent
it. His personality is revealed through his manner of speaking and since it is
he who utters the poem, his manner of speaking is the poem’s style. In his
character we can see the union of style and content. Here the Yankee

\textsuperscript{63} Reginald L. Cook, ‘Robert Frost’s Asides on His Poetry’. American Literature
19 (1948), 335.
\textsuperscript{64} Preface to A Way Out (New York, Harbor Press, 1929), pp. (iii-iv).
manner can be recognized as a vital part, not only of the poem’s meaning, but of its pastoral structure. For it is to a large extent through style that Frost represents the Yankee point of view and thus establishes the contrast between the rural world and common experience. But the process is reciprocal. Just as the Yankee manner defines the regional theme the theme in turn infuses the style with a distinctly local flavour.

**RECOGNITION OF SOCIAL VALUES**

Frost’s regionalism, like the old pastoral, is thoroughly the social. It is concerned more with the rural way of life than with its scenery, more with the sense of values shared by the local society than with the intuitions of a single mind. Very often Frost deals with the theme having a social implication and related it to the social situation around him. In ‘Mowing’, he deals with the theme of the dignity and importance of labour in life. In ‘Mending Wall’ he seems to point to the futility of boundaries or barriers between one man and another or one country and another. In ‘The Vanishing Red’ he treats the theme of racial discrimination and conflict. ‘A Hundred Collars’ presents a contrast between rural and urban manners. ‘The Death of a Hired Man’ hints at the need for social security for old working people. In ‘A Servant to Servants’, he deals with the servants as well as the master of the household. In ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’, he stresses the need to adopt an attitude of kindness towards tramps who are often treated harshly. In ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ the need to heed and fulfill social obligations is stressed.
The social values reiterated by Frost were those he found all around him, in the villages and farms and the country folk living there. It is these that he describes with full sincerity. ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ was first published in 1934. At the time Frost remarked that he considered the poem to be ‘against having hobbies’. Two years later, when he collected it in A Further Range as one of ten poems to be ‘taken doubly’, he added to its title in the list of contents the thematic phrase, ‘or, A Full-Time Interest.’ In both instances Frost provided a clue to his intended meaning. Unfortunately, critical interpretations of the poem have seldom pursued the leads suggested by the poet.

Two such commentaries, published twenty years apart, are particularly instructive regarding the manner in which each reaches out for the meaning of the poem. Each sees the poem as a vehicle for an idea, for a social ideology, but neither finds it necessary to locate the poem in the context of traditional American thought and literature. Denis Donoghue, writing in 1965, reads ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ as a clear instance of the relation between Frost’s temperament and the ideas of Social Darwinism.’ The poet did not find compelling the arguments for giving the tramps a job, and hence Donoghue reaches this puzzling conclusion: “So need, is not reason enough. The narrator has need and love on his side, hence he survives and nature blesses him as the best man. The tramps are unfit to survive because they have only their need, and the Darwinist law is that they should not survive.” Donoghue’s overall reading of Frost’s poem, not to mention his extraordinary application of Darwinist law, defies explanation.

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The idea that conjoined need and love constitute in themselves a higher claim for survival than need alone is a curious form of Darwinism. Frost’s poem does show a concern with personal integrity and the survival of the human spirit, but nowhere does it come close to hinting that need without love, lamentable as it may be, actually renders that mud time tramps an unfit for survival. The narrator may have need and love ‘on his side’ but this fact hardly constitutes evidence either that the situation enables him to survive or that ‘nature blesses him as the best man.’ There is no indication, either within the confines of the poem or in the facts of the poet’s life as we know them, that ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ is intended to recall Charles Darwin or to echo the Social Darwinists.

Donoghue’s reading bears a curious relationship to Malcolm Cowley’s famous commentary on the poem, made more than forty years ago. His Darwinist interpretation is an offshoot of Cowley’s ‘liberal’ chastisement of Frost in the New Republic in 1944. Donoghue offers a specific reason for Frost’s behavior towards the Tramps, while Cowley describes and deplores the poet’s reaction to their request. But both critics are interested in faulting the poet for his inhumanity. ‘In spite of his achievements as a narrative and lyric poet’, argues the dissenting Cowley, there is “a case against Robert Frost as a social philosopher in verse and as a representative of the New England tradition”66, of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Assuming that the poem reflects on actual incident of the depression years, Cowley criticizes Frost for evading the socioeconomic fortune of the masses and retreating into ‘sermon’. Instead of helping men

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who want work, preaches Cowley, ‘Frost turns to the reader with a sound but rather sententious sermon on the ethical value of the chopping block.’

To acknowledge that Cowley’s account of the poem has some, albeit limited, merit, is not, however, to endorse his vestigial reading with its earmarks of the 1930s. It may be granted that Frost was an early outspoken foe of the social excesses he found exhibited in Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the administrators of his new Deal. But to insist unequivocally that in this poem Frost lacks all social conscience is to mislead grievously. Cowley’s concept of a social conscience is at best limited.

That the strangers who come at him ‘out of mud’ display great need, Frost acknowledges. Too readily is his head filled with the narrow logic that he has ‘no right to play / with what was another man’s work for gain.’ ‘My right might be love but theirs was need, he admits, ‘and where the two exist in twain. Theirs was the better right-agreed.’ Frost is not insensitive to the tramps’ need for ‘gain’, for shelter and food perhaps, but, individualist that he is, he is too thoroughly self-reliant and humanistic to assign all priority to satisfying such basic needs. Rather, he hopes to remind us, in offering himself as an example, that men have other kinds of need as well and that their failure to meet those needs results from their inability to recognize the high necessity that ‘love and need’ must make one. This failure, common to men everywhere, is particularized for the moment in the tramps, whose only thought was that, claiming economic need, ‘all chopping was theirs of right’. Frost deplores, of course, the plight of the unfortunates who for whatever reason must totally dissociate need and love, vocation and avocation. He
does not deny that poverty is problematic to society, but he does indicate that the necessity for any man to work much or all of his time for pay alone will rapidly dissolve his sense of other values of self and spirit. He concludes triumphantly:

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mental stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future’s sakes.

Frost’s ideology in this poem has its roots deep in the nineteenth century, and to understand his poem’s relationship to that century, we must turn, to the traditions of Concord transcendentalism. Specifically, we must look to Henry Thoreau, whose work, encountered early, had a pervasive and formative impact on Frost’s life as well as on his poetry. The spiritual morality of the individual self expressed in ‘Two Tramps’ is endemic to both Thoreau and Frost, while Frost’s economy accords perfectly with Thoreau’s views on work and labor as nurture for the human spirit. In ‘Two Tramps’ the kinship of Frost and Thoreau is evident at every turn.

Take Walden for the moment. In Chapter 13 Thoreau contemplates his metaphoric ‘House-Warming’. He begins by taking about woodpiles:

I loved to have mine before my window, and the more chips the better to remind me of my pleasing work. I had an old axe which nobody claimed, with which by spells in winter days, on the sunny side of the house; I played about the stumps which I had got out of my bean-field. As my driver prophesied when I was plowing, they warmed me
twice, once while I was splitting them, and again when they were on the fire, so that no fuel could give out more heat.

These few sentences anticipate Frost’s poem as a unit, but they have their closest dramatic equivalence in the second and sixth stanzas:

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
   As larger around as the chopping block;
And every piece I squarely hit
   Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.

You’d think I never had felt before
   The weight on an ax-head poised a loft,
The grip on earth of outspread feet.
   The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

In situation, motif, and theme, the passage from Walden offers a meaningful context for ‘Two Tramps’.

For a full understanding of the transcendental tradition behind Frost’s poem, however, a more useful document is Thoreau’s brilliant essay ‘Life without Principle’. A discursive presentation of his central ideas on society, labor, and the self this essay was published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1863, after having served for several years as a lyceum talk. It is an important manifestation of Thoreau’s dedication to the spiritual needs of the self and to the idea that the self must be served constantly in its struggle against the destructive pressures of socialization. As such, it can now serve us as a kind
of manifesto of the intellectual and literary tradition to which ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ properly belongs.

Frost takes these Thoreauvian ideals and dramatizes them in his lyric poem. It is not the tramps who work for the love of the work, it turns out, but the poet himself, and consequently he can not without compromise and self-betrayal give way to those who work merely for wages. The values that Thoreau conveys discursively and didactically in ‘Life Without Principle’ Frost exalts in narrative subsumed by lyric. Given such commitments, there is no question that Frost must fail Cowley’s test in socioeconomics and collectivist philosophy, but so must Thoreau. Frost might have said, with Thoreau: ‘To be supported by the charity of friends, or a government pension—provided you continue to breathe—by whatever fine synonyms you describe these relations, is to go into the almshouse. Frost did say that a man ‘should be a larger-proportioned individual before he becomes social.’ In short, ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ should not be read as the one-sided, frontal attack on socialist or collectivist thinking that Cowley would have it be, nor should it be read as Donoghue’s illustrative apologia for the wondrous working of Darwinist law.

Similarly, in ‘The Wood-Pile’ Frost presents in symbolic terms the futility of many of man’s achievements, while conceding an admiration for the impulse that prompts them. It seems foolish as well as pitiable for man to expend himself on labor that will come to naught, an attitude which has something in common with Frost’s scorn for social planning, given his faith in individual initiative.
Frost does not always represent as quite so foolishly unrealistic, nor, on the other hand, as proud and self-centred. He often feels that men can be happy in the universe, but there are moments and occasions when he depicts them not only as unrealistic and self-centred, but also as destructive and even cruel. The universe is indifferent, or perhaps even hostile to man; men, too, at times appear to Frost indifferent to others, even malevolent. Few of his poems directly present men thus, but the ambiguity of much of his poetry reveals that he was conscious of man’s bad side as well as the good. A few of his best-known poems, though, as well as some of his less familiar ones, are aimed at the resentfulness, the greediness, the anger of men, and at their violence in an apparently Godless universe. Very rare are the poems in which Frost takes men to task for attacking nature. Usually nature has the upper hand and men as a result feel the fear and loneliness that we see so often. In ‘Brook in the City’, however, Frost illustrates what can happen when a man does get the upper hand:

........The brook was thrown

    Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone

    In fetid darkness still to live and run-

    And all for nothing it had ever done.

    Except forget to go in fear perhaps.

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........But I wonder

If from its being kept forever under,

The thought may not have risen that so keep

This new-built city from both work and sleep.
In this poem we are struck by the contrast with other works depicting a direct response to nature, like ‘The Pasture’ and ‘Hyla Brook’. Here man appears deliberately cruel and repressive. The brook, moreover, is ‘an immortal force’; it is personified ‘thrown / Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone’, and in conclusion is given the power to influence almost mystically the activities of the people in the city built over it. To offend it is thus almost sacrilegious.

Much more common are the poems that take man to task for his destructive passions toward his own kind. Frost was familiar with these passions and some of these poems derive from his own experience, ‘Beyond Words’ and ‘Fire and Ice’ being obvious cases in point. The first is an almost direct expression of animosity by the poet himself, while the latter testifies clearly to his familiarity with the destructive power of hatred.

This malevolence in man seems to exist on a basic personal level, but in some poems, such as ‘Build Soil’, Frost makes it clear that if men are not careful, these natural personal reactions within an unfeeling universe can become systematized in social, economic, and political terms.

In your sense of the word ambition has
Been socialized—the first propensity
To be attempted. Greed may well come next.
But the worst one of all to leave uncurbed,
Unsocialized, is ingenuity:
Which for no sordid self-aggrandizement,
For nothing but its own blind satisfaction
(In this it is as much like hate as love),
Works in the dark as much against as far us.
Even while we talk some chemist at Columbia
In stealthily contriving wool from jute
That when let loose upon the grazing world
Will put ten thousand farmers out of sheep.

The emphasis here is on the greed that is potential in human nature and which Frost believed socialization or social planning of any kind would be likely to encourage. We may be struck by the similarity between the greed suggested here and the cruelty evinced in ‘A Brook in the City’, for the life of the brook was sacrificed to man’s commercial desires. Both poems represent—as do many others—what can happen when man stands alone, independent of his environment: He feels that there is nothing meaningful to him in the universe to which he can respond directly.

Occasionally, men act as though God were simply not there:

Not All There
I turned to speak to God
About the world’s despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn’t there.
God turned to speak to me
(Don’t anybody laugh);
God found I wasn’t there-
At least not over half.
Even in this weak position, man reacts by trying to organize his life and experience in social terms, the assumption evidently being that if the personal strength is lacking, there is safety in numbers. Frost sees these attempts, however, as futile and ridiculous. ‘Departmental’ presents us with a clear picture of this societal organization. Any society which is organized mechanically, relegating a concern with God to a committee, is intellectually and emotionally dead, and when considered at a sufficient distance, ridiculous. The same basic human situation is described and attacked more intensely in ‘Build Soil’. There Frost says, ‘long before I’m interpersona / Away’ way down inside I’m personal.

It is this personal touch that gave him the awareness that human greed was eroding everything. The arcadian blissful area that he was so devoted to could not remain so for long in the face of encroaching waves of materialism and thirst for acquisition. Thereby it gave rise to Frost’s constant reiteration on the value of human labor, the need to love work and to consider the rights of each and everyone. Even the simple rustic folk had a basic, intrinsic wisdom that guided them throughout their lives.

**DISTRUST OF URBAN LIFE**

Frost is a regional poet, and has dealt with the themes related to the rustic life of New England. Rustic people, the vicissitudes of their life, the tragic aspects of the life of the poor and the old, the drudgery, despair, loneliness of the unprivileged farmers are all depicted by him frequently. Frost is not concerned with urban life, and does not deal with the themes or situations related to life in big cities, as Eliot and Auden do. He focuses his
attention on the condition of life in the countryside, and that too of a particular region. However, he does not ignore human life as a whole or the life and struggles of human beings in general. The range of his thematic concerns is quite wide, and his poetic vision is much broader than would appear because of his treatment of a particular region of America. Nature and Man both form prominent themes of Frost's poetry, and he has expressed his novel views on both. As Louis Untermeyer remarks, “Robert Frost has written on almost every subject. He has illuminated things as common as a woodpile and as common as a prehistoric pebble, as natural as a bird singing in its sleep and as ‘mechanistic’ as the revolt of a factory worker. But his central subject is humanity. His poetry lives with a particular aliveness because it expresses living people.”67

Frost had lived in the New England region for a long time, and become acquainted with the life, people, manners and speech of this region very intimately. Because of his first-hand observation and experience of this region, he could describe things related to it truthfully and realistically. He depicts the pastoral scene of New England; but he does not romanticise it or treat it as a utopia to escape to from the world around him. His descriptions of his favourite region are realistic, authentic, convincing and appealing. They are based on his own observation, and not on his imagination. The manners and the speech of the people of New England are successfully, recaptured by him in poems like ‘Mending Wall’, ‘Birches’, ‘A Servant to Servant’ and others. He employs the speech of those people in his poems, and shows them behaving as they would behave in real life. ‘His poetry’, remarks

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Marcus Cunliffe, “cropped out of this farmer’s world, every part of which he knew, and knew how to render in word with a brilliant off and ease. His reticent, poor, dignified New Englanders are evoked in monologues a little like those of E.A. Robinson, or of Robert Browning, with a difference. His people speak cautiously amid intervals of silence, making each word count. Their lovely farms, the cold winters and all-too brief summers, the imminence of failure, of the wilderness of death—all give one the sense of living tensely.68

Like ‘The Pasture’ in ‘North of Boston’, ‘The Road not Taken’ is italicized and set apart from the rest of the poems in Mountain Interval as an introductory piece. It was originally intended as an ironic ‘genteel joke’ on Edward Thomas. But Frost’s decision to use it as an introductory poem, and to follow it with the overtly regional ‘Christmas Trees’, is perhaps best explained as an attempt to link his new book with North of Boston. The hiker in ‘The Wood-Pile’ and ‘Good Hours’ was uncertain about where he was headed and why. In ‘The Road Not Taken’ he apparently decides—or, more accurately, he tries to convince himself—that by taking a ‘less traveled’ road, he has provided his life with a direction ‘that has made all the difference’. That direction, the structure of Mountain Interval suggests, is toward the countryside, toward the rustic self-reliance and the Yankee shrewdness displayed, even flaunted, in ‘Christmas Trees’. Indeed, the first two lines of this poem take on a special significance at the start of such a regionally oriented collection. They evoke a rural world free of pernicious urban influences: ‘The city and withdrawn into itself / And left at last the country to the country’.

This Yankee voice dominates the rest of Mountain Interval, particularly those poems written after Frost’s crucial decision to return to the New Hampshire farm country and ‘get Yankier and Yankier’. We no longer find an implied author who rambles about the New England countryside, investigating mountains and butterflies around Lunenburg, Vermont, or peering into hotels and family reunions in Woodsville Junction and Bow, New Hampshire. Instead, Frost’s new speaker is located very concretely on his own farm. We see him first, of course, in ‘Christmas Trees’: confronting the intruder from the city, bartering with him, and showing off his trees in ‘hope of hearing good of what was mine.’ The element of self-display is evident in the repeated use of first-person possessives: ‘our yard’, ‘my Christmas trees; / My Woods; ‘My trees’, ‘What was mine’. The responsibilities of rural proprietorship so evident in ‘Christmas Trees’ are reinforced by a sense of agricultural domesticity in ‘The Exposed Nest’, as the farmer poet, accompanied by his child, exhibits nesting instincts while working in his hayfield. Subsequent poems, such as ‘In the Home Stretch’, ‘Birches’, ‘Pea Brush’, and ‘Putting in the Seed’, extended the image of the farmer on the farm: a confident, affirmative figure in the harmony with a natural world he has no trouble comprehending or expressing.

By discarding the myth-induced vision of Derry as the prime source of Frost's art, we can appreciate the extent of his development prior to 1912. There are many traces of a long and earnest apprenticeship, though this training had little to do with Whittier’s prescription for the ‘large experience of an active participation in the rugged tail’ of rustic life. Instead, Frost’s background was more urban and cosmopolitan, more literary and
sophisticated than he usually indicated, Suggestions about his descent from ‘folk who lived close to the soil’ are highly misleading’ in an age when most Americans were still down on the farm, his family had been among the first to leave the country and enter the urban, industrial society that was just beginning to transform the American cultural landscape.

It is significant that in creating his mythical background Frost always glossed over the distance between country life and the social position his family had attained by the end of the nineteenth century. The Frosts were well established townsfolk by then, and their cultivation was not of the soil. The family home, to which Frost’s mother returned after his father’s death in 1885, was in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a highly industrialized city at that time and one of the world’s leading textile centres. The paternal grandfather, William Prescott Frost, an important figure in Frost’s early life, was a bespectacled, stylishly bearded patriarch who had worked his way up to an overseer’s position at the Pacific Mill. Though not a rich man, he could afford a respectable three-story house and a Harvard education for his son. In the 1880’s he retired comfortably enough to do able to do some traveling and to support his grandson Robert at Dartmouth and Harvard before buying him the farm in Derry. Frost’s grandmother, with her interest in feminism and her role as ‘an early leader in the local suffragette movement’, was perhaps even more attuned than her husband to the sophistication and the new style of life that was developing in urban America. Certainly her son William Prescott Frost, Jr., seemed well suited to the frenetic spirit of a booming city like San Francisco. By temperament and education, he was ambitious, impatient, and iconoclastic, in some ways closer to the twentieth century than his son would
ever be. He loved excitement and action, threw himself into politics and journalism, and sought acquaintance with stimulating figures likes Henry George. Too much exertion, along with too much liquor, hastened his death at age thirty four. Very much a part of ‘all this now too much for us’, he would have had little sympathy for his son’s ‘Directive’ back into the rural past. Yet his son did go back to his farm and throughout his life he maintained the part of the genteel New England farmer who was more comfortable amidst farms and log cabins than the urban glitzy life of the cities.

The opposition of city and country in ‘Christmas Trees’ contributes to the appeal of the persona by calling to mind the traditional noble countryman of New England and by distinguishing his ‘country way’ from the crowded, unwholesome thoroughfares of the city. Frost heightened the contrast when he revised the poem. The original fifth line, for instance, introduced the stranger without the crucial detail that he ‘looked the city’. And in line 9, ‘town—ad indeterminate world—as applicable to urban or suburban centers as to rural villages—was changed to ‘city’, creating a stronger and more consistent personification:

He proved to be the city come again
To look for something it had left behind
And could not do without and keep its Christmas

Of course the merchant has come merely to purchase trees the city needs to ‘keep its Christmas’. But the figurative language suggests ‘something’ more important that urbanites have ‘left behind’ and cannot ‘do without’. Since the Christmas tree is associated both with nature and with
reverence and spirituality, these lines hint at modern man's alienation from the natural and spiritual words. Frost intimates, as writers like Jewett and Brown did before him, that what the city has left behind is its soul. Thus this Yankee farmer values his trees as a spiritual refuge, a heavenly city antithetical to the commercial world represented by the merchant:

My woods-the young fir balsams like a place
Where houses all are Churches and have spires.

The conclusions of ‘Christmas Trees’ offers further proof of the speaker's virtue and wisdom. His aversion to the merchant's offer, his reluctance to strip his pasture of trees, his distaste for the paltry remuneration he would receive and the high price purchases in the city would pay—all these reactions in the final lines bespeak his good sense, and his good heart is manifest in his wish to send a tree as a Christmas present to the reader. Since he can not 'lay one in a letter', the poem itself seems a cordial token of his generosity.

The reader unquestionably accepts Frost's promise that the real truth about a locality is to be found in its rural rather than its urban life. The basis of this assumption is the belief that man, in this natural and healthy state, is organically related to his environment, and therefore human nature is the purest and the most understandable where we find it in the most direct and simple relation to its physical setting. Hence his poetry is written about a particular region and in its people. The locality, we assume, shapes the man, and the more and poet dwells upon its distinctly local aspects, both as these appear in the landscape and are reflected in the human character, the closer he comes to seeing the life-process itself. No doubt, a distrust of urban life is
as old as civilization. It has always provided a motive for the pastoral, and Frost’s regionalism expresses his distrust in its essentially modern form. Since the emergence of Romanticism in the mid-eighteenth century, the idea that urban society is artificial and therefore unnatural has been a prominent part of the educated person’s tacit belief. As Frost draws upon the environmentalistic and primitivistic tendencies in modern thought, his poems enlist the literal acceptance of the myth. He can represent New England as a whole through the image of the Yankee farmer in his rock-strewn pasture without seeming to go beyond objective description. For the contemporary audience, the rural landscape and the farmer are the real New England, so that we do not for a moment reflect that they are chosen from a heterogeneous mass of other things equally real and shaped by the poet’s imagination as symbols of the whole. The very way in which we take his stylized regional world as New England itself shows the mythic status of this vision.

Ironically, when Frost, who has to become New Hampshire’s twentieth-century ‘Rustic Bard’, took a summer job as a farmhand in 1891, he happened to work on the very farm where New Hampshire’s nineteenth-century ‘Rustic Bard’, Robert Dinsmore, had cultivated his potatoes and poems more than sixty years before. It is indicative of Frost’s early indifference to New England’s rural literature that he never realized the significance of the Dinsmore farm. Furthermore, his distant relationship to the farm country is suggested by his inability to get along with the other hired hands or with Dinsmore’s descendants. After only three weeks, he ran away—to too discomfited to ask for his pay—and returned home with complaints about the ‘coarseness, the profanity’ of rural folk.
With this incident in mind and with Frost's generally urban and sophisticated background taken into account we should be able to appreciated—as many commentators have not—that the move to Derry was a departure into an alien world. Peter Davison and Archibald McLeish are among the few critics who have noted the element of risk in Frost's frightening exploration into 'foreign lands'. Like the couple in the poem 'In the Home Stretch', the Frost's sensed that they were outsiders in the rural world, and they worried about exchanging their 'lighted city streets........for country darkness'.

USE OF LOCAL DIALECT AND NUANCES OF SPEECH

Frost's conversational language is regional. He has succeeded in capturing the distinctive flavour and tone of Yankee speech. This regional touch is not imparted by the use of dialectic words. There is few dialectic or regional words in his poetry. There is nothing regional about Frost's vocabulary. The words he uses are the words which are in common use everywhere. The regional quality of his diction is seen not in the choice of words, but in their arrangement. It is seen in his phrasing and idiom. Phrases like, ‘To get it anywhere that I can see’, ‘Has nothing any more to do with me’, are real Yankee speech. But phrasing alone cannot account for the peculiar regional quality of Frost’s diction. The impression of regionalism is also created by the fact that Frost’s idiom and phrasing grows out from the meaning and emotion which the poem conveys. The style is not distinct but a part of the content of poetry. The meaning is, ‘reflected in, and symbolised by, the details of language.’ The speakers in his poems are Yankees, and their moral sense, their attitudes and values, their mental states, are
conveyed by their manner of speaking. For example, in *The Code*, there is a perfect fusion of style and content, and so the style acquires a peculiar local flavour. The Yankee pride and sense of self-respect are expressed through the reticence and understatement peculiar to the rural dwellers in the region north of Boston. In *Fire and Ice*, ‘the more one listens to the nuances of tone, the more one hears the Yankee qualities of the speaker voice.’ As a record of colloquial English, the poem is a tour de force. It acquires much of its intensity from the Yankee habit of understatement and reticence. The colloquial phrasing does not negate the poem’s bitterness. Quite the opposite it is the means of raising it to an extreme pitch. The more the speaker’s manner disclaims strong feelings, the more powerful his feelings seem. Furthermore, the understatement dramatizes the special character of the Yankee concerned. His ironic, casual manner manifests a more than normal sensitivity of thought. He is speaking of things in human nature which arouses the deepest terror, but he will not yield to emotional outbursts. Instead he holds back, pretending to be amused indifferent because only by reining in his own feelings can he be free to face the brutal results of man’s emotions realistically or recognizes their full destructiveness. Most serious ideas are here expressed, through humble, everyday phrase. In such poems, Frost’s style acquires a symbolic significance. We see in it, and through it, the essential nature of the Yankee mind.

How does Frost catch the inflections of Yankee speech? This is due to his sense of the dramatic. We hear a voice speaking in his poems and we find his language genuine because the speaker speaking in the poem is a person who has been dramatically conceived. Frost explains his mode of
composing a poem by saying that ‘He begins a poem by imagining the tone of someone speaking in the form of simple meter. The speaker and the speech rhythm are not invented separately; the meter is that of someone speaking. The whole manner of speaking is embodied in that ‘Someone’.

In most of the cases this speaker belongs to rural New England. The attitude, the moral sense and the mentality of this person give a dramatic shape to the regional world and therefore all these three characteristics of the speaker serve to represent this world symbolically. The personality of this speaker develops through his mode of speaking and since this person speaks through the poems, his mode of speaking becomes the poem’s style. We find a blend of style and the contents of the poem in his character. This Yankee manner is very important. Its importance does not lie only in the meaning of the poem but its importance lies in the pastoral structure of the poem also. Style is quite important for Frost and it is with the help of style that Frost gives vent to the Yankee point of view and thereby he brings about a contrast between ‘the rural world and common experience’. This is a reciprocal process. Just as the regional theme is defined by the Yankee manner, the theme also gives a local flavour to the style.

So far as Frost’s language is concerned, it may be safely said that his poetry speaks and unfolds itself. He uses simple words and uses common speech in his verse. His words are the words that are commonly used in every day talk and they form the plain language. The language used in the poems in ‘A Boy’s Will’ is the language of the genteel poets. But the language used in North of Boston is the language used in north of Boston. Frost has created his own idiom keeping in view the dignity of a literary
language. He did not employ the vulgariest and crudeness of the common speech he rather decanted them and refined vernacular so as to make it suitable for poetry. In this process he did not tarnish the shape of this form of speech and he also did not steal the flavour and savour of it. In doing so Frost achieved something that Wordsworth could not despite his best efforts. Frost fully and successfully satisfied the theory of Wordsworth's poetic diction.

Every poet's creates his own idiom. Frost did not lag behind in this respect. Frost won laurels for his Yankee manner and it was through this mode that he expressed himself in the North of Boston. Frost's tone is often easy and really full of artistry. It contains decisive music, the language that is contained in it is always simple though artistic: His language has directness, clarity and simplicity. His language is conversational yet what Frost has to say is extremely complex. Frost made experiments with language and rhythm. If these experiments made by him appear to be conservative before the more public experiments made by Pound and Eliot they are, nonetheless, real experiments. Frost had been struggling with words and music and this struggle did have a very good effect on the American poetic language. There we find in his poetry irony simplicity and honestly and we find that he is quite fastidious in the use of abstractions. Frost has gained complete mastery over the iambic pentameter as if were a natural conversational rhythm. He has mastered form and these conversations sound like 'Language of ordinary men'.

Frost used the speech of common people in expressing his thoughts through poetry. In this respect he followed Wordsworth. Frost's poetic
concerns are similar to those which led Wordsworth to choose incident and situations from common life and then to present them in a language actually used by common man. Frost, like Wordsworth and like many other poets before and after him has emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. He is one among those modern poets who have emphasized the capturing of ‘the sound sense’ or sound pasturing’ as repeatedly referred to by Frost in order to enrich the underlying metrical rhythm.

A saner view would be that Frost’s rhythms seem regional because the causal quality we have noticed is combined with distinctly local diction, but this too is wide of the mark. In the seventy-seven lines of ‘The Grindstone’ there is not a single dialect word or phrase, and only five or six localisms are found in the whole of his work. Frost is not a dialect poet, either in the sense that he uses regional words or in the way he spells other words so as to indicate a local pronunciation. He seems to have recognized from the first that dialect forms attract too much attention to themselves and have a tendency to produce ludicrous effects. Furthermore, the attempt to write poetry in dialect is almost always self defeating.

It is colloquial usage rather than dialect that distinguishes his style. Every English speaking person may be said to know two tongues—the formal, more tightly organized literary language and the language of everyday speech. Frost consistently writes in the manner of the spoken rather than the written word. But in adapting the colloquial language to poetry, he purifies it. Everyday speech tends to be slangy and allows for careless inaccuracies in the use of many words. Frost recognizes that the essence of colloquial
English is its phrasing rather than its diction, and in his verse it is that he imitates. Take the opening sentence of ‘The Grindstone’:

Having a wheel and four legs of its own  
Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone  
To get it anywhere that I can see.

The last line is certainly unlike literary usage, yet none of the words are outside the pale of written English. The colloquial quality is in the idioms and the casual way one follows the other. The same may be said for phrases like ‘farm machinery’s gone in’ and ‘Has nothing any more to do with me.’

To study Frost’s poetry, we should pay particular attention to the New Englander’s distinctive verbal and linguistic traits. But again there is little agreement on the basic character of the local dialect. Extremists on one side assert that it is dramatic and enervated the speech of an impoverished and moribund culture. On the other hand, its proponents claim that it is a lively and colorful language, flourishing with pithy idioms, striking locations, and vivid figures of speech. In a general way, the popular image of Yankee prudence and taciturnity is hard to reconcile with the garrulous, impulsive country folk whose discursive circumlocutions and whimsical ramblings dominate such characteristic Frost poems as ‘The Mountain’, ‘A Servant to Servant’, ‘The Witch of Coos’.

Frost, universally regarded as synonymous with New England, is even praised for bringing into literature the New England tongue. But his verse actually is not regional at all. Amy Lowell knew her New England dialect and felt its absence when Frost brought out his first books. His people, so true to
the locality in most respects, do not speak with any degree of local authenticity—and this lack irked the Boston poetess. With his characters and situations she found little to cavil at, but where was the peculiar Yankee turn of speech? The down-East region was well known for its strong dialect, not a difficult one to catch, as it had, for example, been caught by her own cousin, James Russell Lowell: ‘We’re curious critters: Now ain’t jes’ the minute / That every fits us easy while we’re in it’ and by Alice Brown:

“I tried to do all I could for them that was in need. But I never lived my life with ‘em, even when I was tendin’ upon ‘em and gettin’ king of achey trottin’ up an’ down stairs”69

But this is not the speech of Frost’s poems at all. Missing are both the peculiar pronunciation unique to New England and the specialized vocabulary of that area. ‘Speech like that is of the essence of New England’, said Amy Lowell, ‘and yet Mr. Frost has ignored it absolutely. He feels the people, but he has no ear for their peculiar tongue.’70

He was aware; she reasoned that the use of exact dialect undeniably narrowed a writer’s immediate appeal. Dialect also, by rendering a work subject to fashions in literature, was likely to shorten perhaps by decades one’s eventual literary life. She recognized that the Yankee dialect required very noticeable deviations from normal spelling yet she cited Robert Burns as an example of a writer whose work not only survived with dialect but apparently derived a good share of its continuing charm from the very fact of its being in dialect. Frost’s decision not to employ dialect in his monologues

70. Ibid, p.126.
and dramatic narratives seemed a serious error; it flawed the authenticity of his verses. But few other critics appeared to care—indeed, even to notice, Amy Lowell's criticism, well-founded as it may be did nothing to dispel this myth, but then why should he trouble himself to contradict a notion which was pleasing both to himself and to those who believed it?

What readers hear and respond to in the poems are the recognizable rhythms of standard American colloquial speech. His own speech patterns were firmly established long before he returned to New England, and they were shaped on the West Coast. He would likely view the Yankee dialect of the Northeast as an oddity. Whether or not he realized that precise use of localized speech would restrict his audience, cannot be said yet a great measure of his success with the general public is due entirely to the fact that readers all over the nation intuitively recognized that the poet and his common folk were speaking the language of the land. That this everyday speech placed in the mouths of his rural speakers could also, in defiance of tradition, be poetic was no surprise to Frost; for he was convinced that "the common speech is always giving off........the special vocabulary of poetry. The same thing happens with the tones of everyday talk." It is now axiomatic that the nation's joyful reception of his poetry owed a good deal to his readers' elation at discovering in verse their own idiom, syntax and colloquial expressions.

The myth of dialect has been systematically demolished in John F. Lynen's close study of Frost's poetic diction. In his through analysis Lynen

locates only ‘five or six localisms’ in the whole of Frost’s output. He cites the use of ‘ile’ for ‘oil’ in the last stanza of ‘Brown’s Descent’ and the rhyming of ‘ira’ with ‘inquiry’ in ‘Of the Stones of the Place’. One must hunt diligently to find even these examples. It may be that one is so attuned to meeting in print only the more formal written language that one really fails to hear his own spoken words, with their more casual air, even when they are presented to him. One tends instead to regard them as a picturesque dialect peculiar to some distant locality. Frost’s language, when coupled with his infinitely observed and deeply understood regional characters, becomes an integral part of the dramatic situation in a poem. The resultant fusion of speaker and language produces the authentic ‘Local’ flavor for which the poems are praised to glorify speech rhythms have nevertheless gained variety and richness in the iambic line through deliberate and conversational variations of accents.

But there are further reasons why Frost followed Emerson and Wordsworth in his particular consideration of folk speech. This language had intrinsically two elements in common with poetry: proverbial or epigrammatic turns of phrase, and a natural musical cadence. The very limitations of a small vocabulary and of expressiveness in folk-speech force the speaker into direct statements shaded by those tones of voice which convey the peculiar intensity of emotion and thought. Carlyle pointed out that if you ‘think deep enough you think musically’. And from the beginning, all art has been amplification and sophistication of those deeply felt expression. Poetry thus finds revitalization when the creative imagination summons up experience fresh from life, and experience which has not been evoked in quite the same
way before. And Frost in turning back to this perennial source of inspiration was eager to break away from the threadbare subjects and tones of poetry: from the wonderful, the beautiful, the heroic, and the eternally sublime. The quest for new subject matter and for new treatment of it led him to listen to all the tones of life with a new consciousness that any aspect of life could be a fit subject for poetic treatment if its vitality could be re-created in poetic form.

Such a goal might have taken him into the arms of the ‘local color’ enthusiasts who were having their little day when *North of Boston* was first published. But his characterizations were not concerned with the quaint, the picturesque, the peculiar. Instead they disclosed and elaborated in subtle and indirect fashion new aspects of the ageless varieties: the sorrowful conflicts between good and good, the persistence of loneliness even in love, the power of the failure of love to make recompense for the difference between man and woman. These are but a few of the themes which are unfolded and clarified anew in the homely scenes of his dramatic narratives and characterizations. With them may be found occasional delineation of emotions and thoughts which have been psychologically twisted by fear, hate, pride, jealousy, fatigue. And always there is the subtle indirections of Frost’s dramatic method. So much more is suggested than is stated. Somehow the thoughts and emotions are embodied in a context of words which suggest not only a physical setting – a room, a road, a garden, a farm, a grove, a hill – but also a psychological setting.