

Reconciliation and Preconditions of Existence: Normative Mythological Foundations in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Traditional mythologies serve...four functions, the first of which might be described as the reconciliation of consciousness with the preconditions of its own existence.

Joseph Campbell, "The Four Functions of Mythology"

Campbell's elucidation of the purposes of mythology extends, quite naturally, to be a useful lens for organizing the primary functions of all narrative expression. Moreover, he subtly but convincingly upends the Aristotelian notion, per *Poetics*, of *mimesis*, or imitation, as being primary by listing his four functions progressively and placing the mimetic aspect second (with sociological and psychological aspects filling out the roster respectively). In other words, according to Campbell, first our art must map the figurative topography of our world. Only then can it proceed to depict the particularities thereof.

And it is a unified world, singular, that Campbell assumes. We might thereby conclude that this is lesson number one: no pluralizing of existence. His very progression insists upon it: before we can emplace the nuances of groupings and mind states, first we must agree upon the limitations of possibility. Milton's Satan may have had a point beyond casuistry when he said "The mind is its own place and in itself/Can make a Hell of Heav'n, A Heav'n of Hell," but he utters his words in the aftermath of a crushing defeat, and the fact of his expulsion will not be undone.

Now, within the context of our theme—moral formation—it may be rightly pointed out that Campbell's great philosophical forebear is Schopenhauer, he of the "world as will and idea." Indeed, especially following his popular apotheosis as mystic-for-our-time via his widely-disseminated interviews with Bill Moyers in the 1980s, Campbell's philosophical trappings became obscured to the point of confusion. But he very consistently remained throughout his career a genuine Pessimist in the Schopenhauer mold, i.e. one who affirms Idealism while insisting on the preponderance of suffering.

As such, it could be objected that Campbell's "preconditions" make for poor morality, since at best they are only an unyielding insistence upon the immutability of unpleasantness and at worst they are the animating anxieties of all manner of egomania. This would appear poor stuff out of which to formulate generalized rules for living, let alone such that may distinguish right from wrong.

But, of course, Campbell's affinity with Schopenhauer extends even to this qualifying extent: truth, sans ironical quotation marks, is concomitant with good. And even more remarkably, the aesthetic may be judged upon its fealty to truth, and therefore good. Thus, when a given creation

adheres to the preconditions of existence, it is or can be morally edifying and-- to a given extent--formative.

So, besides an insistence upon “one world,” what are some of the other preconditions Campbell identifies? We might assume, rather sweepingly, that mortality is a quite obvious precondition of existence. But that is overdrawn. In Campbell’s analysis—again mimicking Schopenhauer—there are at least three issues comprised by the general category of “death”: 1. The Sisyphean futility and inherent incoherence of existence; 2. Suffering that is necessitated by that precondition when matched with a human being’s tendency toward desire or vanity; 3. The ultimate crucible of choice between an embrace of the quixotic and a refusal of the struggle, i.e. “to be or not to be.”

Before I discuss some works by Frost in light of the foregoing, it might be useful to note that I do not intend to suggest that his work is singular in its reflection of these preconditions. On the contrary—I see all of these elements quite prominently in literature as varied as *the Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, all the novels of Hardy, Mann, and Cormac McCarthy, and much of the poetry of Wallace Stevens and John Koethe. In effect, I see some of these themes practically everywhere. Once one is conscious of the motif, it recurs so frequently that it cannot “unrecommend” itself.

In that, it reminds me of a story I once read about scientists who had identified a toxin in some soil samples and—hoping to provide some basis for expressing its threat to the environment—kept broadening their sample size. The toxin continued to turn up in every successive sample and in amounts the scientists had once thought aberrant. Eventually, after they had tested enough samples to account for an area the size of large state, they were forced to conclude that—though still undeniably deleterious of existence—the toxin was so ubiquitous that there was no basis for remedy. In other words, people just had to live with it.

In this, then, neither Frost nor his works is unique. Rather, my attention to his work is motivated by a conviction that it is uniquely distilled along lines highly similar to Campbell’s formulation of preconditions. That he “got there” apparently independent of Schopenhauer only, in my view, argues for the validity of the overall assertion, viz. that life comes with provisos with which we must contend and whose reality, if you will, is discrete from our formulations.

Frost was a therapeutic nihilist. Not officially, of course—that would be anachronistic. He probably never knew much of an Austrian intellectual café movement from the first few decades of the twentieth century, but he was a kindred spirit. In essence, the therapeutic nihilist asserts that the real ills of the world defy curing. You can draft legislation, start an NPO, donate to your church and the American Cancer Society, volunteer your life away, or even become an assassin, but you’ll never solve the real problems, because the real problems are *sic semper* (thus always; too bad Booth knew the Latin but didn’t get the point).

And his “real ills” are remarkably consistent in form and character with Campbell’s preconditions: that we live in one world independent of imaginative variation; that there is no comprehensible order in the world except that which we have the will to establish and maintain; that pain is an unavoidable consequence of our inevitable struggle; that we must choose between the negation of a futile existence and the embrace of a harrowing one. And to this last, Frost adds his own particularizing caveat: choices are forever, and you’ll never know with certainty whether the choice was correct. It was Seamus Heaney who once observed of Frost that his entire poetic manner seems to reside within the implied, fortitudinous challenge of “I’m ok; what about you?” That’s quite right, and the larger meaning behind Trilling’s famous characterization of Frost as “terrifying.” He takes us to the root of our fears via bucolic settings and by doing no more than inviting us to walk with him as he repairs the preconditions that lie figuratively yet insistently in field, swale, tree, and wall.

Upon the point of an ultimately irreducible world, we begin with “Mending Wall,” a 45-line dramatic monologue perhaps most famous in non-literary circles for being among the very few pieces of literature ever cited in a Supreme Court decision (1995, *Plaut v. Spendthrift Farms*; Justices Scalia and Breyer). But we consider it here for its deftly constructed rhetoric of inevitability underpinned with a deliciously fatalistic irony.

For those unfamiliar with the text, in sum it features a springtime ritual of repairing a rock wall undertaken by two neighbors. One, the narrator, at first ruminates upon and then begins to question aloud the obvious redundancy, futility, and dubious reasonableness of this ritual. Two lines in particular underscore his stance: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” repeated twice (line 1 and line 35), and, in answer to his neighbor’s aphoristic insistence that “good fences make good neighbors” (lines 27 and 45), the question, “*Why* do they make good neighbors?” (line 30). The other neighbor is portrayed rather unflatteringly by our speaker as an atavistic and insular character, an “old-stone savage armed” (line 40) who “moves in darkness” (41). That he is given the last word—a re-emphasis of his aphorism—is often taken as a kind of defeat for the more enlightened perspective of the narrator.

But the somewhat simple moralism of a thinker defeated by the intransigence of a rube is, of course, a classic Frostian red herring and undone—in this case—by a single fact: it is the narrator who initiates the ritual (line 12: “I let my neighbor know beyond the hill”). This single, ironic line is devastating to any reading of the monologue that would regard the narrator as somehow distinct or excluded from the ritual and all it embodies symbolically. For all of his cleverness and impish prodding of his comparatively slow-witted companion, he is not exempted from either the necessity of wall repair nor its implications.

Among those implications is of course the idea that boundaries—however motivated by a savage or even feral suspicion of “other”—are pragmatic necessities that survive even the deconstruction of their practical justification. But further is the implication of ineradicable

boundaries themselves. Wanted or not, justified or not, comprehensible or not—they persist, unmoved by mental acuity or imaginative desire.

At times Frost can be much more direct and absolute in such pronouncements. An example would be the lyrical “Nothing Gold Can Stay”:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

A summary of the rhetoric itself is virtually a synopsis of cyclical determinism: nature, first, early, only, hour, subside, sink, grief, down, nothing. The only qualifying words attach to the hopeful aspects of the first four lines; the last four are causally inevitable and absolute. This sketch, if you will, invites no exception.

But it is my view that Frost’s most devilishly ensnaring poem—in the context of binding us, as it were, within given confines—is the sonnet “Design.” Cleverly mimicking the stanzaic arrangement of an Italian sonnet (octave/sestet) while incorporating the internal trappings of the English variety (*ottava rima*, closing couplet, and tripartite perspective), the poem depicts a grotesque scene that for the speaker begs several impertinent (and theological) questions. A white spider has taken up residence in a flower (“the heal-all,” or *prunella vulgaris*) that provides camouflage only by chance: normally blue, it is a mold, or blight, that has changed its hue. Within the spider’s grasp is a dead or dying white moth. The sestet says it all:

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?
If design govern in a thing so small.

(lines 9--14)

Rather like his spider, Frost has us trapped as the moth between two unpalatable conclusions: random chance that can yield such unlikely horror or determinism that yields certain destruction. And while many have tended to emphasize the cosmological ambiguity the series of questions recommends, I'm more compelled by the reinforcing message the prosody, which is only cosmetically ambiguous, delivers. The poem itself is an ingenious and inescapable trap, and it would seem that preferring the possibility of chance is an accession to illusion, a refusal of the weight of the evidence.

What is often considered Frost's first "great" poem—"Mowing"—makes clear his position regarding the necessity of the Will to Order, i.e. the primacy of imaginative exertion in negating or ordering the inherently impersonal, inchoate, and indeed chaotic nature of this unified reality we call life. "Mowing" was the central piece in Frost's first official collection (he had previously published a chap book, *Into My Own*), *A Boy's Will* (1913), and is also an irregular sonnet as well as the poem he most often cited as demonstrative of his theory of the "sound of sense."

The two "halves," if you will, of "Mowing" form an argument. The octave is a rumination. While describing the setting and action in which a scythe is being wielded on an overgrown pasture, there is a conspicuous accumulation of words that indicate absence, loneliness, inarticulacy, and isolation: "never," "one," "whispering" (three times in variance), "not" (three times), "myself," "perhaps" (twice), "lack," and "no." The sestet answers the implication of these terms:

Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak

To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,

Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers

(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

(lines 9—14)

The metaphor is unignorable: just as the purpose of mowing—a difficult labor that achieves no permanence—is an ordering that must be accepted as self-justifying, so all forms of laborious "ordering" are to be regarded. What is achieved is a form of truth, and Frost is very pointed in rejecting alternatives (the speaker derides "gift(s) of idle hours" and "easy gold of fey or elf," i.e. romanticism/escapism) as inferior or illusory. The only true alternative—a Hobson's choice per Frost—is chaos.

In order to discover why Frost found chaos, as such, so repulsive, we must look at one his last great poems, “Desert Places,” written three decades after “Mowing.” Here, utilizing a rather disjunctive set of four quatrains that echo yet elide the regressive *terza rima* form he famously employed in “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” there is another contemplation of a snow-filled vista. The circumstance is unclear, and I’ve often thought the speed of the observations coupled with the distinct discontinuity suggest a passenger on a train (as opposed to the stationary horse rider of “Stopping by Woods”), but at any rate we begin with a rather terse description of a barren winter scene:

Snow falling and night falling, fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

(lines 1—4)

The speaker then broadens his consideration to the surrounding woods and countryside, noting he too is a part of this tableau (“The loneliness includes me unawares”). The third stanza succumbs to the incipient depression of the second’s projection of loneliness (“lonely as it is, that loneliness/Will be more ere it will be less”), and we appear to be headed toward a rare conclusion for a Frost poem: defeat.

But the fourth stanza enacts a bizarre turn:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer some
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(lines 13—16)

First, there is the jarring invocation of “they” after all the emphasis of loneliness. And who are *they*, exactly? Astronomers, apparently, given “their” alleged pronouncements concerning stars and vast emptiness. But second, we arrive unexpectedly back where Frost so often takes us—but this time with notable truculence: *that’s big...but I’m bigger than that*.

In effect, then, Frost chastens in “Desert Places” the prophets of science, in the form of astronomers, for asking the wrong questions. Instead of “Are we all alone?” or “Is this [material] all there is?”, “he’s rather asking “Will I be or remain equal to the task of meaningful ordering?” In saying “they cannot scare me” and “I have it in me,” he is saying that he has always known that nothingness was the consequence, the default setting, of the world writ large. The only real issue is whether imagination is capable of combating it.

But that combat, if you will, takes a toll, and just as the entropic decay affects his mending wall, Frost depicts the decline of will in “After Apple Picking.” And that inevitable weariness that ends with death brings us to the subject of suffering born of desire. The speaker in “After Apple Picking” admits his condition and qualifies it as consequential of his ambition:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired
(lines 27—29)

If we take the harvesting of the apples as metaphorical of the development of knowledge—and the configuration of the world within an intelligible frame—we may interpret these lines as something of a self-admonition, though one redolent of futile lament: if I hadn’t gone at this quite so hard, perhaps I wouldn’t be at the point of collapse. But, of course, as we already know, Frost doesn’t really see a genuine alternative, and the speaker goes off to his slumber not knowing whether his figurative rest will be either temporary—like the cyclical hibernation of a woodchuck—or “just...human,” i.e., paradoxically both brief and permanent per the tenor and vehicle of the symbol.

“To Earthward” offers a contrasting attitude to the sleepy defeatism of “After Apple Picking.” First of all, it is sensual and robust, even defiantly so. The almost-lewd sexuality inherent in words like “love,” “lips,” “touch,” “flow,” “musk,” “ache,” “spray,” “stain,” “stiff,” “sore,” “hand,” “hard,” and “length” is obviously intentional, unusual for Frost (although not without concord—see “The Silken Tent”), and almost always shocking when pointed out to my students. But the poem is “about” more than rough sex; rather, it’s more fully about an attitude of mature embrace of the pain of existence. Campbell has written of initiation rituals in what he terms the “primitive” world.

...where direct confrontations with brutal bloody facts of life are inescapable and unremitting . [The ceremonies] to which growing youngsters are subjected are frequently horrendous, confronting them in the most appalling, vivid terms, with experiences...of this monstrous thing that is life: and always with the requirement of ‘yea,’ with no sense of either personal or collective guilt, but gratitude and exhilaration (180)

In reading “To Earthward,” one recognizes that Frost would not think such ceremonies primitive at all. On the contrary, the speaker dismisses the pleasures of his youth, when he “lived on air” and “craved strong sweets.”

Now no joy but lacks salt,
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain
Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove.
When stiff and sore and scarred
I take away my hand
From leaning on it hard
In grass and sand,
The hurt is not enough:
I long for the weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.
(lines 17—32)

There is indeed exhilaration and gratitude in these lines, the sanguine belief that the diminishment of nerve endings and taste buds that physically necessitates “harder” impulses and stimuli are a trustworthy analogue to a spiritual existence that is closer to truth, an undeniable good.

But I would be remiss if I did not delve a bit into what I see as Frost's addition to the list of preconditions—what we may call the cruel inscrutability of choices. The theme is everywhere, frankly, in his oeuvre: in the playful invitation of "The Pasture" ("You come too"); the desperate threat of the scorned husband in "Home Burial" ("I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will!"); the casual misogyny of "The Sound of Trees" (Some day...I shall be gone"); and most especially in the dramatic turning away from disillusion at the end of "Stopping by Woods" ("But I have promises to keep"). Frost's personae are frequently poised like casually tossed coins above a determinative earth. That he found choices—particularly what he termed possibly "reckless" choices (in "The Sound of Trees")—so ubiquitous and therefore unavoidable is readily apparent by their prominence throughout his work. But the poem that most thoroughly explores the issue, and most vividly demonstrates the cruel aspect of what we may call human choices, is "The Road Not Taken."

It is among his most well-known works. I seldom go long in my life without meeting a relative stranger who, upon learning that I am a Frost scholar, will readily recite the poem's famous opening pentet:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

(lines 1—5)

There was a time when I detested the poem for this very reason. There was something about its popularity that made it seem shallow to me, and I found it relatively easy to ignore in my studies, secure in my conviction that it was obviously not a "serious" piece of work, that it was silly in the way that the Stones' "Satisfaction" is silly: a jokey, half-baked idea that took on a life of its own once it reached the public. So I rejected it...until I had an epiphany.

I was re-reading Lathem's full collection of Frost's works in preparation for my dissertation defense, and one day I turned the page and there it was: "The Road Not Taken." From somewhere inside the voice of Ricardo Montalban as Khan in the second *Star Trek* movie—channeling Melville's Captain Ahab-- leaped into my mind: "With my last breath...I spit at thee." Nonetheless, I drew a sigh, and read, and...started to cry. The tears were dotting the page before I was even aware of how immensely sad I had suddenly become. Not knowing what had come over me, I read again...and began to sob even harder. I was at work, and my door was open onto a heavily-trafficked hallway, so I was suddenly in terror of being seen. I packed up

my things and went home, still hitching in my chest the whole way there. And I still, even after I gathered myself, had no idea what had just happened.

More than half suspecting that I was losing my mind—perhaps from the stress of the dissertation process—I decided to go for a long walk and try to get a handle on what to do. Should I seek help? Remember, as far as I was concerned this was no more sensible than bursting into tears over a beer jingle. Clearly I was unstable. Then, about a mile on my walk into what was, in fact, a yellow wood, it hit me: “The Road Not Taken” wasn’t shallow. It never had been; I was.

The key is in the last stanza:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference
(lines 16—20)

Contrary to popular interpretation, “The Road Not Taken” is not an affirmation of independence or self-determination (one reason why it is often misnamed “The Road Less Travelled”). Rather, it is a ruthlessly vivid and achingly pure meditation on an unavoidable fact: we must and will choose among and between incompatible directions in life. We will always remember having made the more excruciating choices, and we will likely be certain that some difference—notably uncharacterized in the poem—has been effected. But what we cannot—indeed shall not—ever know, is whether we chose “correctly.”

So why did I cry? Because I had just made an excruciating life choice. My then wife had left me, moved to a far northern state, and then in effect said, “Join me, or say goodbye.” I thought about it as long as she would allow, which turned out to be the better part of autumn. Then I said goodbye. But I wasn’t in any way certain that I was right. In fact, I’d say I rather more suspected pride had corrupted my deliberations. And reading “The Road Not Taken” that day made me realize that I would never know, that—as Frost puts it—“way leads on to way” (line 14), and not only was that alternative path soon to be an overgrown and distant mystery but also that I could torture myself for the rest of my days about some alternative “me” living out a different (“better” was the real fear) existence on that path.

And though I was not a child in years, I shamefully realized Frost had shown me that until very recently I remained one in understanding. Whether by chance or design, I had managed to live over thirty years without making any truly hard choices. And now that I had made one, I was caught in an illusion—perhaps that I could go this way and realistically imagine my way in the

other, but also that in keeping the memory of the divergence vivid I might find a future intersection between the two. I saw with vividness that day that it could not be—“way leads on to way,” and any alternative is pure illusion.

So—to hopefully bring this full circle—when I assert that Campbell and Frost provide ample evidence for moral formation in literature, which I can only interpret in my limited fashion and according to their lights to mean “a sense of what is true and therefore, at minimum, usefully good,” it is with both an awareness of the literature and—just as importantly—because I have experienced the good within their stern and admittedly forbidding medicine. And while I don’t feel it is quite as cynical as my favorite line from *The Princess Bride*—“Life is pain; anyone who says differently is selling something”—it is tough stuff. It asks if you have the courage to accept what life is, as it is, and still say, “I’m ok. How about you?”

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