

# Meta-Meditation in Robert Frost's "The Wood-Pile," "After Apple-Picking," and "Directive"

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IN "EDUCATION BY POETRY," published in *The Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* in 1931, Robert Frost invoked the intricacies, including the limits, of metaphor as knowledge. "All metaphor breaks down somewhere," he argued. "That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going" (*Prose* 41). By that time, Frost had "lived with" metaphor through many books. His early poems, which he had collected and published sixteen years before, had displayed a sophisticated sense of the limits of metaphor, a careful testing of allegorical possibilities, and an inclination to expand narrative models through rhetorical motifs other than those already enshrined in lyric conventions. The best of the poems Frost would write in the next two decades would go further by making rhetorical self-critique an intrinsic structural and thematic element of their poetics.

"The Wood-Pile" and "After Apple-Picking," both from *North of Boston* (1914), illustrate the two poles of a language of meditation drawn, respectively, from Dante and the tradition of allegorical landscape, and from Wordsworth and the romantic acknowledgement of the otherness of landscape. Each poem confronts comparable problems in signification: the limits of allegory (a walk in winter woods, a journey over a rutted country road), the unruly complexity of the symbol (the wood-pile, the Grail), and the loss of religious faith and iconography and the difficulty of finding a comparably significant but secular language. These problems signal an apparent exhaustion of lyric conventions and encourage Frost to use his characteristic irony to deconstruct the meditative voice, expose it as a fiction, and renew the lyric sense

of wonder and discovery by invoking a speech-oriented language (a dialogic, rather than monologic, voice) more informal, less conventionally poetic, more intimate than the language it displaces. That is, the renewal proceeds by visibly displacing one language-model for another. Frost, unlike Williams, for example, does not refuse established lyric models, but escapes the conventional language of meditation, monologue, and lyric ecstasy without entirely abandoning established formal paradigms.

This essay will examine these two poems to trace the process of confronting, bracketing, and refusing the same conventional modes of meditation (allegory, symbolism) they initially invoke, their critique of or establishment of the limits of these modes, and their turn towards renewal through alternate language-modes. It will then consider how "Directive," as a paradigm of Frost's later poetics, draws upon a more integrated model of meditation that evokes neither allegory nor symbol as a mystifying function. From the start, this poem poses the dialogic mode as an alternative to the earlier monologues. In "Directive," the speaker's imagination (which Bakhtin would recognize here as self-consciously dialogic) posits an ongoing critique of its own processes as a proper meditative model.

"The Wood-Pile" opens by invoking Dante's motif of the lost soul, the wanderer in the dark wood. The speaker warns us that like many other allegorical landscapes this one is no place in particular and cannot be readily named, too formal with its "view . . . all in lines / Straight up and down of tall slim trees / Too much alike to mark or name a place by. . . ." Such places, lacking adequately differentiated signifiers, typically entrap the traveller, and the reader might well expect this speaker to fall prey to self-doubts, misgivings of the sort that suggest that inner and outer landscapes are actually one. Frost's wood is frozen, grey, and snowy, and by lacking clear definition it threatens the absorption or erasure of the self.

The speaker is neither passive nor desperate. He offers no particular moral dilemma, displays no fear, and asserts a role in his own salvation by positing the choice between turning back and going on. Also, no leopard—a figure clearly not of the waking world—leads him on, though another natural emblem,

an otherwise undistinguished "small bird," flies before him, neither leading him nor quite fleeing from him, as if it toyed with its own allegorical role which it cannot quite fulfil. The speaker implies, in his playful, uncommitted personification of the bird, that its reluctance to name itself derives from its reluctance to expose its inner life, which centres, for the moment, on fear. The speaker assumes that the bird believes he is being chased for his feather, his metonymic self, "like one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself." One can conceive of someone foolish enough to take all landscapes, allegorical or otherwise, as personal to himself; but this Wordsworthian stance is not Frost's, and his refusal of this relatively simple link between being and nature redirects the poem from allegory to a less conventionally predicated mode.

By invoking the convention of the allegorical landscape, Frost suggests the possibility of constructing his poem entirely within a structural certainty in which every motif, every emblem finds a place and contributes towards the reconciliation of self and other. But Frost has a delicate sense of scale. Dante's immensely complex poem accomplishes its task only by invoking the entire structure of medieval Catholic theology and shaping it to the even more inclusive convention of landscape allegory. Frost, who always insists that the play of language is central to poetry, loves to tease the reader by setting up expectations of grandeur that if actually attempted in so brief and colloquial a poem would surely fail.

"The Wood-Pile" turns abruptly, takes "One flight out sideways," as it were, and forgets its allegorical beginnings as the speaker forgets the bird and lets "his little fear / Carry him off the way I might have gone." The bird, that is, delves further into the allegorical landscape, but the speaker, alerted by his discovery, enters a new mode.

As some versions of literary history would have it, poetry altered its course in the romantic era by positing the symbol as a logocentric repository of meaning outside of language. "The Wood-Pile" somewhat wryly critiques that version of literary history, and critiques as well both the convention the poem first invokes then abandons and the newer convention it turns to and

gently mocks. Paul de Man notes that the earlier romantics resisted the temptation to collapse being and the natural object into a single entity or sign (15). Wordsworth toyed with the idea that in place of a firm grounding of faith, imagination, by means of a self-reflexive poetic language, might empower the sign with the presence of nature. But he well understood the paradoxical quality of his endeavour, and the *Prelude* displays his awareness of the negating power as well as the nostalgia of the imagination.

In "The Wood-Pile," at the very moment of empowerment, Frost undercuts the utility of the wood-pile as a symbol of human presence by recalling that, like all signifiers, it has something of allegory in it—in this instance, the bird, which "went behind it [the wood-pile] to make his last stand." He also reminds us that the symbol, unlike the allegorical emblem, embodies, rather than merely suggesting metonymically, its own history. Though isolated in its human import, the wood-pile is the monolith that represents all history, all endeavour, all made things, and is, therefore, "older sure than this year's cutting, / Or even last year's or the year's before." Yet isolate, human-made, and symbolic though it is, the wood-pile lacks stability, and is losing its own sense of origin by returning to nature and surrendering its logocentric status. Already "Clematis / Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle," reclaiming it as the bark warps off it and it deconstructs into its natural status. This disintegrative process generates the tropes of impoverishment Richard Poirier finds in this poem (140). The woodpile, claimed from nature and therefore claimed by Being, is slowly reverting to a simpler form of sign, returning to the world of allegory, in de Man's sense, in which the primal and ethical distinction between the mind and the world is relatively clearly defined, but in which metaphor, deprived of a central shaping role, seems impoverished.

Frost's paradoxical moralism—which argues 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"—both conceals and reveals the gap between being and nature by calling into question the very process of making and naming. What is the use of doing tasks at all if one spends oneself only to

abandon and forget the results of one's labour? The answer is the poem's critique of its own process of hacking a symbol—the wood-pile—from conventional allegorical motifs. In concealing its refusal to cross the gulf between sign and nature, this symbolic decaying wood-pile exposes its—and the poem's—self-deconstruction. The wood-pile completes the failure of signification by refusing to warm its author and instead warming, "as best it could," the original allegorical landscape it seemed, momentarily, to endow with a human presence.

The consequence of this shift from allegory to symbol is to suggest that neither language-mode is sufficient to engender a poetic sufficient to overcome the nostalgia for the human world, the primacy of the external object. "The Wood-Pile" is a poem about the search for origins and the limitations of the most obvious attempts to reconcile nature and the mind. It is also a poem about the power of language to invoke the very idea of presence, an idea that if not realized in fact is capable of generating imagery that is so evocative as to demonstrate that metaphor-generated illusion can as generously engage the sensuous being as the actual presence of the evoked object. The opening line—"Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day"—signals a pattern of open vowel sounds that corresponds to the open view through the leafless trees. The imagery, including the closing picture of the wood-pile decaying in the middle of the swamp, corresponds to a sense of expanding possibilities. The forgetfulness of the woodcutter corresponds, the speaker believes, to a larger sense of purpose. Renewal through language, then, is not the property of particular language-models (allegory or symbol) but a larger argument shaped by and around their limitations. By exploiting and conflating lyric conventions rather than attempting to abandon them, Frost argues from their relationship; in miniaturizing a literary-historical model (the displacement of allegory by symbolism), he replicates the expansive history of the attempt to resolve through language and imagination the isolation of the mind. In doing so, he implicitly argues that the positing of fictional modes of representation affirms the practical utility of the language of imagery to engage the senses and

sustain at least a momentary illusion of natural or human presence.

"After Apple-Picking," with its irregular metre and rhyme scheme (described by Reuben Brower [24-25]) and its dreamy, almost surreal atmosphere, is in some ways uncharacteristic of Frost. In acceding to the proposal, in Poirier's words, that "only labour can penetrate to the essential facts of natural life," the speaker invokes and then, after achieving a degree of satiation, refuses the iconographic status of the apple as repository of the plenitude of desire. Though the apparatus for engaging this symbol (his "two-pointed ladder," a metaphor of metaphor, as Poirier points out [295]) remains in place "sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still," the speaker has exhausted through satiation his passion for everything the apple has represented, its entire history as a signifier. But because the speaker has already indulged himself, because he admits he "desired" the "great harvest," the poem has to acknowledge fully the illusion of totality the apple (and the very concept of symbolism) embodies before freeing itself from that no longer satisfactory goal.

In reviewing and finally rejecting the totalization represented by apple-picking, the speaker has to invoke and face the possibility that without the totalizing synthesis of the symbol consciousness itself might depart and leave him in a state too uncertain to name. It would be sleep, but whether sleep could function as a metaphor of death, or whether it would be death itself, he cannot say. The difficulty occurs early in the poem, when the speaker, immediately upon recognizing that the apple is losing its grip on him ("I am done with apple-picking now"), begins "drowning off." This is not ordinary exhaustion, but, he explains, is linked to a shift in vision, a new way of looking at the world:

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
 I got from looking through a pane of glass  
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
 And held against the world of hoary grass.

That is, he holds against (both in the sense of comparison and of bearing a grudge) the "world of hoary grass" the very possibility of a fresher way of seeing, an unconventional poetics. But he

cannot sustain it: the satiation of the apple-world of symbol, determinate meaning, and unquenchable desire was heavy upon him this morning, and he "let it fall and break."

Nevertheless, he had already, before the day had fully gotten underway, determined to refuse the illusionary desire, regardless of consequences. Therefore, later in the day, although exhausted, he retains the sense of strangeness. Sleep, postulated before he dropped the pane of ice-glass, brings upon him a still more fully saturated vision of apples. This vision compels him to face the materiality of the apple, "every fleck of russet," to suggest not so much its actuality as the futility of the totalizing desire that induced the "great harvest" with its "rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in." The vision of apples thus invokes an incoherent, disarticulate language of desire mocking itself and him.

The consequences of surrender to symbolic desire are both physical and metaphysical. The former is relatively mild—"My instep arch not only keeps the ache, / It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round." The sense-impressions linger with relatively little pain, but the psychic drift from investment in the symbol to satiation and loss of faith is the centre of strangeness in the poem and has potentially dire implications. If, as Poirier argues, "the penetrating power of labour can be evinced in 'apple-picking' or in writing or reading about it, and any one of these activities brings us close to seeing how apples and all that surround them can be symbolic of the spirit," then to admit to having had "too much / Of apple-picking" is not to deny the spirit but to refuse the necessity or the efficacy of the symbol (294). It is also to question, agnostically, whether the symbol can effectively link the ineffable to this world. The speaker now doubts the earlier promise of fulfilment, a kind of pact between himself and the apple crop. He concedes that the gap between consciousness and object is intolerable, and that his desires, too, because external and illusory, conceal the psychological and linguistic inadequacies of his investment in the apple as signifier. As Poirier argues, "the intensity of labour has brought him in touch with a vocabulary of 'apples,' 'trees,' 'scent,' 'ladders,' 'harvests,' of ascents and descents that make it impossible for him not to say

one thing in terms of another" (298); but this conscious recognition of the necessity of metaphor only generates an exhausting self-consciousness. The vision of a new poetics, glimpsed briefly that morning, has only confirmed the speaker's sense that the physical world has failed to embody itself in the symbols his consciousness has attempted to possess.

Not even "ten thousand thousand fruit to touch" can provide enough sense-impression to overcome this growing drowsiness, this feeling of loss. Yet in refusing the iconic potency of the apple-symbol the speaker has opened himself to a new poetic, and with it, a growing awareness of the fragility of the physical world. The apples, after all, are only so much pulp:

For all  
That struck the earth,  
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,  
Went surely to the cider-apple heap  
As of no worth.

However, the failure of apples to maintain their formal value under slightly altered conditions suggests to the speaker his own status as formal construct, which his refusal of symbolic desire has called into question. When he says he "can see what will trouble / This sleep" of his, "whatever sleep it is," he reminds us that by deconstructing his symbolic desire he has called into question the very nature of consciousness and being. The woodchuck that if present "could say whether it's [the speaker's sleep] like his" is absent primarily in the sense that everything else is absent: not an actual component of the sign, the very nature of which has been exposed here. The difference between the woodchuck's "Long sleep" and "just some human sleep" is that the animal, without the gift and curse of language, has no measure for his sleep, no desire (even to wake), nothing but the negation of his vision of harvest. The speaker of the poem, on the other hand, cannot say whether he, too, will retain his sense of loss, his absence of desire, and his awareness of the illusory nature of the symbol, or whether he will revert to the desire-burdened state of "human sleep" (the previously established form of which is "winter sleep" informed by "the scent of apples"), whatever its metaphorical consequences.



The exhaustion of the romantic-lyric convention of the symbol finds its consequence where it begins: in the speaker's awareness, or lack of awareness, of his own state of being. By displacing the language-model of the symbol with only a fleeting glimpse (through a sheet of ice, a most tentative form of matter) of an alternate linguistic or metaphysical situation, he abandons one of the basic ways in which humans become self-aware: by emotional and rational investment in language. The dreaminess of the poem, the gradual regression towards sleep, is the slope or angle of the speaker's declining sense of self. Renewal, perhaps, would be a function of sleep, but, if so, it would only be a human sleep, not the more primal alternative of erasure evinced by the absent woodchuck.

It is no accident that the title of the poem following "After Apple-Picking" in *North of Boston* is "The Code." For Frost, a code is always open to question, but he also recognizes its social and psychological utility. While "After Apple-Picking" deconstructs the code-relation between the symbol of desire and actual desire, "The Code" examines the semiology of social relations. The poems therefore complement each other—one by focussing on the psychological or metaphysical link between sign and psyche, the other by considering the social link between sign-user and audience. However, unlike the "town-bred farmer" who is unaware of the code he has violated, the speaker of "After Apple-Picking" deliberately, out of respect for and acknowledgement of the rift between desire and the symbol of desire, rejects a code to which he has previously committed himself. By doing so, he opens himself to new possibilities, new poetics, but he also risks, in sleep, re-conquest by the simple and perhaps necessary human mystification that makes language possible but condemns it to inadequacy.

Critics such as Marie Borroff have noted the prevalence of a more elaborate and Latinate vocabulary in Frost's later meditative poems, particularly in "Directive" (50). The presence of this vocabulary indicates a more analytical mode; the speaker of this complex poem more fully engages the reader by exposing his thought-process as the basis of narration. The result is particularly intimate and dramatic, and the poem has earned much

admiration. Randall Jarrell found it so compelling that he quoted it in its entirety in "To the Laodiceans" (46-48). And Frank Lentricchia argues that the poem makes a large thematic claim on the reader: "'Directive' is Frost's *summa*, his most compelling and encompassing meditation on the possibilities of redemption through the imagination, the one poem that a critic of Frost must sooner or later confront if he hopes to grasp the poet's commitment to his art as a way of saving himself, and to understand the astonishing unity of his life's work at last fully revealed here in this major poem of his later career" (112).

Lentricchia's powerful assertion is rhetorically almost as delicately constructed a performance as Frost's. By defining for "Directive" a powerful thematic and authorial hegemony, this statement becomes an extension of the poem, part of its history. The present essay will not attempt to controvert this claim, but merely will demonstrate an important facet of the poem's rhetorical strategies, its systematic rejection of the various claims of trope in order to gain the reader's confidence, its embrace of a dialogic stance in which the speaker directs his attention simultaneously inward towards the meditative resources of the language and outward with the social resources of rhetoric.

The opening lines suggest how this doubleness will work, presenting backward and forward movements as one, as temporality and direction refuse to coincide:

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off  
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,  
 There is a house that is no more a house  
 Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
 And in a town that is no more a town.

The ironic series of doublings, the "house that is no more a house," the "farm that is no more a farm" and the "town that is no more a town," is the designated predicate, while the combined attention of speaker and reader, the "us" of the first line, for whom together "all of this" is "now too much," in dialogic mutuality forms the subject.

Lines 8-40 explicate the narrative trope of the movement along the broken road to the ironic discovery of what the speaker already knows is there, the bogus grail-goblet from which one might drink from the brook that is "cold as a spring as yet so near its source." Though the destination is entirely known to the speaker, this extended action of the dialogic subject demonstrates that the designated predicate, despite the repetition of doubling (line 45, for example: "Then for the house that is no more a house"), is anything but a fixed or known quality. For one thing, as in any version of the grail legend, the search for what Lentricchia calls "redemption through imagination" predominates over ostensibly religious motives, so that the speaker's attitude cannot be determined by the nature of the predicate but only by the verb-movement towards revelation. The discovery of that attitude, an exposure of the speaker's psyche, is part of the process of modifying the predicate, not of the axiomatic, though dialogic and therefore complex, subject.

The subject, though, does divide and reunite at various points before it finds wholeness in the closure. It splits into traveller and guide in line eight ("the road there, if you'll let a guide direct you . . .") and suggests that the relationship between them is socially benign (" . . . who only has at heart your getting lost") rather than structurally disruptive. But "getting lost" is a step towards finding one's self, and further, a way of linking more indissolubly the two dialogists, who will become "whole again beyond confusion" when they drink from the brook that is "too lofty and original to rage." Finally cementing the relationship, fully enclosing the dialogue between speaker and addressee, is the purpose of this poem, and the journey over the broken road that "May seem as if it should have been a quarry" is a rhetorical one in that its main purpose is to impose the flow of dialogic narrative on the uneasy structures of tropes.

This dialogic narrative, established by the simple dramatic device of speaking to the reader as in an inclusive and confidential way, requires the supposition of a readerly memory similar to the speaker's—an understanding of the "all this" in the first line. It also requires confidence that the reader will share a faith in the ahistorical notion of a lost golden age in which the details of life

(or death, like the details of "graveyard marble sculpture") were never fully and cumbersomely thrust upon the beholder. Surely these details are historical, but memory has fictionalized them. The utopian memory, which creates as well as recalls the golden age, thrives on this kind of fiction. This remaking through memory recalls the conventional invocation to the imagination that commonly frames myth, legend, and folk tale, an appeal for the imagination to displace worldliness. Yet the landscape of the subsequent journey is doggedly of this world, and the speaker's fanciful tropes (the personification of the "enormous Glacier," for instance) only serve to remind the reader that this poem is struggling to impose unreality on what is insistently actual.

The exposure of this struggle, and the obviously fanciful quality of the chosen tropes, weaken their force and make it possible for the speaker to remind the reader not to take any of this too seriously ("You must not mind . . ." "Nor need you mind . . ."). This suggests one of Frost's admonitions in "Education by Poetry" about the metaphor: "unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere" (*Prose* 39). The speaker of this poem has set about the task of educating the reader in the dangers of metaphor, which he will overcome for their mutual benefit. The threat of these tropes of presence, their coolness, the "ordeal" they present in their watchfulness, their very occurrence in the poem, challenge the rhetorically intimate relationship the early lines of the poem attempt to presume. The problem is to establish this intimacy of speaker and reader despite the tendency of language to isolate and subjectify individual experience. In this regard, the Grail is the most challenging element in the poem, yet the one most subject to vanquishing by tone.

For the establishment of a trope-defying tone is the key to the rhetorical success of the poem. Self-discovery, which in this poem requires the witness, if not the actual connivance, of the reader, will come only by defining the voice of the self as one that can confront and survive the various attempts at closure presented by successive heavily-burdened tropes. The Grail is the most burdened, but before that the speaker and reader together have to

run a gauntlet of absorptive, closure-inducing tropes. The Glacier, capitalized like a god, is a trope of time and other abstract dimensions; the cellar holes, which first as a group and then as a particular, more fully-historicized instance, dominate the bulk of the poem, embody the failure of culture to maintain its temporary dominance over nature.

The forty cellar holes first encountered represent the continued peopling of this quasi-enchanted backland with ghosts. But their ghostliness is caught up and merged with the insistent life of the woods so that the vague remnants of culture shade off into the heartier presence of nature. The speaker, by encouraging the reader and himself to "Make yourself up a cheering song of how / Someone's road home from work this once was," invites consideration of the domestic quality of actual human presence, which so entirely lacks the mystery suggested by the cellar holes as to separate them entirely from human significance. Thus the trope of lost culture, by its present mysterious indeterminacy, undermines its own historical link to that culture, undermines its very status as a trope.

The particular cellar hole, though, the goal-site of this journey, unfolds a more complex series of tropes of culture and human presence. The "children's house of make-believe" serves as a three-pronged metonymy of domesticity, imagination, and childhood, and provides a setting in which the dishes, the "playthings in the playhouse of the children," undermine the later appearance of the hidden drinking goblet, "like the grail," by suggesting that artifacts, by their very survival in a place from which domesticity has fled, underscore the absence, rather than assert the former historical presence, of the human. The difference between the assertion of absence and the metonymy of former presence may seem merely one of rhetorical stance; but it is significant in regard to the Grail-goblet, which for its privileged status as religious artifact requires the ability to invoke not only human agency but the presence of the divine. The speaker, we learn, has stolen this goblet "from the children's playhouse," but the fact of its theft demonstrates that it is stealable and therefore still at least partly of the world of the domestic and of culture.

The description of the “belilaced cellar hole / Now slowly closing like a dent in dough” that once was a “house in earnest” suggests that the once-inhabited, now abandoned site has lost its claim on human sympathy and begun to heal back into the world of nature. Its legitimacy or usefulness as a destination has passed, to be replaced with the brook, a product entirely and honestly of nature (“destination and . . . destiny . . .”). The speaker, however, in presenting the loss of culture and its reversion into the alien world of nature, toys with these brute categories in order to tease out the trope-shaped relationship between culture and destiny, both of which attempt to subvert nature. This playful indulgence assumes that the reader, who is also himself, understands that his destiny is separate from the failure of culture. This distinction between the social-cultural and the personal dimensions of this meditative poem requires a dialogic interplay of voices to impose a narrative discipline upon trope. But the speaker, assertive and intimate in the end, plays with the possibility that the concluding tropes—the cellar hole, the drinking goblet—would, if allowed their full degree of supplement, elegize and privilege the deaths of culture and religion, and thus leave the reader bereft of the world of culture. The reader would also remain separate from the speaker, since the central motif of elegy is the alienation of material and spiritual worlds, and the tropes of alienation necessarily privilege that state as one of special feeling.

The prescriptive admonition that closes the poem, however, admits the efficacy of narrative by completing the journey with a justifying act, the act of drinking, as if the whole purpose of this trip over rough country roads were to assuage a simple thirst. The actual purpose of the poem—to unite the dialogic voices of the poem, to link speaker and reader in a single entity—requires this confrontation with trope. The consequence of the play of metaphor is to assert the unifying power of narrative and force a closure independent of, yet informed by, an invoked array of cultural and religious possibilities.

Redemption through the imagination in “Directive” comes partly through the refusal to let trope dominate over the dialogic movement of the narrative. The meditative model for this poem is Wordsworth’s secular idea of the imagination and the integra-

tion of self, its disparities here represented by the functions of speaker and reader, requires the rhetorical dominance of this model over the trope-model of allegory and symbolism. By exploiting the poem's status as discourse and relying on the narrative interaction between speaker and reader, Frost avoids the limitations of trope-oriented models yet retains the power of trope to evoke larger worlds of discourse than those otherwise immediately available. By conflating the playful trope-awareness of poems like "After Apple-Picking" with a dialogic strategy, he retains the lyric evocation of privileged worlds of meaning without committing his poem to them, and yet avoids the narrowed because necessarily conversational rhetoric of the dramatic poem. Frost's inventiveness is nowhere greater, and, despite the desire of some critics to read him as a religious poet, nowhere does he make clearer the doggedly secular basis of his self-redemption.

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