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“Work is play for mortal stakes”: A Culture of Labor in Frost’s Poetry

The critical appeal of Robert Frost’s poetry, including his poems about labor, has perhaps suffered from its massive exposure to audiences outside the intellectual and scholarly realm. Frost’s rural fixation and insistence on singularly conducted labor gets reduced to a reflection of a middle class, bucolic imagination.<sup>1</sup> Critics argue that his work is (over)steeped in traditions of the New England countryside, and that it eschews the incorporation of a defining facet of the region: that, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, extensive urban migration resulted in the creation of major metropolitan communities built upon industrial labor. Such arguments rely on the “rugged individualist” persona Frost created for himself, but later revised. They ignore both a significant portion of the poet’s biography as a member of an industrial laboring family, and his definable progression from rugged individualist to one who participates, independently, within a community.

His rustic brand of poetry, in contrast to the reality of his years spent working in the Lawrence mills, is often subjected to the same criticism imposed on the Romantics and earlier nature writers for its idealistic adherence to a “pathetic fallacy.” Margaret Ronda calls this folly an enchantment of the georgic genre, tracing the roots of environmental fetishizing back to, at least, the emergence of Virgil’s *Georgics*.<sup>2</sup> Like Lawrence Buell’s discrediting of the traditional “[re]turn to nature,” georgic enchantment is guilty of trying to make “the dream of a world outside history and ideology”<sup>3</sup> a reality. Frost’s dream of a world where man

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1 Hoffman 111

2 *Georgic Disenchantment in American Poetry*

3 Dowling 88

intimately interacts with organic material is, in this view, little more than a perceptual trick that finds comfort in a nostalgic gaze at an image of pristine wilderness that may not have ever existed; but, his work still manages have some potential in inspiring a positive relationship between man and nature. Ronda and her ecocritical colleagues are careful to remind us of this, while they indict him for anachronistic “errors,” such as his dependence on the pathetic fallacy.

The history of Frost criticism, especially that of his reviewers, is in many instances decidedly harsh. His contemporaries have censured him for being duplicitous or faltering at key moments in America’s labor history. They have claimed, for instance that the poet, “characteristically clos[ed] his eyes to some social facts”<sup>4</sup> and “social responsibility”<sup>5</sup> in his depiction of labor politics. The claim here is that his poetry is naïve in its selective and idealistic vision of America’s reality as a capitalist country with a struggling farming industry. In his own notebooks, though, he was well aware of the entanglement of capitalism and labor, understanding that “abolishing the capitalist would mean abolishing the farmer included.”<sup>6</sup> The obvious question, then, is why doesn’t include that in his poetry. The claim has been made that the “closing his eyes” is a deliberate stemming from fears that “his national reputation as a poet might be jeopardized by any show of sympathy for the working class.”<sup>7</sup> This is the case for many of the poems discussed in this paper—Frost acts in self-interest, wastes valuable resources, and turns away youth seeking work in fulfillment of his own necessity of labor. This paper will attempt to justify these choices by finding an

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4 This, from Lawrence Thompson’s *Years of Triumph* (594), is written in reference to Frost’s long poem “New Hampshire” (published 1923) a piece that “refuses to examine strained relationships between labor and capital in that state or in the country more generally” (Hoffman 122).

5 Gregory. “Robert Frost’s New Poems” 132

6 “Notebook” 148

7 Hoffman 121

alternative use for labor outside of socioeconomic interests—a fixation that the poet’s contemporaries are limited by the ideologies of their own generation.<sup>8</sup>

Recent critics of Frost have set precedence for this argument. Margaret Ronda and Tyler Hoffman, two such critics who I will often refer to, are well aware of the hostility with which many have approached Frost’s work; and, they have done well to defend him. Hoffman, in his essay *Robert Frost and the Politics of Labor*, claims that, “despite the confidence behind these [the aforementioned] critical commonplaces, the assumptions they make about Frost are not only simplistic but misleading.”<sup>9</sup> His main argument is that much of the poetry is *deeply* concerned with the social and economic implications of labor. He reduces the poems’ many antisocial, isolating gestures to a “preference of individual, as opposed to collective, action.”<sup>10</sup> Ronda, focusing her criticism on the genre in which Frost writes, tries to ameliorate those who have discredited the poet with possessing a “creative deficiency.”<sup>11</sup> By coloring his moments of indecision as “didactic evaluations of labor’s vexed value placed alongside rhythmically and sensually rich descriptions of labor in action,” she applauds the way in which he, “grapples with the division and alienation of labor and the increasingly abstract logics that determine its social value.”<sup>12</sup> She, too, finds Frost interested in the politics (and aesthetics) of a uniquely American style of labor. In this modern reading, Frost engages his contemporary reviewers precisely where they put pressure on him: at the

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8 I mean to insinuate the irony that critics, such as Malcolm Cowley, who wrote, “he [Frost] is too much walled in the past. Unlike the great Yankees of an earlier age, he is opposed to innovations in art, ethics, science, industry or politics” (“The Case against Mr. Frost” 39), are themselves bound by their own history. Recent scholars have the benefit of a perspective has made conclusions about particular understandings of the Modernist era and the totality of events of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

9 Hoffman 109

10 Ibid 115

11 Ronda 74

12 Ronda 61

intersection of society, economy, “vocation[,] and avocation.” (“Two Tramps in Mud Time,” line 66)

Hoffman, Ronda, and their peers do not write without other concerns though. Hoffman is, at times, scathing in his disparagement of Frost’s making choices in defense of his reputation rather than deep-rooted beliefs.<sup>13</sup> In a less personal vein, Ronda’s essay, entitled *Georgic Disenchantment in American Poetry*, questions the integrity of modern nature poets’ (i.e. from Whitman, to Frost, and beyond) very reliance on an outmoded genre. Her concern is with the, “belatedness of his [Frost’s] own relation to a georgic poetics.”<sup>14</sup> She argues that the georgic persisted with diminished appeal to readers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but she does not entirely reject its potential for massive appeal. She calls for a “disenchantment” of the genre that can somehow uphold the kind of ideal labor Frost is interested in, but is more responsive to modern forms.<sup>15</sup>

This paper responds to these and other critical concerns of critics, and to the concerns Frost himself. Through a survey of his labor poems—with an emphasis on his reverence for the power and creative potential of individual, laboring pursuits—Frost redeems his own country bumpkin image by being both progressive and quintessentially American. In his looking back, not for a pristine image of nature, but for the most basic form of a creative human agent (one that *is* historically factual), Frost traces his own the discovery of purpose, production, and compassion through the eyes of men set to their own tasks. For the speakers in these poems, proper work—the kind that has a function greater

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13 Hoffman: “he [Frost] recognizes the pain that the people suffer, but does not want to reflect publicly on it for fear that such sympathy will lump him in with those on the left.” (123)

14 Ronda 70

15 Frost’s poems are traditional in a sense: they are primarily lyrics written in rhymed, iambic pentameter, with few deviations.

than the upholding of an economy based on commodified goods—is conducted when man creates using only his own hands and his environment (and, perhaps, a simple tool).

These episodes of lonely labor, self-imposed and conducted to achieve a personally-defined prosperity is a more respectable alternative to the ideals of Jeffersonian agrarianism that are so easily perverted by capitalistic desires.<sup>16</sup> Ecocriticism has indicted such ideology for its categorical abuse of natural “products” (put forward by Marx<sup>17</sup>) in her tracing of western civilization’s history of environmental destruction. She calls upon a new literature to inspire more sustainable work. Frost’s labor poems attempt to do just that by presenting the reader with displays of human power and creative work that are sincerely satisfying to the laborer even if it requires them to manipulate the environment. As a result, one quickly recognizes the potential for creation and destruction in these poems. Through a number of didactic Frostian adages, these poems place the onus of invasive actions on individual morals rather than collectivist ideology; and, that the speakers of these poems, to varying degrees, self-impose limits on the extent of their work suggests that Frost assumes a baseline of environmental respect inherent to the individual. In that sense, he *is* idealistic as many critics have argued; but, never without careful reference to American culture and history.

Precisely how Frost examines the strength of human agents, and uses that to inspire individuals to personal pursuits and positive environmental interaction, will be explained. It will require him to distinguish between himself and others—first natural objects, then other organisms. A display of some kind of labor then follows, often a kind of experiment where human action sets in motion a symbiotic relationship between those objects. Reflection,

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16 Morton calls out the hypocrisy of America’s images of beautiful settlement plantations (pre-Civil War) as a cover for an economy dependent on slave labor. Buell has been argued that industrial America is also guilty of operating on deplorable working conditions, with memories of workers’ subjugation fresh in mind (89-90).

17 “All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil.” (*Capital* 365)

repetition, and disruptions by things such as culture and industry ultimately produce a model for individual man's role within a network of worldly beings. Unresolved moral dilemmas are often presented in pursuit of this model, hopefully motivating the poems' laborers, and readers, to collectively considerate, yet essentially individualistic, endeavors.

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The beginning of this whole process<sup>18</sup> leads off very organically, with a provocation of childish curiosity, figuring an interest in one's own ability as a primal feature in Frost's understanding of labor's inspiration. "At Woodward's Gardens" sets up a scene that isolates man from beast on intellectual grounds:

A boy, presuming on his intellect,  
Once showed two little monkeys in a cage  
A burning-glass they could not understand,  
And never could be made to understand. (1-4)

The boy's difference from the monkeys is absolute and permanent, and his capacity for "intellect" justifies the ensuing edifying episode. But, there is something simple about the boy's intelligence. This is suggested by the poem's the basic iambic meter, the omniscient and moral distancing of the speaker from the subject of the poem, and the instinctive (read: "thoughtless") "presuming" of the boy. Via the speaker's establishment of a moral high ground, the boy's "educating" of the monkeys is immediately undercut by a judgment of his juvenile intellect. Originally, the different objects of the scene—the boy, the monkeys, the burning-glass, and "solar rays"—are all benign in their separation. The boy puts these objects into action when he uses the burning-glass to produce a concentrated beam of solar energy directed at one monkey's body. Although his behavior is age appropriate, it is reckless

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<sup>18</sup> This progression, which serves as the outline of this paper, reflects the order in which Frost published these poems. The majority are published in Frost's first major collection, *North of Boston* (1914) in the order that they appear here. "Two Tramps" (1934) is the only major exception.

and harmful. The speaker understands that using the “lens / for gathering solar rays” (5-6) causes pain, but the boy does not. Identifying objects with contrastingly naïve vocabulary (in comparison, he uses the “burning-glass” to make the “sun a pin-point on the nose” (8) of one of the monkeys) the boy’s lack of social and moral development seems a central problem of the poem.

Interestingly though, the speaker shifts his focus to the primates’ response, suggesting that Frost is interested in something other than the self here, perhaps something about man’s difference from other species. The monkeys unsuccessfully try to diffuse the beams effects, resolving to snatch the burning-glass out of the boy’s hand. “Without the needed insight” (26)—the basic “intellect” reserved for the boy in the opening lines—their attempts at neutralizing the burning-glass are unsuccessful. They do not understand that the instrument is only injurious when used in combination with sunlight. However, they still serve a crucial moralizing function in the final lines, after abandoning their investigation. Their ultimate response to the boy’s juvenile affront is one of nonviolence. Their refusal to retaliate against what they don’t understand is an unlikely supposition of moral responsibility by creatures of a lesser intellect. The speaker counterpoises their inaction as an ethical rebuke to the boy; and, perceiving both the boy’s recklessness and the monkey’s evident benevolence, offers a simple conclusion:

Who said it mattered—  
What monkeys did or didn’t understand?  
They might not understand a burning-glass.  
They might not understand the sun itself.  
It’s knowing what to do with things that counts. (33-37)

The more sophisticated narrator, perceiving the boy’s recklessness and the monkeys’ benevolence, offers up a simple resolution. What matters, what “counts,” is that one only responds to what one understands. The monkeys, in a humbling gesture for humans, do this

better than the boy. As they don't understand the objects at play, much less the relationship between them, they make the responsible decision to avoid aimless or uninformed retaliation. The boy, guided only by his ability to cause a reaction—his power—is seen as less-than-primate in this reading. We can only hope that the boy, in future encounters with his manipulative powers, will eventually understand what the speaker has concluded through an analysis of the action and reaction of the monkeys.

The labor in “At Woodward’s Gardens” is basic. It works as a form of experimentation represented by the simple act of “knowing what to do with things” in the last line. Labor, though, thus far has little value other than displaying man’s power to create. It is here earnestly undertaken by a curious child, and thus unsullied by almost any economic valuation. By this token, it is ideal labor—work for work’s sake. But, it lacks the moral understanding of proper societal interaction (to be discussed further). Furthermore, Frost must admit that not all work can be conducted in this fashion. It takes work, not just to satisfy curiosity, but also to survive and produce what’s necessary for human existence. Accordingly, the vast majority of his poems that depict more traditional images of labor—as calling “At Woodward’s Gardens” a labor poem is admittedly a stretch)—deal with the affairs of the workingman: the farmer, the woodchopper, the factory worker.

The widely read “Mowing” is one such example. Like “At Woodward’s Gardens,” its setting and characters are simple. There is a man, a field of wheat, and a scythe. A major difference exists, though, in the consciousness of the one conducting labor: a mower intensely focused on his purposeful task of cutting down wheat. He is more aware and contemplative of his actions than the speaker of “At Woodward’s Gardens.” For all that he is attentive, the poem opens with him unaware of his role in a larger environmental context: “There was never a sound beside the wood but one, / And that was my long scythe



whispering to the ground. / What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself” (1-3). The singularity of the speaker’s perception is indicative of Frost’s individualist persona, but it is also cause for his trepidation in exploring the woods further. He struggles to make sense of the whispering interaction between his tool and the ground.

The need for work is somewhat in question here. Perceiving his alienation from the event, the speaker is held only by his ability and desire to cause an interaction between objects. He spends the remainder of the poem in contemplation, trying to describe his reason for conducting the labor of mowing thusly. Part of this process requires doing away with traditional rationalizations. Frost eschews any societal or spiritual justification when he writes, “It was no dream of the gift of idle hours, / Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf” (7-8). It’s hard to imagine that leisure time would spent exerting effort in “the heat of the sun” (4), or that value is derived from some transcendental achievement made available by the labor. We’re also not supposed to assume that the narrator does leisure-labor for the monetary benefit of the product it creates—he simply abandons the hay at the end of the poem. “Mowing,” justifies working, specifically with organic material, by attributing it to another human enterprise: love.<sup>19</sup>

The speaker identifies “The earnest love that laid the swale in rows” (10) as the reason why he mows and why man chooses to exert effort in any instance of labor. He admires his own ability to manipulate objects. For that, he depicts the cutting of wheat into swale<sup>20</sup> with care and grace. To create something, here a heap of hay, is a definitive action—a “truth” (9), or proof of man’s agency—for Frost (as both the speaker and writer at this

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19 Not coincidentally, the poem is written in sonnet form (14 lines of iambic pentameter).

20 “Swale” to be seen not as a commodified object, but simply another configuration of wheat into “a moist or marshy depression in a tract of land, esp. in the midst of rolling prairie” (OED). In fact, the poem avoids referencing the grain stalks entirely *until* the speaker manipulates them. Only then is at a product at all (and ambiguous still).

moment if we hold “love” as the motivating quality of all forms of work). The dispelling of old traditions and compulsions—of passive leisure time, of spiritual understanding, of financially incentivized action—allows the speaker to assert his individual power and to realize that “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows” (13) in a world of constructed, collective principles (of the American farming industry, cosmopolitan leisure, and Transcendental aspirations). While this may be isolating for him, it is cause for purposeful action. Furthermore, the poem makes reference to one’s unavoidable attachment to society by even proposing that there are competing justifications for labor (the “easy gold” and “gift of idle hours”) at the time Frost writes this poem. His connection is thus an oppositional one. The speaker (and the poet) seems comfortable with that position. The poem ends much like it began: “My scythe whispered and left the hay to make” (14), with the speaker having fulfilled his creative desires. His only goal was to put the scythe to use—make it whisper and cut. With that work done, he quits the field. The remaining efforts, of bundling the swale to “make” bales of hay, will (or will not) be someone else’s work—perhaps someone interested in the economic gain of such “easy gold.”

But a question still remains: why assume there are hay bales to make at all if Frost isn’t interested in their market value? This can be seen as another instance of him showing an awareness and acceptance of a market economy that requires the use of nature’s materials. Frost’s mower is to be seen as knowledgeable of, but idealistically resistant to, this reality. Relying only on the love that informs his labor, he is unapologetic about his laying low of the wheat. Environmental degradation is of little concern to one who uses natural objects so earnestly necessary as a means of satisfying the need for love. Love ensures that while we are as much subject to Darwinian anxiety as any other organism—and as such do most anything in our own interest—we can still be considerate. Unlike the theories of Buell

and other ecocritics, who propose a paradigm shift in human perspective by asking that we assimilate ourselves into nature, Frost hopes to hold (and perhaps even solidify) this eco-conscious individualist identity. He trusts that earnest and intentional individualistic pursuits are beneficial to man and, at the very least, ambivalent towards others.

“The Wood Pile” adheres to a similar sentiment of environmental respect, and compares it to an image of man engaged in another destructive activity. The poem depends on the same love for labor that characterized that of “Mowing,” but differs in its questioning of the (debatably) finished product of such work. “Mowing” ends with an image of a man almost compulsively cutting down stalks of wheat, requiring some sort of idealistic justification for the action while at least suggesting a value in a human economy. He acts with “love,” making him appear less reckless than the boy in “At Woodward’s Gardens.” “The Wood Pile”—which depicts a memory of a man chopping a tree, as well as a perceived combat between a lumberman and a bird—is tasked with vindicating humans’ interactions with the environment beyond a narcissistic pleasure pursuit.

A line is again drawn between man and his surroundings in this poem, with insertion of a personal “I” acting as an assertion of distinctive identity. An ecocentric reading would be critical of this alone as it leads to a chain reaction of environmental concerns as a response to human-preservation (according to Marx, who is particularly critical, like Frost, of capitalist agriculture).<sup>21</sup> The bird that appears later in this poem seems similarly anxious. These fears are ultimately proven baseless given this particular woodsman’s intentions. He has concerns of his own that arise from his initial anxieties of the placelessness of the scene:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day,  
I paused and said, “I will turn back from here.  
No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.”  
The hard snow held me, save where now and then

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21 See note #3

One foot went through. The view was all in lines  
Straight up and down of tall slim trees  
Too much alike to mark or name a place by  
So as to say for certain I was here  
Or somewhere else: I just was just far from home. (1-9)

The speaker doesn't find comfort in knowing his exact location. There are too many nondescript features in the woodland scene, and he considers abandoning his outing. To do so would be figured as a symbolic rejection of the man versus nature trope so prevalent in western and American literature (think earlier writers like Melville and Twain, or later modernists like Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Faulkner). Ecocritics, many of whom attempt to do away with the man/nature binary, might applaud any rejection of something termed "man versus nature." But, the temptation to "turn back" does not hold for this speaker.

Rather, he embraces the opposition that the environment presents him at the onset of this poem. He continues his exploration of the woods as the scene changes at the sudden appearance of a bird. The speaker is disappointed by the bird's refusal to "say no word to tell me who he was / Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought" (12-13). The man imposes a kinship here in assuming that he and the bird can hold a conversation. He commits to anthropomorphic processes, deemed a major issue to contemporary ecocritics, when he begins to interpret the bird's action through an understanding of human behaviors. He tries to think the bird's thoughts, and in doing so, imagines it engaged in a defensive war against the man: "He thought that I was after him for a feather-- / The white one in his tail: like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself" (14-16). The joke here<sup>22</sup> is that the speaker, by assuming that the bird's combative behavior is egoistic, is also guilty of a kind of narcissism (anthropomorphizing tendencies). The poem is not interested in the

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<sup>22</sup> Whether this a joke depends on how aware we think Frost is of the irony of the speaker's attitude toward the bird. I find humor in these lines by viewing the grumpy dismissal of the bird as an exaggeration of the stubborn "individualist" persona of Frost. Any reading that softens Frost (here, by inserting humor), works to counter his hostile critics.

contradiction as much as in conveying the experiences of a conscious observer in natural setting, as a conveniently placed pile of wood sets the speaker off on a new tangent that again finds Frost's figures contemplating images of nature. The woodsman-speaker describes the new scene after shifting his focus away from the bird: "And then there was a wood pile / for which I forgot him" (18-19). The bird continues the "fight" by going "behind it [the wood pile] to make his last stand" (22). To the bird's credit, he may have cause for concern in light of the instances of environmental dominance we have seen humans engaged in thus far. But by bringing about another scene change, the speaker becomes entirely focused on the cord of wood and the memories of labor that it recalls.

The "love of labor" idea returns to the woodsman by his imagining someone carefully stacking wood; but, the value of that wood suggests something new for Frost's poetics. Opposed to the heap of swale in "Mowing," the, "cord of maple [was] cut and split / and piled—and measure, four by four, by eight" (23-24), the organization of the wood with geometric precision, recalls the neatness and evenness of the "tall slim trees" of the opening image. The likeness established in these two images culminates in a series of observations where natural and artificial objects, though distinct, correspond:

...Clematis  
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.  
What held it though on one side was a tree  
Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,  
These latter about to fall. (30-34)

The dactylic "clematis" interrupts the largely iambic meter of the poem, and signals a tone change for the more peaceful. Natural and artificial objects harmonize via mutually beneficial work. The clematis and tree exert an almost active, though visually inanimate, force in keeping the pile together. The tree and prop, holding together what unites them—wood pile

with is memory of human labor—is pleasant but at risk in its fragility. The labor seems for not when the narrator supposes:

I thought that only  
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
Could so forget his handiwork on which  
He spent himself, the labour of his axe,  
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace (34-38)

This is the same dilemma that afflicted “Mowing.” The “labour” seems either pointless in creating an unused product, or egotistical in its singularity of purpose. “The Wood Pile” redeems that work in its last two lines. Emerging from the disrupted metrical regularity with a final dactyl on “fireplace,” the final lines resolve to iambic simplicity. The wood is cut, not just for use in a fireplace, or for man’s vain activity, but also, “To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay” (39-40). Preservation is not the goal here; nor is the production of an object for human use. If Frost’s only depicted those kinds of rationalizations for labor, his critics would be justified. Preaching absolute individualism or labor-for-profit betrays the reality of social culture and the idea of “good work,” respectively, for Frost. This poem ends, however, in looking beyond those concerns, with the speaker theorizing an alternative purpose for his work: the facilitation of natural processes and comfort in the reality of the unavoidable “decay.”

This marks a significant change in Frost’s ideology. The poems up to this point have only featured characters in definitive isolation from their environment, both natural and not. They have barely managed to escape rural idealism, and they certainly struggle to appeal to social ideals, even as they reference other beings (with which the speakers reluctantly engage). But Frost’s imagination does extend beyond this. Though he is writing for and about individuals, and of the benefits of country living, he certainly doesn’t ignore the realities of community and his culture’s history of labor.

“Two Tramps in Mud Time” is a perfect example of how Frost, as Tyler Hoffman points out, “responds directly to contemporary historical developments and to the unique configuration of labor and the politics of labor in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century,” by making reference to the era’s abject industrial laboring conditions.<sup>23</sup> In the poem, a stubborn speaker engaged in the soulful task of chopping wood takes a cynical view of America’s cultural values regarding labor. He is disapproving of capitalism’s influence on labor. This is perhaps another instance in which Frost beats back against quintessentially American ideology while showing that he is aware of it. The principles of Manifest Destiny and Jeffersonian agrarian labor, both preoccupied with homesteading labors, do not apply for the speaker-woodchopper of “Two Tramps.” However, his dream of individual autonomy is necessarily entwined in the reality of the market-based (read: “collective”) economy.

This contradiction is signaled in the first stanza of the poem. It begins “Out of the mud two strangers came / And caught me splitting wood in the yard.” Immediately, an opposition is made apparent by the isolating of “strangers” and “me,” and the difference between the “mud” origins of the former against the placing of the latter in a clearly defined “yard.” Further strain is added when the narrator comprehends what that these two tramps “had in mind: / They wanted to take my job for pay.” His hostility is not for fear of surrendering potential profit to the tramps as one enmeshed in a market economy may suspect, nor does it result from an unwillingness to disengage in a leisure-time hobby of “georgic” work, as Margaret Ronda terms such nostalgic endeavors in regards to labor *and* poetry.<sup>24</sup> We do sense the speaker’s temptation to make a case for the latter, however. Frost spends a full five stanzas describing the aesthetic pleasure derived from chopping wood on

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23 Hoffman 110

24 Ronda 60

an idyllic April afternoon complete with visions of birds and the dawning of spring (9-40). He spends the next two criticizing the vain and “hulking tramps” for their profit-fueled, brutish ambitions. This contrast, like that of two muddy tramps against a pristine backdrop, results in a sudden impulse of “logic” that undoes any such argument. The image of the two destitute workers-for-hire inspires a sense of compassion not yet seen in Frost’s poetry. Similar to the way in which the speaker’s perspective shifts at the appearance of a bird in “The Wood Pile,” the emergence of the boys sparks a moment of moral clarity:

...all their logic would fill my head:  
As that I had no right to play  
With what was another man’s work for gain.  
My right might be love but theirs was need.  
And where the two exist in twain  
Theirs was the better right—agreed.

Frost, perhaps recalling his own experiences working in the Lawrence mills and witnessing poor working conditions (as well as the unemployed), instills these memories in the speaker. It is nigh impossible for the privileged narrator, who can chop wood for leisure, to justify taking work from those who rely on labor as a means for survival.

Their being “of the mud” takes on two meanings here. On the one hand, they are filthy simply because they are homeless and tramping around in search of work. In this light they are also sullied, in the speaker’s eyes, by their engagement in labor for economic gain. On the other, being “of the mud” acquires an equivocating potential. Taking into account Frost’s values as a self-described “Old Testament Christian,” the phrase reads as an analog for the biblical story of origins in which God formed man from the dust of the Earth.<sup>25</sup> The speaker, too, is “of the mud” in that sense. Thus, the feelings of solidarity—signaled in the poem by the speaker’s recognition of “their [the tramps] logic” (the reality of their struggle)

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25 The poem makes other reference to Frost’s religion: the cleanliness of one’s “soul” (15); “God” (50); “Heaven” (72) etc.



—jostles the man’s resolve for ideal labor. The poem reaches an impasse with the woodchopper’s insistence on individualist ideology clashing with his (perhaps religiously-derived) compassion. The question for readers and for the speaker now becomes how to balance personal ideals and other instinctive human emotions, like empathy.

Frost, frustratingly, does not provide us with a conclusion. The poem ends with a meditation on the separation of work and play:

Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For heaven and for future’s sakes. (69-72)

The “deed” of exhibiting charity and allowing the tramps to chop wood as an economic imperative, admittedly would fulfill a religious and moral agenda; but, if the speaker’s goal is to unite “my avocation and my vocation” (66), then work and play are *not* separate, and he has legitimate cause to rejecting the tramps’ offer. However, in even presenting an alternative choice, and not explicitly showing the rejection, Frost leaves the conclusion ambiguous.

While criticism traditionally focuses on the poet’s underrepresentation of urban laborers and projects an ending in which the tramps “are left stranded,”<sup>26</sup> we might instead consider the consequences of ending at the pinnacle of a moralizing moment. To offer no conclusion is to either say there is none, or that he is concerned that his true beliefs will be unacceptable to readers: recall the insinuation that Frost believed, “his national reputation as a poet might be jeopardized by any show of sympathy for the working class,”<sup>27</sup> suggesting that Frost’s unwillingness to make a decision is a way of sidestepping revolutionary thought in preservation of his public appeal. But, the final stanza might also suggest that he avoids aligning with laborers out of a belief we’ve previously seen in Frost interested in: the

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26 Carruth 156

27 Hoffman 121

importance of individual work. This is still speculation though, so we must look elsewhere for some better conclusion.

In Frost's ever-popular lyric "Mending Wall," we find support for a more forgiving reader. In it, the creation of a stonewall between two neighbors seems intended to protect traditional values by maintaining a critical distance between laborers and the monetized natural products they use. Primarily concerned with bottom lines, the speaker of the poem weighs the costs and benefits of hours spent rebuilding a wall. We can only guess at the ambiguous intentions driving the speaker's mystifying neighbor with whom he is engaged in the process of rebuilding. The poem revisits many of the issues of those already discussed. Like "At Woodward's Gardens," it shows the extent of man's simplistic yet powerful creativity, here through the action of heaving and stacking large rocks into a wall that visually demarcates where certain tree species will grow. Like "Mowing," labor is imperative and justified by a love of the materials it uses and the processing it requires. That said, this poem differs in that the work is not individually undertaken. This would complicate Frost's insistence on individualism if either were working solely for the benefit of the other.

The depiction of something resembling a collective effort is strange for Frost, but it might be a reference and response to the tension of "Two Tramps." Much like the "logic" that sparked the moral predicament for the wood-chopper, the subject(s) of "Mending Wall" are compelled by:

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. (1-4)

The "something" here is a natural process that promotes kinship or relationship between distinctive objects, something that will break down artificial barriers that inhibit their connection (with great, destructive force), such that "two" can move together. There is an

inherent divide between the two men in this image however. We see this again when the younger man, the speaker of the poem, worries that the work is pointless. The landscape is already divided, he says: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard” (24). Delineating land ownership is not the intention of this artificial barrier (the wall between their two fields). That “he” and “I” are aligned with distinct natural objects rather than referring to them by the possessive “his” and “my,” establishes the difference between men as one that is natural itself. On a fundamental level, separation is both natural and not. Some, like the difference between species and persons, are obligatory. Others, like the forceful attempt sequestering of apple and pine trees, serve specific purposes, and can be altered by others and by natural forces. Accordingly, the speaker is aware of not only the organic processes of freezing and thawing that will destabilize the wall, but also of the “work of hunters” who deconstruct it for gaming purposes. This is a humble moment for Frost, for as much as he showcases the creative (and destructive) powers of man, this poem claims that those powers are subservient to those of the environment.

Even more unusual is this poem’s, inclusion of a *speaker* who questions the value of labor. Questions of value are typical to readings of Frost’s work, but it we have yet to see a mature speaker question labor’s purpose without finding validation on his own. This speaker, at best, accepts the cryptic rationale of his neighbor. Doing so makes a poem more realistic with regards to the previously mentioned traditional economic motivations for work. His materialistic concerns are cause for his perceiving of the wall building as a futile endeavor. Calling it a measure practicality is of no use. The speaker has no knowledge of “what I was walling in or out,” and thus his purpose is unclear. Like “Mowing’s” rejection of “easy gold at the hand of fay or elf” (8), the speaker of “Mending Wall” dispels the notion of a spiritual justification: “it’s not elves exactly” (37) here, either. Readers, through the

perspective of a speaker who is curiously compelled by some vague appeal to the work (somewhat resembling divine inspiration: “it’s not elves *exactly*,” but it’s not *not* elves), must defer to the poem’s other character, an old man who insists on the wall’s being built, explaining only that “Good fences make good neighbors.” He seems to be functioning on some higher moral principle, signified by a proverbial refrain that sounds so ironically naïve. Frost’s inclusion of this sage-like character is bizarre. The reader’s tendency is to align the writer with the speaker—previous poems have done this, and the speaker does, after all, concede to the labor for labor’s sake. But “Two Tramps” effectively destabilized where we think Frost’s sentiments lie. It is unclear who best represents Frost in this poem. It’s probably not the speaker who is reminiscent of the vagabonds for which the speaker of “Two Tramps” displayed so much contempt. To locate Frost entirely in such a figure as vague as the narrator is also unlikely, though he is such a compelling character. Just as the speaker faithfully assimilates to the unknown motivations of the elder, so does the reader. We are made to assume that he, again referencing his sage qualities, possesses knowledge that we do not.

Why, then, does Frost not inform us of those motivations? Perhaps because he is not interested in an opinion that is universal. Much has already been made of the poet’s insistence on individually derived inspiration labor. Such is the case for the elder man in “Mending Wall.” His otherwise unsatisfactory justification that “Good fences make good neighbors” warrants no explanation on these grounds. He would rather the speaker (and reader) decide for himself why the labor is necessary. That the speaker at least superficially surrenders his motivation to that of the elder is not to say he doesn’t labor earnestly. The good fences, good neighbors argument is tempting in its simple convictions alone. Its mystifying ambiguity is cause enough to inspire labor. What it implies is perhaps the defining

message of a poem that seems so torn between the questionable utility of various boundaries.

Ending with a third repetition of the adage, the poem proposes that both fences and neighbors are necessary to conducting meaningful work. Both can be natural or artificial; and, natural and artificial endeavors are important to displays of human creativity. The barriers in this poem—both the man-made wall and the natural divide between fields of various tree species—isolate objects as a way of defining their identities. Distinctive identities, ideally, will benefit from the production of meaningful, individually-inspired labor. To be neighborly, however, liberates one from the existential issues of narcissism that might otherwise be a byproduct of such individualized efforts. In “Mending Wall,” this is what permits collective effort. The two men can perform a mutually beneficial task *because* it is mutually beneficial. This, opposed to capitalist labors whose benefits are not equal for all parties. The trademark caveat for Frost is that such a task be conducted with natural objects. His tendency to present labor against an environmental backdrop does not necessarily presume that georgic labor is the only acceptable kind of work worth doing. It is simply Frost’s brand of individualism, which holds a relationship between man and environment (with its potential in supplying human creativity) in the highest regard. It allows him to best showcase humankind’s very primitive connections to power and creativity, in contrast with the industrial developments of the modernist era.

“Mending Wall’s” realization of good fences making good neighbors is an acknowledgement that humans can be a “natural” tool for one another. To work together for individual and, by extension of good neighborliness, group aggrandizement affords collaboration a place in Frost’s poetics, despite his insistence on isolated labor in other works. The results are still hard earned, and there still doesn’t necessarily need to be a

finished product. This poem is aware that the wall will have to be rebuilt next year; others assume that more wood will have to be chopped, trees and brush will grow back. All this is established when we arrive at “Mending Wall.” What stands out, and what is redeeming for a Frost’s deemed “anti-progressive,”<sup>28</sup> is how sociable and compassionate Frost can be while also being functioning as an icon of nonconformity.

To understand the motivation for such a drastic change, it may help to consider the goals of a poet. For all of his resolute conceit, Frost the poet by profession, presents a product that is transmissible to wide audiences. His poem entitled “An Invitation: The Pasture” directly appeals to its readers. Interestingly, it is one of his earliest published pieces, and it foregrounds an amiable tone with which we might approach the whole of Frost’s poetry (again, to the chagrin of his reviewers). It appears as an introduction to Frost’s first major collection of poems, *North of Boston* (1915), the publication from which the poems in this essay originated. In two short quatrains, the poem is welcoming to readers and laborers alike. Informed by such hospitable intentions (each stanza ends “you come too;” analysis forthcoming), it is a wonder why so many critics have label him as antisocial. The poem epitomizes, and predates, Frost’s identifying with “ragged” as opposed to “rugged individualism”<sup>29</sup> The latter marks an approach that is weathered and almost necessarily isolating. The former, though, proposes that bareness and exposure is a measure of inclusivity (think: the compassionate emotions elicited in the speaker when he sees the ragged tramps). This attitude is central to “The Pasture,” and by extension, to much of Frost’s oeuvre.

The social ideals of this poem require a casting off of traditions—a move Frost that should now be seen as of a trademark to Frost’s poetry. The speaker begins with a purposive

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departure from customary pastoral. With the first line, “I’m going out to clean the pasture spring,” the reader can immediately identify two possibilities. The literal reading is basic, and more apparent when reading this poem in isolation: the speaker is going outside to conduct the labor of clearing a water source for his livestock. This is nothing new for the georgic farmer or for the nature writer. But that this poem serves as a prefatory role, and that its alternative title is “An Invitation,” makes it quite possible that we’re hearing directly from a poet who has in mind a figurative message as well.

In this reading, the clearing of the spring now takes pastoral ideology as its referent. The aesthetics here are quite lovely, albeit hyperbolic: writing, and specifically nature writing, originates from a wellspring of bucolic simplicity. However, that source has been muddled and rendered unproductive due to its being saturated with leaves—those leaves being analogous with pages of a text. Frost’s poetic labor is situated at this unique impasse where writing needs a sort of spring-cleaning. His task is to, “only stop to rake the leaves away / (And wait to watch the water clear I may).” Thus, his ideal responsibility is to affect some change to a stale poetic landscape by clearing away its imposing sediments in literary culture. But, as he cannot simply eradicate the lineage of writers who, frankly, were *his* inspiration, his secondary obligation (albeit parenthetical) is in fact the more realistic one. While he’s out, he’ll also “fetch the little calf / That’s standing by the moth. It’s so you, / It totters when she licks it with her tongue.” The purpose of this task is vague. Why is he gathering livestock? Why specifically a calf? And why mention its (“the”) mother? Applied to the reading of this poem as a transmission of Frost’s literary intentions though, it works nicely. The newness of form that he is enlisting, represented by the calf (again a reference to the naturally-derived artistry of poetry), is borne out of older forms signified by the generation difference between calf and mother. In this way, Frost juggles idealism and rationality. He can aspire to poetic

revolution, but knows that his work does not exist in isolation. The vague work of clearing (and subsequently reinventing/refreshing) is inextricably coupled with the work of observing responses, by both the free-flowing spring and by his literary contemporaries.

Both stanzas reflect this with their movement from the claiming of personal intentions (marked by the repetition of “I”) to the communal conclusion(s) of “You come too.” Frost invites his readers to not just experience his literary work vicariously, but to use that work—individual, purposeful, and ambitious—as a model for their own work. We have seen, in “Mowing” and “Two Tramps” as in other works, that laborer prefers to labor alone. But “Mending Wall” asserts that one man’s work can have collective appeal. Singularity of labor is of equal importance here. It is essential to doing good work, *especially* if that work is to be creative in a more tradition (i.e. poetic) sense. But with the work done, and some product rendered—be it a cleared waterway or a poem—social phenomena ensue. The speaker “sha’n’t be gone long” for this to occur. The colloquial conjunction in this line is a signpost or a reminder for the speaker that he is in fact speaking to someone, not proselytizing on ideal principles. The word is almost a surprise, resulting in pause and the deletion of an iamb in lines 4 and 8 that makes room for the very simple and amicable invitation of “You come to.”

Frost is often this direct with his readers,<sup>30</sup> but rarely is he so welcoming to collective work. Being brought to the brink of action, much like in “Two Tramps,” Frost’s invitation is simple: to “come” along and bare witness. He invites us observe and trusts us to respond with labor, both traditional and creative. “An Invitation” ends up presenting an ambiguous opportunity to the reader, and figures them as a laborer in the process of critical analysis and

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30 See the “revelatory” mock-proverbs that round out “At Woodward’s Gardens,” “Mending Wall,” “Two Tramps,” in this paper. (Also “Hyla Brook,” “Design,” “Directive” etc.)



response. This requires him to eschew all proposals of how the reader should respond on the grounds that he staunchly resists what's proper (often a collective pursuit) in lieu of earnest individualism.<sup>31</sup> Good ideas (judged "good" as they are unsullied by suggestion and expectation) and actions are derived from basic observations experiences. This is true not just for the reader being addressed in "The Pasture." Frost reminds the reader with the last word of the poem, that he is going on a journey, "too."

These moments, in which the poet figuratively steps out of his own poems, are essential to establishing a comprehensive understanding of the importance of various forms of labor for Frost. They are plentiful, but they are merely implicit in comparison to the open-armed preface, "The Pasture." Furthermore, they stem from those strange moments when readers are so critical of him: when he evades action at a moment of climax or asks the reader to be satisfied with rhetorical questioning. These moments have already been laid out in this paper, but only with respect to the moral dilemmas they provoke—the seemingly futile work of "Mending Wall," the ambiguous intentions and debatably finished products of "Mowing" and "The Wood Pile," the old man's indecision in "Two Tramps." Frost must be aware of the competing biases at such moments, as are his readers. The responses are various, ranging from indictments of "creative deficiency" to defenses that "we might read this lack of closure not as a poetic faltering but rather as a disenchanting admission of [decision's] own impossible stakes."<sup>32</sup> But by holding Frost up as a self-described "ragged individualism," a paradoxical social recluse, his "faltering" is defensible in its suggestion that ethical decisions be left to individual judgment.

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31 By this logic, this paper's intentions are also unwarranted. However, this paper is partly concerned with simply defending Frost scholarship by justifying choices previously called into question.

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By not proposing a solution or explicitly explaining the motivation of his subjects, he leaves everyone (himself included, at times) wondering what all this labor is for. Here the speaker must be separated from the writer. There is always a subject who acts as a participant in the moralizing moment. It's easy to assume that the "rugged individualist" persona of Frost would identify with said characters. There is also always some sort of exploited object (ex. the hopelessly cavalier bird in "The Wood Pile" or the destitute vagabonds of "Two Tramps") that that persona will exploit for his own gain. Frost, the writer, is a third party presenting the various players without adjudicating. This requires reflective work of the mind, which is itself a facet of poetic labor. Ronda claims Frost's greatest contribution is the ability to draw "complex connections between the creative labor of poetry writing and the bodily labor of cultivating the ground."<sup>33</sup> This can certainly be supported by referring back to the dualistic readings of "The Pasture" in which a pasture spring serves as a metaphor for the wellspring of inspiration for georgic poetry. However, Ronda does not make an attempt to describe the connections; and Frost's labor poems, "The Pasture" included, don't always show their work.

After so much talk of labor, it is strange that so much of that work is inferred. These poems often describe moments immediately before or after labor, or otherwise describe the action in a few lines as a way of completing a scene. Physical labor, while immensely important as a passion that Frost ascribes great personal value to, is sometimes implicit, or at best a memory, hinted at by the objects in Frost's poetry that could only have gotten there by some "rugged individual." What is more important, if Frost is to appeal to readers, is the complexity of the scene itself—the entirety of its subjects and objects, its actions or lack thereof—and the ability to hold the concerns of its various players in mind. The creativity

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here is a comprehensive mis-en-scene established through poetic texts. In the well-known sonnet “The Oven Bird,” a bird laments the decay he sees at the arrival of fall by refusing to sing. The speaker takes on the bird’s perception: “The question that he frame in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing.” Without the creative faculty of language to describe and make sense of the devolving forms of natural objects, it perceives an existential dilemma in an alien autumnal scene. In another poem of negative images, “Hyla Brook” shows us that a human would never be so concerned. The poem resembles a Shakespearean sonnet, as it is written in iambic pentameter, and describes the speaker’s love for a local tributary. But Frost adds 2 lines to the typical sonnet form to redeem the image of a brook run dry. The speaker focuses not on the death of the waterway, but on what remains:

Its bed is left a faded paper sheet  
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—  
A brook to none but who remember long.  
This as it will be seen is other far  
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.  
We love the things we love for what they are.

The work of the human imagination is able to consider new possibilities in a way that the bird is unable to. For the bird, the world is merely experiential, and its actions are subjected entirely to the temporality of natural processes. The speaker of “Hyla Brook,” rendering his world textual by transforming dead leaves into a “faded paper sheet,” can transcend the existential issue of decay by relying on a memory of seasonality. Instead, “we,” humans who can actively manipulate the materials of any setting, embrace and even enact change. Our loving of “the things we love for what they are” is a result of our ability to be creative with them.

Admittedly, Frost’s poetics are simple in their approach. He relies on a lineage of georgic poets who themselves rely on an outmoded environmental imagination. And, his speakers operate on ideals that seem to ignore historical realities—of culture, of economy, of

social justice. That certainly does not mean, however, that the poet was unaware of the facts and hardships of his own era. Frost perceived the economic issues of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America as results of the shortcomings of his culture's imagination with regards to labor and the environment. By writing accounts of labor with idealistic simplicity he allows himself to play the role of social critic while suggesting an alternative to a stale worldview resulting from a literary aspiration and labor inspiration run dry. He proposes that there is satisfaction in the most basic displays of human power and creativity. The essence of that creativity is a being's ability to cause objects to interact, establishing a relationship between them. What is unique for humans, in reference to Frost's work, is the ability to reflect on those moments, not just in memory, but in re-writing those memories in poetry. While such commonplaces are so rudimentary, Frost advocates for a return to the fundamentals of man's power in hopes of inspiring a more productive, appreciative human agent. For him, the result is a collection of poems that require extensive mental work to remember and reformulate experiences into a composite of a deeply personal worldview. For his readers, Frost's work hopes to instill a culture of individuals with a lasting passion for creative labor.

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