

THE PRECIOUS DARK: FROST'S TREATMENT OF SCIENCE

by

Nancy Kress

The Blaine DeLancey Memorial Award Essay, 1979

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The twentieth century has been called the Age of Science; Robert Lee Frost has been acclaimed as one of the best, and best-loved, of the century's poets. Since writers have always reflected the concerns and culture of their times, it is pertinent to ask how Frost treats science in his poetry. Other contemporary writers have given it various guises: the last hope of mankind, prostitute to Big Business, sure road to planetary destruction, misused handmaiden of humanity. Frost, with his characteristic complexity and stubborn individuality, adopts none of these.

To determine what *is* Frost's view of science, it is first necessary to consider what we mean by "science." For purposes of analysis, we can divide science into three areas: descriptive science, by which is meant the systems--some of them centuries old--for classifying and naming the various objects in the physical universe; "pure" science, the systemized knowledge of the nature of matter and energy and how the two behave; and technology, the application of scientific knowledge. The last two differ significantly in their basic goals: "pure" science aims at understanding the environment, while technology aims at controlling it. Frost displays varying attitudes toward all three areas and the interrelationships among them.

DESCRIPTIVE SCIENCE

Another, older name for descriptive science is "natural history," under which Victorian term Frost undoubtedly knew it during his schoolboy days at Lawrence High School. Although certain elements of natural history--stars, flowers, trees, rocks--have long been staple imagery among poets writing about nature, Frost's poetry contains words and usages that go beyond the vernacular nature imagery of, say, Wordsworth, and show the influence of various modern scientific fields. In "New Hampshire" he speaks of "a specimen of beryl with a trace of radium;" in "Trespass" (*A Witness Tree*) there is a reference to a "trilobite;" "All Revelation" (*A Witness Tree*) is built completely around the image of a "geode" internally lit by a "ray cathode." Two other short poems consisting entirely of extended scientific metaphors are "Innate Helium" and "A Wish to Comply" (*Steeple Bush*).

What is interesting about these last three poems is that although scientific terminology makes up the heart of each, the poems are *not* about science. Consider, for example, "Innate Helium":

Religious faith is a most filling vapor.
It swirls occluded in us under tight
Compression to uplift us out of weight--
As in those buoyant bird bones thin as paper,
To give them still more buoyancy in flight.
Some gas like helium must be innate.

Here Frost is, by means of one of his beloved “enthusiasms tamed by metaphor,”¹ employing descriptive science to make a point--or several points--about the nature of the religious impulse. Similarly, the “Millikan mote” in “A Wish to Comply” is there not because Frost wished to say something about the measurement of photoelectric effects, or about the work of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Robert Andrews Millikan, or even about the science that lavished vast amounts of concern on the measurement of particles unheard of by the majority of the populace, but because it makes a good starting point from which to imply that individual vision, even in the face of expert authority, is worth perserving:

I rather suspect
All I saw was the lid
Going over my eye.
I honestly think
All I saw was a wink.

What can we infer from this use of scientific terminology in the pursuit of non-scientific ends? First, that themes other than science are Frost’s major concerns (this will be taken up in more detail in the discussion of his treatment of “pure” science). Second, that there is a considerable discrepancy between the popular image of Frost as a lovable old rustic and the image that emerges from paying attention to the use of scientific terminology in his poems; old rustics spending all of their time tramping around snowy woods are not aware of the research into Millikan motes.

The oldest of the descriptive sciences is astronomy, and Frost makes ample use of its terms throughout his poetry. He begins as early as “A Prayer in Spring” (*A Boy’s Will*), which contains a comparison of a hummingbird to a meteor. Later poetry refers not just to “stars,” as would the nature poetry of an earlier era, but to Rigel, Bellatrix, Betelgeuse, Aldebaran, and Capella (in “How Hard It Is To Keep From Being King When It’s In You and In the Situation”), to Sirius (in numerous poems; it seems to have been Frost’s favorite star), to the constellations Canis Major (in “Canis Major”) and Orion (in “The Star-Splitter”), and even to a specific meteor shower, the Leonid, commonly seen over four consecutive nights in mid-November. As Frost himself has pointed out, his poetry is very “astronomical,” a fact he attributes to the childhood influence of a beloved book, Proctor’s *Our Place Among the Infinities*.² He would later use that title as a line in his poem “The Star-Splitter.”

Brad McLaughlin, protagonist of “The Star Splitter,” who burned down his house to obtain the insurance money and buy a telescope, says:

The best thing that we’re put here for’s to see;
The strongest thing that’s given us to see with’s
A telescope.

Frost’s similar delight in the “seeing” of astronomy, and in the use of the specific

terminology of that discipline, is evident. It should be noted, however, that astronomy is a descriptive science, not an operative one; the operative side of stellar behavior is called physics, and Frost's attitude toward physics and the other branches of research science is another matter. Frost treats the descriptive sciences, such as astronomy, with pleasure, and with that certain cavalier flexibility that has always led poets to transmute stars and other natural phenomena into pegs upon which to hang whatever meanings they choose to see there (although perhaps few other poets have done the same with geodes and helium). In short, the descriptive terminology of science is often used in Frost's works not as subject matter or theme, but as an endless, fascinating source of images to use in writing about some other theme. Only the superficial terms are "scientific." This is not true, however, when the poet leaves descriptive science and moves into the realm of "pure" science.

PURE SCIENCE

Pure science, the systemized investigation of the behavior of matter and energy, is Man's attempt to illuminate every corner of the universe with the light of his own understanding, to discover the workings, origins, and interrelationships of all matter, organic and inorganic, including that from which he himself is made. Frost's attitude toward this gargantuan undertaking is pure Yankee skepticism: it can't be done, it may not be worth doing in the first place, and the attempt generates a good deal more heat than actual light.

That man can never really understand the myriad mysteries of the universe, nor those of his place in it--not even with the aid of the tool Science--is a recurrent Frost theme. In "The Star-Splitter" (*New Hampshire: A Poem With Notes and Grace Notes*), Brad has purchased his drastically-financed telescope in order "To satisfy a life-long curiosity/About our place among the infinities." But even though the night-long glut of good conversation, nature appreciation, and "splitting" of stars--significantly, only an illusion of refracted telescopic images, having no effect on the originals--provided much enjoyment for Brad and the narrator, it actually brought them no closer to Brad's rather grandiose goal:

We've looked and looked, and 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?

This attitude that man's scientific explorations make little real difference in how much he understands of the universe can be clearly and consistently traced through Frost's repeated comments on one specific scientific goal, the measurement of the universe. Skepticism toward spatial measurement turns up in four poems written over a period of thirty-nine years: "Star in a Stone Boat," "Build Soil," "The Middleness of the Road," and "The Milky Way is a Cowpath." In the first of these, the poet goes looking for a

fallen meteor because it is the only "world" man will ever be capable of measuring. In the last, a cow who forgets this inevitable limitation and fancifully wanders out to the "razor edge" of the universe--as scientific measurement would like to do--is, significantly, in danger of getting "her gullet cut." Best stay home.

"The Bear" (*West-running Brook*) posits science as one of two "metaphysical extremes" (the other is philosophy) between which man, the caged bear, restlessly paces in hopes of breaking out of the confines of his "cramped" universe:

The telescope at one end of his beat,
And at the other end the microscope
Two instruments of nearly equal hope,
And in conjunction giving quite a spread.

Neither "extreme," however, yields any true insight or understanding to the man-bear. Whether racing between telescope and microscope or sitting still in a quasi-religious meditation, he remains

A baggy figure
When sedentary.

The import is clear: science (for one) has no real understanding, as opposed to mere knowledge, to give to man. As the poem "Kitty Hawk" (*In The Clearing*) puts it, after much discussion of man's first attempts to leave the ground:

... very far
... in where we were.
... Kitty Hawk.
We'd have got as far
Even at a walk.

Frost is not impressed. Reaching for the final ends of space--either literally in the Wrights' shaky canvas plane or metaphorically in our scientific attempt to understand the universe and mark it for our own--is a goal simply far beyond what man has been given to know. The goal is unattainable. Despite the efforts of our best minds, "Earth is still our fate."

The material universe which is science's province, then, conveys only so much information, and that limited in value because it is not of the essence of life, not the wisdom of the elusive "Secret" of the two line poem "The Secret Sits":

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

But *why* does Frost believe that science is thus limited to the point of virtual triviality? What in either the nature of science or the nature of the poet can account for

his view of the irrelevance of science to the real nature of existence? A close examination of Frost's poetry reveals three interrelated considerations.

The first, and most important, is Frost's position that science, an objective and vigorous mode of thought, is simply less effective at dealing with the slipperiness of life than is that pastiche of attitudes and intuitions we call "humanistic thinking." Specifically, what we can learn from science is far less satisfying than what we can learn from love, or from the undogmatic aspects of the religious impulse. That same star-wandering cow in danger of a cut gullet out along the Milky Way is, Frost points out, in trouble partly because she has abandoned her rightful place as a nurturing "foster mother" of mankind. The cow is a symbol of both mother-love (through her milk) and human imagination (through the use of the nursery rhyme Frost is parodying; nursery rhymes have long been the first introduction a child gets to the world of imaginative literature). By leaving this important post of earthly nurturing, and going off on the lesser one of space exploration, the cow has "gone right on astray/Through let-down pasture bars."

Frost can, however, express the superiority of nurture over scientific intellect more directly and less playfully than in "The Milky Way Is a Cowpath." Consider the last stanza of "Bond and Free" (*Mountain Interval*):

Yet some say Love by being thrall
And simply staying possesses all
In several beauty that Thought fares far
To find fused in another star.

Also to be considered in this light is "Too Anxious for Rivers" (*Steeple Bush*), one of Frost's most beautiful and melodious poems. Comparing the origins and destinies of human life as seen by primitive man ("The world as we know is an elephant's howdah") with what is known by modern science, Frost concludes that both are so limited as to be mere stories, children's dreams. What really reveals the essence of life, gives it its source and "sets us on fire,"

'Twas something we knew all about to begin with
And needn't have fared into space like his master
To find was the effort, the essay of love.

If love is one half of the humanistic knowledge that, for Frost, dwarfs scientific knowledge, then the other half is God. Frost never displays the provincialism that argues for one set of beliefs or one specific dogmatic outlook, but he does say that the perception or intuition of the presence of God can take man further in wisdom than can knowledge. When the tower clock and the steeple bells of "I Will Sing You One-O" (*New Hampshire*) were striking,

They filled their throats
With the furthest bodies
To which man sends his
Speculation,
Beyond which God is.

Frost considerably gives God Himself a chance to express the same idea in *A Masque of Reason*:

My forte is truth,
Or metaphysics, long the world's reproach
For standing still in one place true forever;
While science goes self-superseding on.
Look at how far we've left the current science
of Genesis behind. The wisdom there though
Is just as good as when I uttered it.

Science and wisdom are, according to this version of God, two different entities.

Love and religion are united in the well-known "Birches" (*Mountain Interval*). The poet can see no better fate for man than to have both, climbing eternally "toward heaven" and returning eternally toward Earth, "the right place for love." Nowhere in any of the poems dealing with science is there this same note of approval, of wistful desire. Frost never says, for example, that one "could do worse" than give detached thought the top priority in experiencing the world.

It is interesting to note that in the *Selected Poems of Robert Frost* (1963), with an introduction by Robert Graves, Frost himself was asked to make the selection of poems to be included.³ Many of those he did *not* choose were the ones dealing most directly with science and technology: "Some Science Fiction," "Accidentally On Purpose," "The Milky Way Is a Cowpath," "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," "Bursting Rapture," "Too Anxious for Rivers," "An Importer," "Any Size We Please," and "A Loose Mountain (Telescopic)." In contrast, poems of comparable length dealing with more traditionally humanistic themes were much more likely to be chosen for the collection.

An illuminating comment on the relationship he perceived between science and other values was offered by Frost himself during his interview for the *Paris Review*. The interviewer asked for the poet's comment on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's new curriculum requirement that future scientists take more courses in literature. Frost declared himself opposed to the idea, adding:

But you see it's like this: the greatest adventure of man is science, the adventure of penetrating into matter, into the material universe. But the adventure is our property, a human property, and the best description of us is the humanities. Maybe the scientists wanted to

remind the students that the humanities describe you who are adventuring into science, and science adds very little to that description of you, a tiny bit.⁴

The first reason, then, for Frost's attitude that science is mostly incapable of leading us to wisdom, is that science is merely an intriguing "adventure" (a word choice that would seem to put it in the same class with climbing Everest or spear-fishing in the Bahamas), his belief that, as a guide, science is inferior to religion or love. A second reason has less to do with the nature of science, or even of "man" in the abstract, than with the specific aspects of Frost's individual mind and personality. The scientific temperament, the "mind-set" with which science approaches the universe, emphasizes close observation, objective analysis of phenomena, outward orientation toward the world, and skepticism about established beliefs. Skepticism Frost has in abundance--although much of it is directed toward the concept of science itself--but his poetry does not reveal the other three to any notable degree.

Of course Frost, like any other poet, observes nature closely, striving to see things with a fresh eye. But scientific observation, in which all subjective associations are stripped from the subject, is much different from poetic observation. The former, Frost says playfully, not only is not an aid in acquiring understanding, it can actually defeat the purpose. The universe guards its inexplicability and does not *want* to be understood. Thus, the poet says that he only glimpses new things when, as is the case with the unidentified flowers of "A Passing Glimpse" (*West-running Brook*), he is on a train going so fast that he doesn't get a second look to observe them closely enough to see what kind they were:

Heaven gives its glimpses only to those
Not in a position to look too close.

It is interesting to conjecture what metaphors Frost might have made with the very recent research on the sub-atomic particles called quarks, of which protons and neutrons are comprised, and which can be identified only by the traces they leave in an experimental bubble chamber, never isolated for direct observation. Several of the world's ranking physicists have expressed frustration with this stubborn elusiveness. Frost would have loved it.

It is central to the scientific approach that all perceived phenomena be examined objectively. Frost, however, says over and over there are areas man cannot examine--moreover, that he needs to be able to *not* see too closely, or dwell in too long. Looking too deeply at these mysteries, Frost maintains, is not only fruitless but counter-productive, yielding nothing but bewilderment or despair. Thus, the poet in "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus" (*A Witness Tree*) is grateful that the stars give no more light than they do, that

their purpose is to flash and spark,
But not to take away the precious dark,
We need the interruption of the night
To ease attention off when overtight,
To break our logic in too long a flight,
And ask us if our premises are right.

The river, too, of "Too Anxious for Rivers," an age-old symbol for the flow of human existence, is better off unfathomed. In the first part of the poem, Frost worries about how the river will escape from the mountain-walled valley, but then he reminds himself that

The truth is the river flows into the canyon
Of Ceasing to Question What Doesn't Concern Us,
As sooner or later we have to cease somewhere.
No place to get lost like too far in the distance.

Such an attitude, a pulling back from the brink of mysteries perceived but unexplored, is alien to the working methodology of science. To science, all mysteries are fair game, and questions are never allowed to cease. Questions are the life's blood of pure science--the river itself.

In addition to differing over close observation and continuous analysis of phenomena, science and Frost also differ over basic orientation toward the world. The scientist tries to detach his results from the characteristics of his individual personality, to remain impersonal, to be oriented outwardly toward the question he is considering. Frost, who is never impersonal, who would not have considered it a virtue to be impersonal ("No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader"⁵), did not need the outward orientation of the scientist to explore the world. He was oriented inwardly--as are most poets--and it was the inner phenomena that affected him the most:

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 home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(*"Desert Places" A Further Range*)

These characteristics--unwillingness to speculate or question certain areas, lack of detachment, inward versus outward orientation--put Frost at odds with the scientific temperament. It is not unreasonable to suppose that, had Frost been a different sort of person, he might have expressed a more positive view of the quality of the knowledge man can derive from science. But, of course, had he been that different sort of person, he probably would not have been an acclaimed poet at all. Good scientists do not, as a rule, write very good poetry. (It should be noted, however, that scientists do not usually have

the opportunity in *their* published work to comment on how superior they may feel science is to the humanities).

In addition to this greater faith in the humanities than in the sciences, and in addition to the personal characteristics that may have produced it, there is a third factor that accounts for Frost's dismissive attitude toward science. This is the effect that he perceived science to have upon the image man holds of himself.

Frost, a celebrator of life and love, wanted man and his God to be the center of at least man's inner universe. Just as the controversy raging around Galileo had once deposed man from the physical center of the universe, so the controversy around another scientist, Charles Darwin, had deposed him from the philosophic center, relegating man to the position of just one more link in the chain of evolution. It was in 1925, midway between the publications of *New Hampshire* and *West-Running Brook*, that John T. Scopes was tried and convicted for teaching evolution in the Tennessee public schools.

Frost, of course, was too educated, too open-minded, too sophisticated to reject evolution as fact simply because it diminished man's overall importance in the cosmos. Not for him the smug, black-and-white simplicities of Whitman, a generation and a half earlier, rejecting the facts of astronomy because they interfered with his mystical romanticism ("When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"). Frost made use of evolution in his poems; the monkey of "At Woodward's Gardens" (*A Further Range*) is "perhaps within a million years of an idea." In "Etherealizing" (*Steeple Bush*), Frost says of a seaweed beach:

There once we lay as blobs of jellyfish
At evolution's opposite extreme.

Similar mention of evolution can be found in "Accidentally on Purpose" and "Never Naught Song" (*In The Clearing*). In these two poems, however, Frost accepted the fact of evolution but altered the import: man has evolved from lower beasts, but *not* by chance. The whole process was part of a plan. Frost liked his evolution without randomness:

At the very worst
It must have had the purpose from the first
To produce purpose as the fitter bred:
We were just purpose coming to a head.

Whose purpose was it? His or Hers or Its?
Let's leave that to the scientific wits.
Grant me intention, purpose, and design--
That's near enough for me to the Divine.

("Accidentally on Purpose")

But accepting a theory, or even part of a theory, is not the same thing as being happy with it. Frost felt that evolutionary theory--like the rest of science--was devaluing things

of importance, was shifting man's emphasis from the appreciation of himself and of his earth, that "place for love." In "The White-Tailed Hornet" (*A Further Range*), he discusses human thought and animal instinct, coming to the conclusion that we overvalue the latter. And in "The Lesson For Today" (*A Witness Tree*) he makes the same point:

Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.
Its contemplation makes us out as small
As a brief epidemic of microbes.

Frost goes on to concede that religion, too, had "belittled" the human race by comparison with an omnipotent God, and that in this respect science and the kind of dogmatic, wrathful, sinners-before-an-angry-God (which was not what Frost himself meant by "God" in the poems previously examined) "really meet." Generally, however, Frost's attitude toward "pure" science was not, as we have seen, this negative; it was merely dismissive. Science was interesting; it could be an adventure; it might even be, as implied in such poems as "Kitty Hawk" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," an inevitable adjunct to human nature. What science was not, however, was a road to wisdom or satisfaction or true growth; it did not really change man all that much. "One age is like another for the soul."

The explorations of science, both physical and theoretical, however, depend only in part on the "pure" scientific knowledge about which Frost was so dismissive. The other factor is the application of that knowledge in various forms of technology.

TECHNOLOGY

It has been said that so varied are the Scriptures, the Devil can quote them to his own advantage. The same could be said of Frost's poems about technology.

On the one hand, there is the straight-forward destruction of nature wrought by the coming of the telephone and the telegraph in "The Line Gang" (*Mountain Interval*). The workmen "throw a forest down less cut than broken," ruin the hush of the wild, and "plant dead trees for living." Turning the living into the dead is also accomplished by the buzz saw of " 'Out, Out-' " (*Mountain Interval*) as it "Leaped out at the boy's hand." In "The Grindstone" (*New Hampshire*), Frost works a variation on the same theme. Here the machine does not directly destroy, but rather kills something in the human narrator using it, driving him relentlessly to the point that the value of human life is perverted. The narrator says of his partner on the machine:

Nor was I for the man so much concerned.
Once when the grindstone almost jumped its bearing
It looked as if he might be badly thrown
And wounded on his blade. So far from caring,
I laughed inside and only cranked the faster,
(I ran as if it wasn't greased but glued);

The usual contemporary machine to blame for this sort of dehumanization has been the computer. It seems typically Frostian to have illustrated it instead with a lowly--and very rural--muscle-driven grindstone.

Technology, Frost playfully implies in "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus" (*A Witness Tree*), occasionally fixes things that were better left alone. The poem's narrator blames Edison for the electric light that interrupts the needed "precious dark." The other speaker in the dialogue, the "literate farmer"--who is convinced that Venus is a new development of Con-Ed--tells the narrator that he is speaking sentimental twaddle, and that slaves never *do* properly thank their "manumitters." The farmer, aglow with living in such an enlightened age, adds that

The old man [Edison] argues science cheapened speed.
A good cheap anti-dark is now the need.

Note the sly dual meaning of the adjective "cheap."

The long poem "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral" (*A Further Range*) points out that each new wave of technology heaps confusion and joblessness upon those least able to cope with them. The narrator, Meliboeus, who seems to express Frost's views in the dialogue between him and Tityrus (Meliboeus is described as living by "writing poems while living on a farm and calling it farming"), says of inventions and the "ingenuity" that produces them:

Which for no sordid self-aggrandizement,
For nothing but its own blind satisfaction
(In this it is as much like hate as love)
Works in the dark as much against as for us.
Even while we talk some chemist at Columbia
Is stealthily contriving wool from jute
That when let loose upon the grazing world
Will put ten thousand farmers out of sheep. . .

None should be as ingenious as he could,
Not if I had my say. Bounds should be set
To ingenuity for being so cruel
In bringing change unheralded on the unready.

Anti-technological sentiments indeed.

On the other hand, however, there is the poem "Riders" (*West-running Brook*). Man is born to be a rider "mounted bareback on the earth," ultimately able to bend and control his huge mount for his own ends:

But although it runs unbridled off its course,
And all our blandishments would seem defied,
We have ideas yet that we haven't tried.

Untried ideas, waiting for the ol' Yankee ingenuity--that same ingenuity about which such doubts were expressed in "Build Soil"--is a good working definition of the technological control of nature.

In other poems, technology seems to be firmly under control, as are the unnamed machinery of "A Trial Run" and Brad McLaughlin's telescope, that "blameless" piece of technology that leads to good talk and shared friendship.

The reconciliation of these two opposing views of technology lies, of course, in Frost's perception of the dualism that lies at the heart of even the simplest created device. Anything that can be used can also be abused--the word merely means "wrong use"--even something so simple as to be practically pre-technological, such as the fire in "The Bonfire" (*Mountain Interval*). The poet warns a group of children about what the bonfire, that symbol of holiday and festivity, is capable of doing to a mountain and a town, of how much destruction "I mean it shall not do if I can bind it." Another example, one employing a typically Frostian symbol, is found in "The Objection to Being Stepped On" (*In The Clearing*). The poet ruefully considers a hoe's dual potentiality after he unwittingly steps on its head and the handle rises up and hits him:

But was there a rule
The weapon should be
Turned into a tool?
And what do we see?
The first tool I step on
Turns into a weapon.

Similarly, the apples of "New Hampshire" are unsprayed and thus free from the poison of "vitriol or arsenate of lead"; their "purity" also makes them too wormy to use for anything but cider. Frost sees, apparently, as much dualism in technology's absence as in its presence.

A final aspect of technology that deserves special consideration because of the awesome nature of its effects is nuclear warfare. Frost wrote a handful of poems dealing with the bomb: "The Planners," "Bursting Rapture," "U.S. 1946 King's X," all from *Steeple Bush*. The astonishing thing about these poems is their tone. None of the horror, anger, resentment, or fear with which other writers have dealt with nuclear destruction is evident in Frost. "U.S. 1946 King's X" compares the men who made and dropped the A-bomb and who now strive to keep it from other nations, to children playing a game and calling, "King's X--no fairs to use it anymore!" "Bursting Rapture" satirically suggests to a bewildered farmer that the final nuclear destruction will at least relieve him of the need to puzzle over the increasing technological load of farming advances. Nor is "The Planners," with its reminder that generations both already dead and as yet unborn have nothing to lose even if man *does* blow up the planet, full of anything more than a mild and somewhat detached satire. It's as if Frost chides man for the bomb, but does not really give the issue his full attention or the full poetic power of his pen.

Why not?

Two possibilities suggest themselves. One is that Frost never *really* believed, when it came right down to the wire, that man would exterminate himself. There is some evidence for this view in his poetry. "It Bids Pretty Fair," published in the same collection as the above poems, seems to indicate that the only real extermination threat man faces lies outside his own powers:

The play seems out for an almost infinite run.
Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.
The only thing I worry about is the sun.
We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the lighting.

The same faith in man's continuance was expressed again fifteen years later with the publication of "A Wishing Well" (*In The Clearing*), in which Frost declared himself assured that

Man's practically inexterminate.
Someday I must go into that.
There's always been an Ararat
Where someone someone else begat
To start the world all over at.

Second, by the time the nuclear bomb became a reality, Frost was 71 years old. Vigorous, keen, sharp-witted—but 71 years old. As he himself revealingly said, in response to a comment by an interviewer that Frost seemed very much interested in science, "Yes, you're influenced by the science of your time, aren't you?"⁶ The nuclear age was not Frost's time. After nearly three-quarters of a century devoted to the poetic exploration of the natural landscape in and out of man, it was too difficult to retool for the new science of a new time. Frost says of man in "Kitty Hawk":

It will not be his
Ever to create
One least germ or coal.

One wonders what the old poet would have made of the current recombinant DNA research in Cambridge, in which the bacteria ("germ") *E. Coli* is being genetically transformed and "created" into new life forms.

But if the small group of nuclear-technology poems are disappointing, and if the much larger body of poems dealing with other aspects of science sometimes seems dismissive of what science can offer man, it is important to keep in mind that science was at best only a minor theme for Frost. His major themes, and the insights they provide into the human heart, remain timeless.

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Where someone someone else begat
To start the world all over at.

Second, by the time the nuclear bomb became a reality, Frost was 71 years old. Vigorous, keen, sharp-witted—but 71 years old. As he himself revealingly said, in response to a comment by an interviewer that Frost seemed very much interested in science, "Yes, you're influenced by the science of your time, aren't you?"⁶ The nuclear age was not Frost's time. After nearly three-quarters of a century devoted to the poetic exploration of the natural landscape in and out of man, it was too difficult to retool for the new science of a new time. Frost says of man in "Kitty Hawk":

It will not be his
Ever to create
One least germ or coal.

One wonders what the old poet would have made of the current recombinant DNA research in Cambridge, in which the bacteria ("germ") *E. Coli* is being genetically transformed and "created" into new life forms.

But if the small group of nuclear-technology poems are disappointing, and if the much larger body of poems dealing with other aspects of science sometimes seems dismissive of what science can offer man, it is important to keep in mind that science was at best only a minor theme for Frost. His major themes, and the insights they provide into the human heart, remain timeless.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly*, Feb. 1931, n. pag.
- ² Richard Poirer, "Robert Frost," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 2nd ser., introd. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Viking, 1963), pp. 22-3.
- ³ *Selected Poems of Robert Frost*, introd. Robert Graves (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), p. ii.
- ⁴ Poirer, p. 23.
- ⁵ "The Figure a Poem Makes," *Selected Poems of Robert Frost*, p. 2.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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