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College of Liberal Arts, National Central University

The Modulation between the Realistic and Romantic Approaches to Nature and Man in Frost's Poetry

Chang-jui Kuo*

*Associate Professor, Department and Graduate Institute of English.

One thing special about Robert Frost's poems is that not only many of them are set in pastoral backgrounds but also most of them are full of opposites; however, these opposites, instead of being contradictory to each other, are, to a great extent, complementary in effect, and Frost keeps on modulating them. He has a strong sense of the inherent complexity and multiplicity of life. Life, like the West-Running Brook, is a continuous flux of opposites. Each situation may suggest several possible solutions, but each solution is only relative and tentative. It is never absolute, for life is multivalent and shifting. Inhabiting a provisional and precarious world of relativity and pluralism, Frost believes that it is necessary to modulate opposites constantly because "[l]ife sways perilously at the confluence of opposing forces" (Frost, *Selected Letters* 467). He once remarked, "All through I have enjoyed confusion, contrariness" (Sergeant 250), and it is "part of his delight to discover many different processes for dealing with these conflicts" (Thompson xxii). Since Frost is interested in the interplay of opposing forces, with

> Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
> Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
> With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
> And heart, if need be, I will do my best
> To keep their building balanced at my breast.[1]

To him such modulation between opposites is a key to life because it enables us to see all the possible sides of things and, thus, to view life, not partially from only a specific narrow angle, but as a whole.

In approaching nature and man, Frost is neither the speaker in Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," who sees nothing but stark reality;

nor is he the man in Stevens's "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," who perceives the world only through his pathetic fallacy. Rather, like Stevens, Frost thinks "Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another, as . . . the imagined [or the ideal] / On the real" (Stevens 218). To Frost, nature, like the rural New England, is paradoxical: "on the one hand it is a realm of ideals where the essential realities are found in their pristine forms; on the other it is an inferior plane where life is crude, insensate, mechanical" (Lynen 153). So his approach to nature and man is neither extremely realistic nor excessively romantic; rather, he tries to modulate the two extremes because neither extreme is sufficient to sustain us through life. It is only through such modulation between the realistic and romantic approaches that we are able to attain "a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes" vi); however, such a stay is only momentary, and we have to keep on modulating.

Without doubt, Frost loves nature and is sensitive to its phenomena. Rivers, mountains, stars, plants, and animals are appealing to him. A lively bird, like the crow, can offer much excitement and pleasure.

> The way a crow
> Shook down on me
> The dust of snow
> From a hemlock tree
>
> Has given my heart
> A change of mood
> And saved some part
> Of a day I had rued. (221)

There are at least two natural phenomena that make the speaker feel spirited. Firstly, there is a scene of visual beauty--the blackness of the crow is a sharp contrast to the whiteness of the snow, while the immobility of the hemlock is counterpointed by the falling movement of the dust of snow--which must offer freshness and vividness to the observer. Secondly, the speaker is in low spirits perhaps because something is going wrong; however, the bird's shaking down a film of snow onto him makes him happy and, thus, helps him overcome his bad mood. It is a naturally beautiful and lively action, and the moody speaker rejoices in it. Therefore, this poem expresses a kind of excitement and joy somewhat similar to that in Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up." But Frost's romantic impulse toward nature reaches only so far. There is no tribute to the crow here as there is to the rainbow in Wordsworth's poem. As Rubinstein indicates, "[t]he . . . intelligence that has [the speaker] live where such a lucky happenstance is possible, [and] the spirit that enables him to appreciate it, are purely human" (32). Nature is not beneficent, trying actively to comfort and inspire man; instead, it is man that takes the initiative, that tries to make some pleasure and comfort out of the scene. Without the perceiving observer, there will be no possible confrontation, nor any pleasure produced. Also there is no communion between nature and man. The speaker enjoys the vivid scene; however, the crow does not sense his pleasure. Nor is its scattering of the snow on the speaker "an acknowledgment of his presence, a greeting [or] a practical joke on him" (Perrine, "Frost's 'Dust of Snow'" 61). It is just an ordinary bird; man does not seem to mean anything to it. It does not commune with the speaker, not to mention loving him.

Nature's lack of love and the impossibility of communion between nature and man can be seen more clearly in "Two Look at Two." In this poem two lovers have been walking up a mountainside, with night coming soon. Here we see that nature is diminished. The path they take is not beautiful or smooth, but rough "With rock and washout"(229). There is no lovely shining moon to guide them back to their home, so they are "unsafe in darkness"(229). And the wall which stops their walk has been tumbled down "With barbed-wire binding"(229). In spite of such a diminished natural scene, the lovers still stand "facing this, / Spending what onward impulse they still had"(229): they still want to give themselves to nature, trying to commune with nature and "seek a 'blessing' from it" (Oster 89). However, to the doe, they, who stand still, are just like "some up-ended boulder split in two"(229). Then, perhaps because "[s]he could not trouble her mind with [them] too long" (229), she walks away serenely and indifferently. Not long later, another creature of nature comes into the couple's view; this time, an antlered buck. The buck looks at them quizzically with jerks of his head. His gaze has a touch of defiance, as if to suggest that since the couple do not make any motion or give any sign of life, they are not worth his concern. Because of his "onward impulse," the man stretches out his hand to touch the buck, but, lo, the spell is broken. "Then he [the buck] too passed unscared along the wall" (230). Here we have to pay attention to the word "unscared." In reality, the buck is "unscared": it is just a common animal that does not concerned itself with the two lovers at all. So in this poem Frost is presenting the fragile relationship between nature and man. No harmonious communion between them is possible. Besides, there is the tumbled wall between the couple and the deer. Though the lovers

come so close to the doe and the buck that they almost touch them, still the wall separates them. In this way, the wall becomes a symbol of the indestructible barriers between nature and man. It should also noticed that this poem is filled with expressions such as "seem," "almost," "like," and "as if." Frost's use of these expressions implies that actually there is no real communion between nature and man. The doe and the buck are in reality inhuman and unfeeling. They do not sigh to the lovers, nor do they understand men and wish to communicate with them. All the feeling and thinking of the animals in the poem come, in fact, from men's imagination. This is what Ruskin calls "the pathetic fallacy," and it is what Frost usually tries to avoid in his poetry. To him, as to Ruskin, great poetry gives the best image possible of objects without losing clear perception of the essential nature of them and without confusing things described with those used to describe them. Therefore, the greatest thing a poet can do is to see something and tell or describe what he has seen in a plain, undistorted way.

In "Of the Pathetic Fallacy" Ruskin divides poets into three main classes: "the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel . . . . Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels . . . . And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings" (163). I think we can put Frost into the last class; that is, "the men who feel strongly, think, and see truly" (Ruskin 164). Ruskin regards this class of poets as the first order of poets. A poet belonging to this class "keep[s] his eyes fixed firmly on the *pure fact*, out of which if any feeling comes to him or his reader, he knows it must be a true one" (Ruskin 165). In his poetry, Frost avoids projecting his passions or

personal feelings on the objects or facts he describes, gives impassive expression to them, and lets the reader gather what he can from those objects or facts. Even if sometimes the pathetic fallacy appears in his poems, Frost makes the reader aware of it. So in reading "Two Look at Two" we are made aware that the animals remain animals; the men remain men. Men and nature are so near yet at the same time they are so far separated from each other. No communion is made, nor is there any harmonious union reached.

Though the buck has gone, still the lovers stand there. They are stricken by the encounter.

> Still they stood,
> A great wave from it going over them,
> As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
> Had made them certain earth returned their love. (230)

It looks as if nature opened itself receptively to men and the appearance of the two deer were a "favor" (230) from it, a symbol of nature's return for their love. However, the poem ends with "As if." Here the metaphor breaks down. Actually, the appearance of the two deer is not nature's return for men's love of it. Actually, the confrontation between the lovers and the deer occurs "not on the metaphysical level--that is as a sign of deeper meaning--but rather on the animal-human level" (Bort 64), and "It was all" (230). Nature is not only diminished but also inhuman and indifferent. It does not care about the appearance or existence of human beings. There is no principle of reciprocity--a principle that nature will return man's love for it.

Realistically speaking, there is separation between nature and man, and nature is unwilling and unable to return man's love; yet man, because of his romantic love for nature, still wants to bring himself close to nature--even to steep himself in it--and wishes to get something from it. In this poem though nature is diminished and indifferent, man, through his love for nature and his imagination, can still get some pleasure or at least some excitement from the natural scene, no matter how fragile and fleeting they may be; and man at least from time to time needs such imagination to make the inhuman world human and habitable.

Since nature is indifferent and inhuman, there is no identifying man with it. "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" can be used to illustrate this point. In this poem a farmhouse was burned down. Now the chimney is all of the house that still stands. Across the way, the barn is "left / To bear forsaken the place's name" (241). Here the speaker indulges himself in the memory of the past, particularly of the "teams that came by the stony road / To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs / And brush the mow with the summer load" (241-42). His nostalgic feeling is intensified more and more when

> The birds that came to it through the air
> At broken windows flew out and in
> Their murmur like the sigh we sigh
> From too much dwelling on what has been. (242)

Here the speaker projects his feelings onto the birds and personifies nature by supposing that nature, symbolized in this poem by the phoebes, shares his mournful feelings and sighs; however, his romantic impulse is soon counterbalanced by his realistic observation of the scene. For the

birds "the lilac [still] renewed its leaf" (242); it is only man that by his memory and imagination is capable of looking backward in time. The phoebes actually have no understanding of the human past. Human affairs do not trouble them in the least; for them "there was really nothing sad" (242). It is just an illusion to identify human feeling with their murmuring, for they cannot and do not feel human sadness. The birds are in reality not weeping for the burning of the farmhouse; on the contrary, they are rejoicing in the nest they keep in the barn, and their normal existence will not be affected by human sadness. Therefore, there is no identification between nature and man. Nature is still nature. Its life process still goes on, not to be disturbed by human feelings.

The fact there is no identification between nature and man makes us question whether or not there is really an immanent spirit in nature, friendly and benevolent to man. And Frost's answer to this question is given in "The Wood-Pile." The poem begins with the speaker's description of his winter walk in a frozen swamp one gray day. After walking for a while, he pauses and says, "I will turn back from here. / No, I will go on farther--and we shall see" (101). Here the speaker shows a romantic tendency: "he regards his rambles through the countryside as the means of a natural and somewhat mysterious instruction of the soul" (Lynen 144). As he walks, the speaker observes the dreary monotony and the bleak sameness of the landscape.

> The view was all in lines
> Straight up and down of tall slim trees
> Too much alike to mark or name a place
> So as to say for certain I was here

Or somewhere else: I was just far from home. (101)

Though lonely and uncertain where he is, the speaker still expects that nature will have some benefit to offer. He hopes that his ramble will lead him to find in the natural scene something spiritual, the discovery of the immanent spirit perhaps. Therefore, though he stops for a moment, he finally decides to continue his walk, and he resumes his walk "without a plan, unaware of what his goal will be, relying on intuition, waiting for a spontaneous revelation to come to him from nature" (Lynen 144). But after he goes on with his walk, the speaker meets, not something spiritual, but an ignorant and inhuman bird that is careful enough to

> Put a tree between us [the bird and the speaker]
> when he lighted,
> And say no word to tell me who he was
> Who was so foolish as to think what *he* thought. (101)

The tree between the bird and the speaker is a symbol of separation between them. The speaker considers himself foolish because there is no understanding or communication between him and the bird. To guess what it is thinking is not only a foolish act but a futile effort--it is just human projection. In the last line of the quoted passage "he" is italicized. The italicization of the word ironically emphasizes the inhumanness of the bird. It is just an animal, having no human quality. It is impossible and useless to personify it.

Also the speaker fancies that the bird may have some human thought.

He thought that I was after him for feather--
The white one in his tail. . . .(101)

Who can know what the bird is thinking when it flies down across a tree before the speaker? This is pathetic fallacy; actually it is the speaker that imagines that the bird puts a tree between them because of its fear of losing the white feather. Like the speaker in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" who assumes that the phoebes share his feelings and lament with him, the man in this poem projects his human thought onto the bird and fancies it perches across from him because of its fear. In fact, it is only his romantic personification of nature; nothing can be certain.

Quite different from his expectation, what the speaker finds at the center of the swamp is not an immanent spirit, but a wood-pile, which was built and left by a wood chopper. The wood-pile makes the speaker think about the man who built it.

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay. (102)

The wood-pile is something forgotten by the wood chopper. It reminds the speaker that he is alone in a place that has been forgotten and deserted. His aloneness becomes all the more complete as away from

human society he cannot find any spiritual guide nor can he get any comfort in the natural scene; what confronts him is only the inhuman wood-pile. This "induces a kind of awe because it is the acknowledgment of nature as a realm wholly independent of human need" (Poirier 143-44). Nature can offer neither inspiration nor comfort. All that the speaker can find in the end of the poem is the cold deserted wood-pile.

I have pointed out above that in writing poetry Frost avoids pathetic fallacy and that even if it sometimes appears in his poems, he makes us aware of it; however, this does not mean that Frost completely rejects it. What is important is how we make use of pathetic fallacy. Frost particularly emphasizes the importance of imagination, which is necessary for the pathetic fallacy to function well. Actually imagination can make poetry appealing and enduring because genuine poetry is both realistic and imaginative--"imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (Moore 267). Besides, pathetic fallacy is human. Sometimes we need it to make the world we live in habitable, for if we stick only to stark reality, the world will become, as Ruskin puts it, "inhuman and monstrous" (169).

"Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is a poem affirming the use of pathetic fallacy.

> He would declare and could himself believe
> That the birds there in all the garden round
> From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
> Had added to their own an oversound,
> Her tone of meaning but without the words. (338)

In this poem Frost is positive of man's ability to inject human qualities

into natural objects. By saying that Adam "*would* declare and could himself *believe*" (italics mine), Frost suggests that in truth Adam is aware of his pathetic fallacy; however, he would make a good use of it. It is his "intention" (Oster 250) to do so. He imagines that the birds hear Eve's voice all day long and their singing is influenced by her voice. As a result, their singing "has been crossed with and become an echo of human sound" (Poirier 160). Adam knows it is an illusion that the birds' singing is influenced by the daylong voice of Eve; however, he is willing to keep the illusion, at least for a while, and believe what he imagines is true because doing so makes his world human and meaningful. Here we see that Adam has achieved the middle ground between the two extremes expressed in Stevens's "The Snow Man" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," and this makes Adam's world a human Eden (Oster 252), full of significance and meaning.

From what we have discussed above, we may see that Frost's approach to nature and man is neither extremely realistic nor excessively romantic. He neither romanticizes nature nor fills it with stark reality. What he tries to do in his poetry is to keep on modulating reality and imagination, facts and dreams, the real and the ideal, for he is aware of both what is ideally possible and what is actually realized in practice. Such is Frost's approach to life, and in many of his poems we can find the coexistence of the realistic attitude toward nature ["that was all" (338)] and the romantic belief in resourcefulness and potentiality of man ["We have ideas yet that we haven't tried" (268)]. Frost's life extends from the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. During this life span Frost "has both inherited the romantic tradition and

absorbed the modern thoughts made available by science" (Tien 33). And living under the influences of both the romantic tradition and modern thoughts, Frost takes his own stance--the modulation between the romantic and realistic approaches. Although Frost rejects strongly romantic fantasy, he does not renounce the romantic tradition entirely; in spite of the tremendous impacts of modern scientific thoughts, he does not absorb them completely. Such an approach can be illustrated by his modulation between man's realistic limitations and his romantically incessant pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Living in the vast infinite universe, what man can do and achieve is limited. One of the most important limitations of man is his inability to attain any perfect knowledge and absolute truth because the universe he inhabits is a dynamic world of relativity and change in which various knowledge and truths on different occasions obtain.[2] Consequently, man cannot solve all his problems or difficulties, nor can he find any definite answer to the question of what the absolute truth is; however, Frost believes that "man *can* [still] have a great deal of good life; only when man demands certainty, particularly on metaphysical questions, is he doomed to despair" (Cook 226). This principle of flux makes impossible the discovery of any perfect knowledge or absolute truth, but if man keeps on pursuing them, he can, at least, enrich his stock of knowledge and better his understanding of the truth.

Because man cannot overcome all his difficulties or attain the absolute truth, intelligence, particularly his imagination, is essential for helping him break through the difficulties, create new values, and find his "place among the infinities" (177), as man, who is not satisfied with his

present life facilitated by modern scientific devices, must engage himself in improving it by inventing new things through the working of his imagination. In such essays as "The Constant Symbol" and "Education by Poetry" Frost again and again expresses his firm belief that most of our thinking is metaphorical. We learn the unfamiliar by imagining its relationship to the familiar. And imagination is the capacity to think in terms of "if," which enables man to suppose, to move outside himself and beyond his limits to discover new knowledge and truth.

Frost rejects romantic fantasy, and he emphasizes that we should recognize realistically our limitations; however, at the same time he also warns us against accepting too easily our limitations because concentrating on our limitations rather than potentialities can prevent us from accomplishing all we might. Though it is impossible to attain the perfect knowledge and absolute truth, yet by our unceasing effort in developing and using our potentialities we can grasp at least part of them, no matter how imperfectly. And such unwillingness of man to submit to his limitations, his firm belief in his potential intelligence, and his incessant pursuit of knowledge and truth are important characteristics of the romantic spirit which are revealed quite often in Frost's poems. Knowing that there is no absolute truth does not mean that man should stop pursuing knowledge and truth. What is important is that man should know his realistic limitations but at the same time keep on pursuing. Man is limited, but he has potentialities to be developed and used. And the recognition of his limitations, yet flexible application of his intelligence and potentialities to pursuing knowledge and truth is what makes his life rich and colorful.

"The Star-Splitter" is one of the most typical poems which show Frost's modulation between man's limitations and his incessant pursuit of knowledge and truth. Here I beg to differ with Kearns in that she thinks Brad is "disordered, a 'dreadful fool'" (114); on the contrary, Brad symbolizes man who keeps on investigating his place in the universe. As Brad cannot manage to sell his farm, he simply burns the farmhouse down and spends the insurance money on a telescope to "satisfy [his] life-long curiosity / About our place among the infinities" (177). Superficially the narrator's first response is his doubting the rightfulness of Brad's action; however, what he really wishes to know is whether man can gain anything from looking through a telescope, whether the stargazing can really help us understand better "our place among the infinities."

Throughout the poem Brad is contrasted with the stars in which he is very interested. Brad is a small finite self in the vast infinitude; however, the stars are remote, unreachable, and infinite. The stars thus symbolize all that man cannot attain; none the less, Brad keeps on looking at them. His stargazing in this sense implies man's incessant quest for knowledge and truth. Brad's purpose is to discover the place of man in the infinite universe, but the narrator is not quite sure of the value of "splitting stars" (179); and at the end of the poem that place is not discovered, nor does the narrator indicate that it will ever be.

> We've looked and looked, but after all, where are we?
> Do we know any better where we are
> And how it stands between the night tonight
> And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
> How different from the way it ever stood? (179)

Brad is still Brad, and the far-away stars will continue to shine on him remotely and indifferently night after night.

At the end Brad still cannot find man's place among the infinities; nevertheless, the narrator is not scornful of his effort. He even shares many nights of looking through the telescope with Brad.

> Bradford and I had out the telescope.
> We spread our two legs as we spread it three,
> Pointed out thoughts the way we pointed it,
> And standing at our leisure till the day broke,
> Said some of the best things we ever said. (179)

If we want to find a practical purpose in their stargazing, at least, it has served to bring the two persons closer to each other; and in their conversation they might have bettered their understanding of each other and perhaps really raised significant questions about the stars.

The truth of man's place in the infinitude has not been discovered and the distance between man and stars is still there, yet man's imagination which stimulates him to devote himself to the incessant pursuit of the truth will enable him to transcend the grimness of reality. Though the result of man's effort to find his place among the infinities may not be as good as expected and the stargazing may not make man understand himself better; nevertheless, man will keep on looking--he will never rest from his persistent pursuit of knowledge and truth. Who can presumptuously say that such kind of unceasing quest is completely futile? Who can deny that someday perhaps Brad may really discover something significant? Not many years ago, because man's knowledge of the space was

limited, the moon was still a mysterious star; however, nowadays, owing to the progress in astronomy through incessant investigation, man has already landed on the moon. This is a convincing proof of the necessity and positiveness of man's incessant quest. Indeed man is limited, yet he has enough potentialities to be engaged in endless pursuit; and such endless pursuit is not only essential but also praiseworthy.

Knowing his limitations, man does not just sit and accept them acquiescently; instead, he will stand up and struggle courageously, struggle even for what seems unattainable so that he can go beyond his limitations to fight with adverse circumstances, to break through the difficulties and obstacles lying before him, and to accomplish what he may. He understands that he has surprising and unbelievable potentialities and that he knows enough to act on and get ahead with, though he must make judgments carefully and test them in actions. Frost is interested in describing at once man's limitations and the difficult yet significant struggle man has to engage himself in. Therefore, in quite a few of Frost's poems we can see the protagonists devoting themselves to fighting back the forces against them. They sally forth to match wits with the worst nature can muster against them and derive pleasure and dignity from the struggle, no matter how small their success may be. Frost is neither fatalistically pessimistic nor naively optimistic. Unlike naturalistic writers, Frost does not regard man as determined by circumstances, having no power to resist and struggle. His tone is hopeful. To him man is strong-willed and well-prepared to fight against opposing forces, and his struggle for survival shall not be futile. But at the same time Frost does not ignore the pains and failures which are inevitable. And in his struggle with

circumstances man cannot be too confident; rather, he should be patient and careful. Frost thinks it is as important to write about the possible success as it is about the possible failure, and his poems show both sides of the struggle--the accomplishments man may achieve and the pains and defeats man is sure to suffer. But failure is the stepping-stone to success and man does not have to feel ashamed of it. Instead, man must learn to live with his failure and learn the "roughly zones" (305) of possibility; and by trial and error and trying again he may finally accomplish what might at first seem impossible.

In "There Are Roughly Zones" the speaker and other people sit indoors, talking about the penetrating cold outside.

> And every gust that gathers strength and heaves
> Is a great threat to the house. But the house has long
> been tried. (305)

The house is man's creation, and thus can be looked upon as a symbol of man's powers to struggle with the hostile nature. The gusts, symbolic of the hostile nature, have tried time after time to destroy the house; however, the house has long been tried and is indomitable. Similarly, man cannot be conquered. Nature is powerful and hostile; yet, man will never bow his neck to it. He *will* keep on struggling with it.

> It is to a northern climate that they transplant the peach.
> It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the
> peach. (305)

Yes, we admit that limited by the cold climate, man has difficulty in growing the peach in this northern area, yet

is it soul or mind--
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined? (305)

Will man be content to be limited? Never. His ambition is "to extend the reach / Clear to the Arctic of every living kind" (305)--to put his will and ideas to the extreme test because he has "ideas yet that [he hasn't] tried" (268). It is true that "There are roughly zones whose [nature's] laws [might have to] be obeyed" (305); yet, there is no fixed line between right and wrong, possible and impossible. Moreover, man has no obligation to be limited and bound by nature's laws. Through trial and error he can keep on experimenting. It is hard for the peach to grow in the cold climate, but it is not completely impossible. The peach tree may die, but it may also grow exuberantly through man's care. No matter how small the success may be, the "limitless trait in the hearts of men" (305) will make him keep on struggling with nature. And by his courage and prudence man may manage to succeed in the end.

In the poem discussed above we may see that if man goes on struggling with circumstances, he can accomplish what seems quite impossible, for his limitations are only roughly defined. But he cannot dream wildly; rather, he must deal with difficulties and obstacles realistically and carefully. He can't be too careful. What is really important is prudence--to judge when to act and when not, when to risk and when to make a strategic retreat. He must struggle; and if he judges wisely and acts carefully, he may still succeed. Although failures are unavoidable, yet if man learns to acquire knowledge, skill, and judgment, and if he is courageous, the final victory might still be his.

"Sand Dunes" also exemplifies man's brave struggle with nature. In

this poem nature, represented by the sea, is not only hostile but also destructive. Not only does the sea drown ships in water but also it changes itself into the shape of sand dunes

> To come at the fisher town
> And bury in solid sand
> The men she could not drown. (260)

Here we see that man is beset by nature's destructive forces. The sea is formidable because its waves beat strongly against the land in a never-ending succession and may destroy whatever enters its realm. But the sand dunes, which are extensions of the sea, are far more threatening and dangerous, for they may even bury in solid sand those who have escaped death in the violent sea. Nevertheless, the speaker indicates that the sea is mistaken if it thinks it can overcome man so easily.

> She may know cove and cape,
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape
> She hopes to cut off mind. (260)

In spite of the destructive forces of nature, man will manage to survive. Man's mind is what is most important in him. He may be defeated by the hostile forces, but his mind cannot be conquered and his will to struggle with nature shall never be weakened. His ship may be drowned, his village may be buried; however, he will muster up his courage again to build a better-equipped ship and a new village to resume his struggle:

> Men left her a ship to sink:
> They can leave her a hut as well;

> And be but more free to think
> For the one more cast-off shell. (260-61)

As pointed out by Tien, man's leaving his ship and hut to be destroyed by the sea symbolizes his ability "to cast off old systems of thoughts, ideas that didn't work, and to squeeze through the straight jacket of facts to free himself to think" (52). Man's ship has been sunken by the waves and his hut, covered by the sand. To survive, man can no longer stick to his old house which was forever threatened by the sea. He must make some change and leave the house so that he can free himself to search for a safe place to build his new house. Also, instead of being bound by old ways of building weak ships, he has to discard them and free himself to think, to invent new ways of constructing better-equipped ships which are strong enough to fight with the ferocious waves.

The sea is really formidable because it can not merely destroy ships in water but transform itself into sand dunes to reach man even in the village on land; however, man shall never yield. Perrine states that "'Sand Dunes' expresses Frost's belief in the ability of human mind to cope with forces of nature and to emerge undefeated from natural catastrophe" (Perrine, "Frost's 'Sand Dunes' " 38). This indeed is the main philosophy of the poem. Nature is impersonal and hostile, but it also serves to glorify man by functioning as a ground for man to show his indomitable will to fight against adverse circumstances. In the struggle for survival man must maintain his strong will so that defeats do not weaken his belief in his powers and potentialities. Nature destroys man's ship and house, but it also tests man and, thus, brings out the true greatness of his mind. Man is a brave and flexible fighter. He may be

defeated, but his failures will stimulate him to find new ways for survival. His ship is destroyed by nature; however, learning from the past painful experiences, he will rebuild a stronger one to bear the incessant beating of the ferocious waves and discipline himself to acquire better skill in steering. Though the sea can reach into the land, it cannot reach too far. Man can still build his new house in new safe land. He will not be destroyed, and in his struggle with nature for survival man may still be the ultimate victor.

Frost acknowledges the limitation of man, but he also emphasizes incessant and brave struggle. Though defeats and losses are inevitable, yet successes and achievements are possible. What is especially needed in the struggle is will, courage, prudence, intelligence, and skill, and it is upon these that Frost fixes his hope for man's ultimate victory. Man is limited, but Frost insists on struggling and such an insistence is Frost's most affirmative response to nature as an indifferent and hostile power. Nature is diminished, but much can be made of it, and the most important that can be made of it is that nature can be used to estimate man's will, courage, prudence, intelligence and skill. Therefore, man should sally out carefully and courageously to struggle with opposing forces. With the hope of possible success, he should take a positive attitude, cautious and not over-confident, and make genuine efforts; and the more powerful the opposition, the more significant and valuable the success.

In a word, Frost's approach to nature and man is neither extremely romantic nor excessively realistic; rather, he keeps on modulating the two extremes. He is interested in nature and has romantic love for it, but he does not forget the impossibility of communion and identification between

nature and man. Nature is beautiful and is to be enjoyed while it is still enjoyable, yet it is also inhuman, indifferent, and even hostile. Man romantically wishes to ask for comfort, inspiration and instruction from nature; however, in reality, nature is diminished and there is no benevolent spirit immanent in it, willing and able to soothe, inspire and enlighten him. In his poetry Frost describes the realistic limitations of man: he is unable to attain the perfect knowledge and the absolute truth, he cannot find his place among the infinities, and his physical power sometimes is not great enough to fight back opposing forces; however, at the same time Frost also emphasizes the romantic spirit of man: his unwillingness to submit to limitations, his firm belief in his potentialities, his incessant pursuit of the unknown and the infinite, and his brave struggle with the hostile nature. Realistically speaking, man is limited, yet he refuses to yield to limitations; rather, he will use his will, intelligence, courage, prudence, and skill to move beyond his limitations to keep on pursuing knowledge and truth and struggling with adverse circumstances. Therefore, we may say that Frost's modulation between the romantic and the realistic approaches not only is an important characteristic of his poems but also reveals to us that although nature is diminished, man can still make something of it and that through incessant pursuit and courageous struggle man, though limited, can achieve not merely success but also dignity.

Notes

1 Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 266-67. Hereafter, all quotations from Frost's poems will be taken from this edition. Page numbers will be put in parentheses after them.

2 Here I would like to explain my special usage of the two words, "knowledge" and "truth." From now on "knowledge" without "perfect" before it means "acquaintance with or theoretical or practical understanding of some branch of science, art, learning, or other area [s] involving study, research or practice and the acquisition of skills" (*Webster's Third International Dictionary* 1252), while "truth" without "absolute" or "the" preceding it denotes "a judgment, proposition, statement or idea that accords with fact or reality, is logically or intuitively necessary, or follows by sound reasoning from established or necessary [facts]" (*Webster's Third International Dictionary* 2457) or a whole of such judgments, propositions, statements, or ideas. But by the "perfect knowledge" and the "absolute truth" I mean the best "knowledge" and the supreme "truth" of something or everything. Therefore, we have only one "absolute truth" and "perfect knowledge" of something or everything, but we can have various "knowledge" and "truths."

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佛洛斯特詩中寫實與浪漫的調和

郭 章 瑞*

摘 要

本論文藉對佛洛斯特詩作的分析應證佛氏對自然與人的寫照，既非過度浪漫也非極端寫實；而乃在二者之間不斷調和，期臻平衡。從其詩中我們可看出大自然雖冷漠無情且已萎縮，但人類猶可從自然中有所取獲。同時佛氏也意識到人類的局限，但又帶期許：希望人類能突破渺小、有限的困境。因此，儘管能力有限，但經由不斷的追求與奮鬥，人類不僅能發揚其人性光輝，且可臻止於成。

* 國立中央大學英美語文學系副教授