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978-0-521-44485-9 - Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite

Katherine Kearns

Excerpt

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## Introduction: The Serpent's Tail

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And if man once thought that straight vision could allow him to escape the opaque barrier that every body presents to the light, now, in his impetuous desire, he is plunged into the darkness that a supposedly enlightened gaze had projected in its very rings and reversals.

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*

At a most fundamental and pervasive level, Frost's poetry documents a man's struggle with his own oppositional impulses of appetite and moderation. Enclosed, tersely resolved against histrionic self-display, a man seeks to keep the battle internal. But desire *will* be made manifest, and so this drama plays itself out correlatively in nature and in women and is enlivened by their natural propensity for capitulation. In the natural world where life rises out of death, fruition out of decay, and light out of darkness, the equivalent downward motion is inevitable: nature and women do not merely accept this gravitational urge but welcome it, inviting men to join them in the fall. Frost's poetry is a heroic assertion of conscious prosodic control placed against his relentlessly subversive awareness of internally derived appetitive impulse. His task is Sisyphean because he cannot remove himself from the source of his desires – enacted by externalities, they are projected from within. And for Frost there are no metaphysical truths to counterbalance the appetitive flux: if desire finds its mansion and its grave in an earthy physicality, metaphysics is a rifled and empty crypt ("A Masque of Reason" l. 284). Frost's model of control may be seen then to exceed the specifically Christian or Puritan terms he often chooses to employ, as any external "systematic," religious, political, psychological, or otherwise, lacks the compelling vitality of the desirous self: control has to do more secularly with the violent expense of self through the mechanics of a desire that is self-generating and is both the reward and the punishment of being a man. Frost's concern is the interdependent physical, ethical, and spiritual con-

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sequences to the self of that virile and necessary appetite when it is brought to expense.<sup>1</sup> He maintains in “The Constant Symbol” that “Strongly spent is synonymous with kept,” but this is true only as long as the energy is poured into a shape, made into a product – a poem, a piece of work, a career.<sup>2</sup> If it is not “kept” within some intact form, however, it is lost. Heautocratic integrity, the internalized deployment of appetite in the service of a virilely informed moderation – or, in poetic terms, the internalized deployment of inspirational “wildness” or delight within the virile containment of a resolute prosodic structure – is a man’s best and only goal.<sup>3</sup> The poem reifies that most exquisitely precarious balance, as it arouses the poet to his own powers of control.

For Frost, anything that expends itself in generation necessarily winds down acceleratively to death, but unlike nature and unlike women, men are possessed of the (potential) rationality by which they might imagine themselves to hold this process in abeyance. Frost’s implications about “femaleness” extend far beyond gender, as he suggests that women signal a condition of barrierlessness; in this he is no more than strictly traditional.<sup>4</sup> By nature uncontrolled, women are formally compromised in Frost’s poetry so that they may, like nature, decompose and reform perpetually: pregnancy, that most singular transformation that begins with the abdomen and extends inexorably to encompass the entire body, is only the first (and frequently the most deferred) metamorphosis in Frost’s world, where women emerge as trees, flowers, and fireflies, as dryads and witches and hill wives. Mothers, and mother earth, are possessed of the immense power both to alter and to be altered by what is within them, and one’s rootedness to the maternal source remains a conduit through which substance burgeons and subsides. Men, holding themselves as antithetical to this regenerative anarchy, reject the metamorphic capacities that allow for them an eternal recurrence, and it becomes thus all the more essential that they throw up the barriers which, even as they are disintegrating, might slow the inevitable lapse. Women, like seeds or fairy shrimp, may go through periods of quiescence, so that for example the dryad of “Paul’s Wife” may remain locked inside her tree as a dry pith until someone should happen to lay that pith beside the pool where it can “drink.” Women may, like Paul’s wife or like the mother/maple of “Maple,” die in one form and be born again in another, so that when the dryad goes out “like a firefly” one can only imagine her reemerging embodied as something else. But men are not formed for transformation, and only a man who rejects some part of his masculinity becomes something other than a man. Thus in “The Subverted Flower” it is not desire alone that brings the male figure to his state of bestial humiliation but also, paradoxically, his sexual ineffectuality. It is his *unmanning* to a state of uncontrol that makes him a beast. Succumbing to

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a rapacious appetite for a defined "other" while being thwarted in consummation, he is a figure of frustrated impotence. Formal rigor becomes an imperative in this vision where one must be both virile and moderate, for what a man loses is lost forever.

Resonating always with his vision of natural unrest, Frost's poetry articulates this most pervasive irony: that desire itself is circular and self-generating, like the seasons or like the flow of blood in the body, but that succumbing to one's metamorphic, appetitive "femaleness" means an irrevocable loss of self into the shapeless void. Poured into that which is ever-changing, this expense becomes "substance lapsing unsubstantial; / [Into] The universal cataract of death / That spends to nothingness." Desire threatens a most essential violation of the intact system, for while it may be internally generated and with effort safely diverted, it seeks outlets: "Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained," warns the speaker of "The Flood."<sup>5</sup> Yet most outward manifestations necessitate that autonomy be suspended, if only momentarily, and that there be a dangerous breach in the fortified self. "Eyes seeking the response of eyes" are, in "All Revelation," the apertures that most compromise the global autonomy of the geode.<sup>6</sup> Expend, that which is, as "West-Running Brook" has it, "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love," is felt to "seriously, sadly run[ ] away, / To fill the abyss's void with emptiness." Contained, enclosed, this energy becomes like the brook channeled under the city, a new potency, a radical and even potentially sinister force to keep others from work and sleep, but released, it becomes a movement toward nothingness. For Frost, the poetic structure becomes the tightly sealed receptacle for desire, a formal containment for the witchery of the inspirative possession implicit in the poetic act itself. The figure in "A Servant to Servants" of the madman in his cell of hickory poles, strumming against the bars and talking of love things, resonates throughout the poetry, for within each prosodic cage the drama of appetite against containment is played out.

So it is that for Frost the figure a poem makes is the same for love. It is not insignificant that Frost's famous correlation between love and the poem makes the poetic act virtually inextricable from the sexual, that "love," as the second term, seems the focus of the analogy:

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life . . . in a momentary stay against confusion. (*Prose* 18)

The "ecstasy" of which the analogy speaks remains ambiguously located (is it love or the poem to which he refers?) until "the first line laid down"

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reveals that the indeterminate “it” is the poem which has reasserted itself. And even here, the line is “laid down,” bedded like (instead of?) a lover, and what comes of this is a birth of form, “a clarification of life . . . in a momentary stay against confusion.” The “poem” becomes, by Frost’s semantics, not merely *like* love, but itself a form of virile, controlled loving. One could indeed say that Frost’s insistence that metaphor is the whole of thinking might be tropologically too general, nearly a subterfuge, for one comes to feel instead that, for Frost, it is all *metonymy*: that the whole of his thinking about poetry, about women, about nature is felt by him as so many contiguities of his own desirous flesh. “The philosophy of the part for the whole; skirting the hem of the goddess” is not, despite Frost’s claim, synecdoche so much as metonymy, extensions of the expanding parameters of self.<sup>7</sup>

The poetic act itself generates that “wonder of unexpected supply” which guarantees that the system of arousal is rheostatic, renewable. “For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew,” Frost says. “I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing” (*Prose* 19). Whether the view is Apollonian (materializing from cloud) or chthonic (rising out of ground), such an experience is intensely pleasurable, productive of delight, gladness, and wonder. It makes one feel a giant, making (phallic) order that is like “the straight crookedness of a good walking stick” (*Prose* 19). According to the poet of “How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It’s in You and in the Situation” (one might substitute “Poet” for “King” and examine the opportunistic overtones of this title), this “perfect moment of un bafflement,” the climactic recognition of one’s own capacity to exploit the exact affinities of a good simile, comes from some potently energizing place: “It may be wine, but much more likely love – / Possibly just well-being in the body” (ll. 242–3). One looks for a name for this bodily translation that takes one at once into the clouds and up out of the ground, that makes one feel ten feet tall, that feels like Bacchic wine and like love: that fulfills, in other words, the figure of “love” by a simultaneous spiritual and physical transformation. This is an autonomously derived pleasure that, named after love, comes to generate love’s terms, comes, in fact, to seem like love. Tautological, this is the “form of forms,” “The serpent’s tail stuck down the serpent’s throat,” indeed.<sup>8</sup> One thing leads to another and on around.

This is a kind of autoerotics, perhaps. Perceiving linguistic pleasure in terms of sex, and sex in terms of the disciplined wildness of the poetic inscription, one performs at a most essential level that unification between discourse and act. Involving a mastery of “wildness,” Frost’s po-

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etics locates power in the one who can both arouse that wildness and contain it (*Prose* 18). The cunning tongue and the crafty pen come to derive what Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* as “pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering it and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.”<sup>9</sup> That Frost began to write poetry just as what Foucault documents as a *Scientia Sexualis* was being codified and disseminated is perhaps not inconsequential to this habit of mind; that he wrote toward the end of an era in which medicine “wove an entire network of sexual causality” to explain every malady and physical disturbance would perhaps explain the sexual etiology implicit in his seemingly nonironic appropriation of the art/love analogy to verify an impulse perceived oppositionally in terms of creation and annihilation.<sup>10</sup> However it may be, Frost may be said to generate his own heat within a self-enclosed system, talking about love, confiding it in secret through his buried allusions to infidelity and arousal, luring it out in the open in his stories of men and the women who leave them, captivating and capturing others by his vision of an earth at once so generative, so dangerous, and so inviting. He is a master of the sexual innuendo, which is always seemingly belied by the hearty voice that utters it. It is not accidental or insignificant that a sexual *metaphor* dominates his vision of nature, for it is in the metaphor-making process that pleasure resides. “The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association,” he says, as if to suggest that mental gymnastics is exactly that “performance” which may be most lovingly sustained, most tantalizingly obscured, most subtly deployed.<sup>11</sup>

In its most delicate construction the poem is a classical figure of love for Frost, Platonic in its articulation of an erotics deriving from the staunch and upright soul. It becomes, as in “The Silken Tent,” a structure of unparalleled harmonic balance whereby the “She” that begins the poem is assimilated to become the body of the text:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
 At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
 Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
 So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
 And its supporting central cedar pole,  
 That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
 And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
 Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
 But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
 By countless silken ties of love and thought  
 To everything on earth to compass round,

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And only by one's going slightly taut  
 In the capriciousness of summer air  
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

It is not the woman, not the tent, but the poetic voice talking this erotically inscribed analogy into being that is foregrounded – as Poirier says, “The elicited suspense waits upon how this voice, with a power of formulation at once flexible, scrupulous, and grand, will conduct itself through the rest of the poem.”<sup>12</sup> The female aspect, the silken tissue, is supported interiorly and thus transformed to “tent” by the phallic “central cedar pole” that “signifies the sureness of the soul.” As is proper to the classical view, the feminine is realized only through the masculine;<sup>13</sup> without the pole the “tent” would be “silk” or “cloth” but not serviceable as such – not available to be made into something else – in its state as “untent.” Such an integral unification of desire and spiritual certitude, where the “female” silk is tethered gently by lines (of poetry and of rope) and at the same time exalted upward by the central pole, is seldom reiterated in Frost’s poetry. The poem’s extended conceit, a notably “masculine” device of linguistic and intellectual virtuosity, echoes formally the harmonious but clearly contrived tension between intellect, spirit, and flesh.<sup>14</sup> The single, extended, perfectly balanced sentence lasts and does not deflate, even as it embraces itself in interlocking rhymes, even as it proceeds so rhythmically to the delicious double entendre of its final lines, even as it urges the tongue to the rustling virtuosity of “capriciousness” while holding the taut couplet in check.

Yet it is not the tent, which is both yielding and, in its yielding, strong, but the house in stages of disintegration that is the prevailing edifice in Frost’s poetry, and for the most part, like the houses that fall, the “soul” may not remain sufficiently upright to counterbalance the gravitational pull. Frost’s speakers may yearn upward to heaven for spiritual and intellectual latitude or they may, as in “To Earthward,” wish for an earthly love that pulls them down to sensual awareness, but they tend to represent the two directions as antithetical to each other so that spirit and flesh cannot be reconciled. As “Bond and Free” so clearly articulates, Love is in bondage to earth “to which she clings / With hills and circling arms about,” while Thought “cleaves the interstellar gloom” toward heaven. The poetic “lines” that join soul to body are seldom so balanced as to remove the sense of bondage to earthly need; another such moment of desire as found in “The Silken Tent” manifests itself instead as “A Line-Storm Song,” showing passion as lines of storms – poetic and atmospheric – that destroy equilibrium in a “rout” of wind and rain that bring the sea back to reflood the “ancient lands” long since dry. Such passion not merely silences the lyric birds, conventional singers of love, but obliterates them:

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The birds have less to say for themselves  
 In the wood-world's torn despair  
 Than now these numberless years the elves,  
 Although they are no less there:  
 All song of the woods is crushed like some  
 Wild, easily shattered rose.  
 Come, be my love in the wet woods, come,  
 Where the boughs rain when it blows.

Compared with this orgasmic fantasy – “Come, be my love in the wet woods, come,” “Come forth into the storm and rout” – “The Silken Tent” is an unprecedented moment that is not repeated again, and the ephemerality of its vision is reified in the silken tissue it hoists in place of the stolid boards and nails, the heavy doors, and the echoing stairwells erected in other poems to withstand the deluge. Here virility informs moderation, so that the feminine is penetrated and in fact created by the masculine, making the poem a rare moment of harmonic *aphrodisia* and of control.

Rare, because however pleasurable such a perpetually renewable source of *aphrodisia* as is intrinsic to a dialectic of arousal may be, it is also frequently problematic, as pleasure itself has come to be, through the endless process of confession to which it has been subjected, almost inevitably productive of guilt and anxiety.<sup>15</sup> Desire, guiltily perceived, opens a man to abandonment, violation, and pain, and as Frost discovers and exposes, sees and tells about it, sexuality is made to confess to its own pathological nature. It may be projected into egressing women or made to reside in their often-noted capacities for obsession, hysteria, and lying, so that women become, in effect, conduits to carry off a form of sexual madness.<sup>16</sup> This leaves men to enact their desires as husbandmen of the more available earth, but this too emerges frequently in terms that make pleasure inseparable from and finally dependent upon pain. The speaker of “The Bonfire,” who leans in to rub out the wildfire and rises, climactically, scorched and ecstatic (and speaks his delight in a metrical pun as “walking light on air in heavy shoes”) is a figure in this dynamic. The speaker of “To Earthward” assumes the earth as lover, and he documents the maturation of this love in terms of an increasing desire for death, a movement from air to earth: “Love at the lips was touch / As sweet as I could bear; / And once that seemed too much; / I lived on air,” he begins. The speaker recalls the flower- and musk-laden air that once could, alone and unaided, tantalize and arouse him, crossing his flesh so that he felt the “swirl and ache,” the “sting” of love. This vertigo, these aches and stings, were in the beginning “strong sweets” enough, but his appetites quickly become more tangible: “Now no joy but lacks salt, / That is not dashed with pain / And weariness and fault; / I crave the

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stain / Of tears, the aftermark / Of almost too much love." ("One of the greatest changes my nature has undergone is of record in *To Earthward* and indeed elsewhere for the discerning," Frost says; *Letters* 482.)

Indeed, the words "love at the lips" which begin this poem suggest that the act of speaking out this drama, of saying love outward from the lips instead of breathing it in, becomes a necessary stimulus. And certainly the poet must have his listeners; he must indulge in the voyeurism of knowing that love from his lips, discovered in the "wild space," is bringing others to pleasure. He must sense that to guarantee pleasure one must, as Barthes says in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "seek out this reader . . . without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary . . . , it is this site: the possibility of a dialectic of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game."<sup>17</sup> Passion arising from the autonomous self, crossing others autonomously and blurring all conventional heterosexual delimitations for the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure, it proceeds inevitably toward the bittersweet pleasures of masochism, from rose petal to the pungently penetrative "sweet of bitter bark / And burning clove." This figure of "To Earthward" has been so synesthetically alive to nature and to the language that describes his interaction with it that he has needed no human other to awaken desire. This vulnerability proves, as always, to be a problematic bliss, from the beginning described in terms of malaise and pain. The inevitable coital completion of his "love" in its late stages is a fantasy of death in which the speaker is prostrate on the ground: "the earth as rough / To all my length." This speaker who now craves "the stain / Of tears, the aftermark / Of almost too much love" epitomizes the figures throughout Frost's poetry who are informed by a desire that colors and shapes the landscape, for he has become a roué whose engagement with the world's body has been variable but so long-lived that joy must be salted with pain. Invoking a gravity so profound that it will join him to the earth, he is tempted by dissolution.

*Telling* about desire – "love at the lips" – is itself intrinsically problematic, for confession is imbued with a double sense of power and self-abasement: it is a discourse at once pleasurable and painful, and one becomes dependent on the other. No matter how much the confessing agent knows or has done, or how well he has done it, no matter how subtly or delicately the details are deployed, it is the listener who is felt to be invested with the power to judge and to condemn.<sup>18</sup> Thus Frost's more consistent speaking model of arousal is not a harmonious Platonism in which desire and its articulation rest in perfect balance, but a more volatile dynamic whereby power is always receding from the speaking voice to locate itself elsewhere: the most literal model by which



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this truth is illustrated is in the husband's final, impotent words in "Home Burial," spoken as his silent wife is about to leave the house yet again. But this paradoxical display – as desire is articulated it undermines itself – is reified consistently throughout Frost's poetry. One sees the pleading man of "The Subverted Flower" reduced in one elided movement to a bestial state of sheer physical dominance, able to "pounce to end it all," and to a position of nondominance, forced to all fours and off the field. At a more subtle level, one sees a persistent image pattern in which a speaker articulates himself in relationship to some vast, wordless power as a figure of impotence. "On Going Unnoticed," in which the speaker is attuned to the mean and pallid coral root clinging to the skirt of a regal and utterly indifferent tree, is a type: variously, speakers take on the forms of a prudent, priggishly self-justifying woodchuck, a flower beaten by the wind, a listless leaf whose ambitions to fly, driven by storm, it admits to be delusory. Speaking, figures are frequently made to confess to their own impotence, to call themselves "too absent-spirited to count" ("Desert Places"), to see themselves as windy-headed and concerned with turbulent "inner" weather ("Tree at My Window"), to announce themselves self-pityingly as "in my life alone" ("Bereft").

Yet it is not merely those lovelorn or depressed speakers succumbing to the confessional impulse who may be found to have subverted themselves through language, for by Frost's terms the power to undermine any speaking voice lies within the venereal force of language itself. True discourse is pleasure, like love, and as such it is always threatening barriers, urging one toward lapse, moving one toward promiscuity (*Prose* 39).<sup>19</sup> Thus the symbol of the lyric voice, the bird, appears throughout Frost's poetry as at best a compromised figure who "knows in singing not to sing" ("The Oven Bird"). Made to subscribe to Frost's ambivalently declined "sound of sense," it is subsequently burdened, a virtual parody of the romantically conceived lyricist as it consistently represents itself or is represented as powerless, flightless, and lost. As these symbolic birds suggest, it is not ever, in Frost's poetry, within the speakers' scope to seize and hold on to power, which is lost either quite specifically by admission or is taken tacitly by the poet through the more subtle devices of irony. Even the most Apollonian-seeming voices within the poetry may be seen as afflicted. Always subject to ironic subversion, they tend also to betray themselves through their patterns of allusion and imagery. The subtexts frequently reveal darker and far more chthonic preoccupations than the unruffled surfaces would appear to hold, and it comes to seem that utterance for Frost inevitably manifests itself as some version of appetitive impulse. The naked madman upstairs raving about love things, the murdered lover's skeleton sashaying from cellar to attic: these are merely logical extensions of Frost's disabled speakers. Power

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and control must then reside in form, in sound shaped into prosodic compactness; the bodies within the poem are inevitably compromised while the body of the poem is solid, immune to the hysterias of failed love, tautly disposed in “living lines” so vascularity alive that “they bleed when you cut them” (“but if the body is firm and resistant, if internal space is dense, organized, and solidly heterogeneous in its different regions, the symptoms of hysteria are rare and its effects will remain simple”).<sup>20</sup> Thus Frost may be said to come close to having it both ways – talking about pleasure, taking pleasure in the truth of pleasure, while holding himself apart prosodically from pleasure’s perceived consequences of anarchy and dissolution.

Frost’s is a world where consummation is always productive of conflict and profound ambivalence, however: this is a dynamic fully articulated in (the “war poem”) “The Bonfire” by the man who is aroused to put out the deadly and beautiful fire that he himself has set. That the moment of ecstatic triumph comes when the wildfire is rubbed and beaten out – that it is a moment utterly ambiguous in its conflation of orgasm and controlled stoppage – suggests this ambivalence. Marked in the dramas between men and women by childlessness, infidelity, divorce, abandonment, and madness, marriage is that state of consummated “love” which is virtually guaranteed to reify the dissolution of certainties: in “The Thatch” the symbolic value of the abandoned marital house whose thatched roof deteriorates to let rain into the “upper chamber floors” can hardly be underestimated, as it suggests a correlative state of wounded disorientation in the man who has left it. In “Bereft” that “porch’s sagging floor” upon which the abandoned speaker stands suggests an equivalent unmaning, for consummation leaves one’s footing uncertain. Marked in the dramas between man and nature, there is often that tendency toward abasement one sees in “To Earthward,” for if men penetrate the earth, plowing and sowing seeds, they are also brought low by it.

When enacted rather than transfixed as in “The Silken Tent,” desire frequently, then, becomes reciprocal with death, contiguously oriented so that the dark and lovely woods simultaneously invite penetration and promise annihilation, equally careful conditions. It is not fear of death in “Stopping by the Woods” that keeps the man from the woods, but the promises he has to keep. His duty as a man is to resist that generous invitation to nothingness, and yet appetite is felt to extend its seductive invitation even from the grave. Frost so frequently makes this death-desire consummation explicit, he so completely adheres to the synonymy of “husbanding” both women and soil, he so punctuates his landscapes with cellar holes, graves, and tunnel mouths, that he may be said, to paraphrase his own metaphor, to hurl the symbolic value ahead