



Robert Frost and Creative Evolution

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I

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND precisely what Robert Frost meant by "creative evolution," it is first necessary to consider the history of that notion in general, to examine it not merely as an original concept of the idealistic Victorian and modern critics of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), but as a theory that existed side by side with the mechanistic theory that was centered in matter and biology since the ancient Greeks. In the opening two paragraphs of Henry Fairfield Osborn's important and largely denigrated article, "Aristogenesis, the Creative Principle in the *Origin of Species*" (1934), he made it clear that both Darwin and his critics, in their respective conceptions of evolution, were anticipated by the Greeks. The very title of Osborn's article indicates that Darwin's great work included elements of the creative principle:

As the title of his epoch-making work Darwin chose "The Origin of Species" (1859) because, as conceived by Linnaeus (1735),

"species" was the ultimate unit of Creation in the animal and plant world. *Nullae speciae norae* was the battle cry of the conservatives of pre-Darwin days, but what Darwin devoted his life to was the *origin of adaptations, not of species*. Species are simply the by-product of adaptations.

Adaptations and the origin of fitness carries us back with a gigantic leap over time to Democritus (450 B.C.) the opponent of the intelligent creative design of Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.) and the preponant of fixed natural laws in a purely mechanical system.... In truth mechanical adaptation was the oriflamme from Empedocles (494-435 B.C.), the father of the evolution idea, through Anaxagoras, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Plato. The Greeks led the way in forming what may be called the proto-Darwinian "chance hypothesis," the proto-Lamarckian "inheritance of acquired adaptations" hypothesis, and finally the "entelechiastic" doctrine of natural law tending to perfection. The progressive improvement or retrogressive degeneration of human and animal mechanisms were the guideposts to the use and disuse inheritance speculations from the naturalists of Greece and Rome to Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck....¹

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As Osborn summarily noted, the ancient Greeks anticipated "every phase of

modern speculation, amplified but not radically altered by our 'neo-Darwinians,' 'neo-Lamarckians,' 'mutationists' and 'geneticists,' 'entelechists' and 'vitalists,' all of whom feel the magnetism of the eternally baffling problem of the origins of adaptations."² In short, from the ancient Greeks to the time of Frost, there were several theories of evolution besides that of Darwin, and the basic conflicts over evolution were between those who adhered to the "chance hypothesis" based upon "fixed natural laws in a purely mechanical system," such as was held in its most extreme form by Ernst Haeckel and Thomas Henry Huxley, and those who believed in the "inheritance of acquired adaptations" hypothesis, a belief in "intelligent creative design," such as was advanced by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, and refined by Mivart, Butler, and Bergson. But since creative evolution in general allowed for great variations, both in basic principles and in the elements included in creativity, and since Frost's conception of creativity was highly original, his version differed in important ways from those of his predecessors.

What were the vital factors that distinguished Frost's creative evolution from that of Darwin's Victorian critics in the same tradition? The poet's eclectic habit of mind, his willingness to "accept anybody's...premises...let them have their say, and then...take it my way," meant that his philosophical dualism of mind or spirit and matter, combined with his thinking in metaphorical terms, enabled him to be far more original than any of his predecessors regarding the concept. His dualism was well balanced between the respective claims of matter and spirit, so that, unlike Butler and Bergson, he did not stress spirit to the almost total exclusion of matter but continued to accept Darwin's biological and botanical basis of life. Although Frost continued to be highly critical of Huxley's interpretation of Darwin's theory, even-

tually it appeared to him that Butler and Bergson opposed Huxley's material monism, not as dualists, but as spiritual monists.

No monistic view of evolution, or of anything else, could ever satisfy Frost. In his Notebook 001723 in the Baker Library at Dartmouth College, he recorded the difference between his dualism and the two kinds of monism, the mechanistic one centered wholly in matter, and the idealistic or spiritual one. Regarding evolution in man as a species, he rejected both of them: "Mechanism and Idealism: What's the difference? By any name all monisms come to the same thing. If all is good or all is bad we were still secure in monism. But we find in experience that there is a division between good and bad. We get both permanently so far as we have gone." The whole tenor of Frost's dualistic philosophical orientation in rejecting both forms of monism remained firmly fixed, rooted in his experience that good and bad, true and false, in all of their respective complexities, were a constant factor of mind or spirit and matter throughout human history. His conception of creative evolution was deeply grounded in his philosophical dualism, which respected matter and biology, but which construed mind or spirit as the most vital active element in generating changes in man as a species.

Sir Isaiah Berlin's famous adoption of Archilochus's distinction between two basic types of human thinkers—the fox and the hedgehog—may be fruitfully applied when considering the contrast between Frost's dualism and the two monisms regarding evolution. After noting that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," Berlin compares the monism of the hedgehog with the dualism or pluralism of the fox:

For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything

to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.³

In keeping with Berlin's analogy, Frost was clearly a fox, not a hedgehog, but in one important respect he differed from Berlin: he included a moral and aesthetic principle in his pluralistic conception of creative evolution. As a fox, Frost was always skeptical of ideological system-builders, whether in science, or in religion, or in politics or in anything else.

Berlin's analogy is no less applicable to thinkers concerned with physical nature than to those engaged in fields such as politics and ethics; so that Frost was well aware that there were two very different types of naturalists. In talks with students at Bread Loaf during the summers of 1939 and 1940, he identified Henry David Thoreau and Charles Darwin as naturalists who were almost polar opposites, although he readily admitted that he could admire both of them, each in his own way. Thoreau's *Walden* was for Frost the best single-word title borne by any book. It underscored the place as the dramatic setting for Thoreau's observations and narratives about nature. "All poetry begins with geography," Frost said, and much in *Walden* is poetry in prose.

Thoreau, a Harvard man who wore his classical education very lightly, invariably applied his value system in the humanities when describing events or places in nature. He was also a very keen observer of the natural world; in that respect he even excelled James Thomson, whose descriptive power in *The Seasons* is proverbial. Moreover, Thoreau was

not interested in reducing his empirical observations to any system or ideology. He found infinite resources within himself, in his aesthetic imagination and moral sense, so that, like Saint Francis of Assisi, he perceived something divine in every aspect of physical nature. Whether at Walden Pond or during a week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers, he transmuted every walk or trip in nature into a revelation about life and an episode of self-discovery.

In comparing Frost's responses to Thoreau and Darwin, it is good to remember his assertion that among the works he most cherished were *Walden* and Darwin's *The Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*.⁴ Both books were to Frost perfect examples of how naturalists could explore the external world as empirical and rational observers while subordinating science to the discipline and value system of the humanities. During the almost five years voyage on the *Beagle*, from December 27, 1831, to October 2, 1836, Darwin surveyed Brazil, Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, Peru, and various islands in the Pacific, including the Galapagos Archipelago, Tahiti, New Zealand, and Australia. Although he was only twenty-two years old when he embarked on the *Beagle*, he was already an experienced naturalist, with an amazing knowledge of plants, animals, birds, reptiles, insects, fossils, and geological formations.

The facility with which he described in scientific terms the organisms and specimens he collected is striking proof of his maturity as a scientist. Yet his intimate personal, chronological narrative, and his clear and concise prose style and sense of metaphor, make his book at once a classic of science and a masterpiece of literature. Undoubtedly, Frost's very favorable response to Darwin's account of the voyage of the *Beagle* carried over into his acceptance of *Origin of Species*. Like Whitman, who "contained multitudes," Frost's dualism

enabled him to perceive Darwin's theory as an epic metaphor, despite its being so heavily weighted by matter. But Darwin's theory of how changes occur in species through natural selection was wholly mechanistic, a world removed from a perception of science as one of the humanities. How did Frost account for the great differences between Darwin's *The Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle* and *Origin of Species*?

In his conversations with students at Bread Loaf, Frost made it clear that Thoreau as a naturalist provided the best explanation of what had happened to Darwin after the great evolutionist returned to England and became totally immersed in his scientific projects. Six years before he had published *Origin of Species*, Thoreau wrote in his journal (March 9, 1853), on the great danger in studying nature without reference to the spirit of man, which transcended a direct view of physical nature: "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through her and beyond her. To look at her is as fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone."⁵

Frost agreed with Thoreau, and on several occasions he spoke vehemently and at length about passages in Darwin's autobiography which revealed the evolutionist's gradual and eventually total loss of aesthetic sensibility regarding literature, music, painting, and the arts. During his voyage on the *Beagle*, Darwin recorded his former enthusiasm and taste for good literature; later, in his autobiography, he lamented his loss of such aesthetic sensibility:

I was fond of reading various books, and I used to sit for hours reading the historical plays of Shakespeare.... I read also other poetry, such as the recently published poems of Byron, Scott, and Thomson's *Seasons*.... I mention this because later in life I wholly lost, to my great regret, all

pleasure from poetry of any kind, including Shakespeare.⁶

...I took much delight in Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetry, and can boast that I read the *Excursion* twice through. Formerly, Milton's *Paradise Lost* had been my chief favourite, and in my excursions during the voyage of the *Beagle*, when I could take only a single small volume, I always chose Milton.⁷

Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music.⁸

Darwin regretted "this curious and lamentable loss of the higher aesthetic tastes," because it resulted in "the atrophy of that part of the brain...on which the higher tastes depend." He concluded by describing his state of mind and feeling and by identifying the cause of his great loss: "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding laws out of large collections of facts. It sometimes makes me hate science."⁹ In a moment of great candor, two years before he published *Origin of Species*, in a letter to Thomas Henry Huxley (July 9, 1857), he confessed that he consciously and deliberately sought to depersonalize his desires and emotions in order to achieve greater objectivity in his work: "...Alas: A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affections—a mere heart of stone."¹⁰ Two years after his monumental book had appeared, Darwin retrospectively identified a major cause of his loss of emotional and intellectual sensitivity. In a letter to H.W. Bates (December 3, 1861),

he wrote: "I have long thought that too much systematic work [and] description somehow blunts the faculties."¹¹ At the time that Darwin wrote *Origin of Species*, he was both emotionally and intellectually at the opposite pole from Frost when the poet formulated his conception of creative evolution.

Frost thought that it was remarkable that, given Darwin's enervated condition, he still retained enough of the sensibility he had had during his voyage on the *Beagle* to make good use of metaphorical language in explaining the principles of his theory. Darwin as a naturalist continued to fascinate Frost for the rest of his life. As he saw it, the evolutionist was the archetypal case of how a normal and superior mind could become aesthetically desensitized by being too immersed in the mechanical processes of its work. But the poet denied that science, as such, was the cause of Darwin's deprivation of aesthetic sensibility. The real cause was excessive specialization of any kind, the subversion of one's humanity in one's professionalism. Frost always believed that specialization destroyed the creative powers in man. He stated on several occasions that acquiring a vast quantity of factual knowledge beyond what could be usefully employed by the imagination, intuition, reason, consciousness, will, and memory injured the human psyche. Darwin was particularly vulnerable to the loss of his aesthetic sense, because, as he acknowledged, his education in the humanities was to him "simply a blank."¹² In addition to this severe self-depreciation, Frost also noted that during his voyage on the *Beagle* Darwin experienced a loss of faith in revealed religion. There was therefore nothing to set bounds to the scientific descriptions and quantitative measurements of facts in his research; no impediment centered in the value system of the humanities.

Despite his reservations about any

scientific theory treated as an abstract absolute, Frost continued to think well of Darwin throughout his adult life. When the poet was seventy-five years old, during an interview on November 17, 1949, he made a tantalizing analogy regarding himself and Darwin: "If a writer were to say he planned a long poem dealing with Darwin and evolution, we would be tempted to say it's going to be terrible. And yet you remember Lucretius. He admired Epicurus as I admired, say, Darwin. And he wrote a great poem."¹³ It is doubtful whether Frost ever seriously intended to write a long poem about Darwin and evolution, but he was clearly concerned about the naturalist's theory, both in his poetry and in his prose. Eventually that concern dilated upon how far it fell short of his own conception of creative evolution. As a dualist, Frost had the perennial problem of how to reconcile Darwin's apparent monism, centered in a mechanistic view of nature as pure matter, even in biology, with the contrary monism of such idealists as Thoreau, whose view of nature was more centered in mind or spirit. His belief that science is merely one of the humanities and his metaphorical treatment of both science and religion as two very different but not contradictory ways of understanding reality went far to humanize the differences between the two types of naturalists. Thoreau's type of humanistic naturalism is captured in Frost's poem "Two Look at Two" (1923), and Darwin's scientific naturalism is well illustrated in "The Most of It" (1942).¹⁴

The originality of Frost's conception of creative evolution cannot be perceived if it is assumed that he simply followed the traditional formulations of such critics of Darwin's theory as Butler and Bergson. Lawrance Thompson's account of Frost's enthusiastic response to Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911) has often misled a whole generation of scholars and literary critics to assume that the

poet was a close follower of that philosopher.¹⁵ Thompson's initial error was his failure to distinguish sharply between dualism and monism in Frost's philosophical orientation. Indeed, on several occasions he even implied that the poet was committed to a monistic view of man and nature.¹⁶ As a result of this imprecise treatment of Frost's philosophical perspective, many literary critics have assumed that his imagery and conception of nature, particularly in "West-running Brook," are indebted largely to Bergson. The culminating error in Thompson's contention lay in his belief that "for Frost, and perhaps for Bergson ... 'creative evolution' was of ultimate importance because it could be used to preach the gospel of triumph over death."¹⁷ This utterly simplistic mis-interpretation of both Bergson and Frost was justified by Thompson's dubious claim that they were philosophically and religiously related by way of Lucretius and Saint Paul, which he thought was evident in Frost's poem "West-running Brook."¹⁸

John F. Sears in "William James, Henri Bergson and the Poetics of Robert Frost" (1995), relied heavily upon Thompson's account of Frost's relationship with Bergson. In describing that thinker's psychology regarding "the mysteries of time, creation, and process," Sears raised the important question: "Bergson asked how does evolution express spirit?" To answer his query, he turned to Emerson's transcendental belief in the superiority of mind or spirit over matter, and concluded: "Our experience of the material world is thus effortlessly incorporated into our mental activity."¹⁹ Thus Frost's dualism of matter and mind was subsumed by Sears into the very Emersonian monism that the poet expressly rejected. A few years after Frost read Bergson, he came to perceive the French philosopher as in the tradition of Emerson and Butler: a spiritual monist rather than the dualist he had first thought him to be. As

Dorothy Judd Hall noted in "An Old Testament Christian," (*Frost Centennial Essays*, III), Frost's "initial enthusiasm" for Bergson "eventually waned," but she offered no explanation of why or how the poet came to modify his views on that philosopher's conception of creative evolution.

II

Frost's doubts about Bergson's philosophical orientation probably began shortly after he had read the French thinker's version of creative evolution. In 1939 at Bread Loaf, in a retrospective conversation with Peter Stanlis, Frost stated that George Santayana's critique of Bergson was essentially valid. That thinker's fifty-page analysis of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, in "The Philosophy of Henri Bergson," appeared in *Winds of Doctrine* (1913), just two years after Frost had read Bergson.²⁰ Santayana attacked Bergson's highly optimistic idealism and psychology, based upon his central principle, *élan vital*, which was his circumlocution for God, and according to Santayana was very similar to "the will of Schopenhauer or the unknowable force" of Herbert Spencer.²¹ He also noted that Bergson "has a horror of mechanical physics," and that "reason and science make him deeply uncomfortable."²² Since Frost respected the whole range of the biological and physical sciences as part of the humanities, far from having a horror of physics, he accepted it as wholly consistent with his belief in matter as a basic constituent of his dualistic philosophy.

But apart from religion and science, as applied to aesthetics and art, Bergson, like Jean Jacques Rousseau, made spontaneous emotion and self-expression paramount in creativity. He said nothing about the need of self-discipline to provide both direction and purpose in the creation of artistic design. This separation of emotion from reason, moral imagi-

nation, and the creation of form, lay at the heart of Bergson's psychology and aesthetics. His conception of creativity violated Frost's belief that "a poem is a thought-felt thing," a harmony of mind and passion, which required "tons and tons of discipline" in order to master technique and provide the means of creating form out of the raw materials of life. Finally, in sharp contrast to Frost, Bergson's creative evolution also contained an implicit belief in progress as applied to human nature itself. In 1940, Santayana repeated this criticism, writing sarcastically of "a Bergsonian vision of a miraculous human evolution."²³ In rejecting Bergson's view of "progress," by the period of the Great War, Frost had come to believe that human nature was "terminal," and was not evolving into superman, a belief that he held for the rest of his life.

Frost had no access to Santayana's most explicit criticism of Bergson's view of reality, which is set forth in a "Note on Bergson" deposited in the Manuscript Collection of Columbia University in 1969, and written on notebook sheets. The Spanish philosopher's own materialism is evident in his critique of Bergson's separation of matter and spirit: "The inertia of matter he calls matter, the energy of matter he calls life." He then charged that Bergson absorbed matter into a monism of spirit: "...Matter turns out to have no other substance than spirit itself.... In a pure monism it would make no real difference whether we called the one reality God or Nature, mind or matter, water or fire or will, since in any case this substance must be the seat and source of every kind of distant existence.... The great stream of 'life' is said to run through matter...."²⁴ In his "Note on Bergson," Santayana made explicit what had been implicit throughout his criticism of him in "The Philosophy of Henri Bergson" in 1913.

Whether through Santayana or on his

own initiative, or both, Frost came to doubt that Bergson shared his own dualistic view of reality. As a result of his skepticism, the poet's conception of creative evolution was qualitatively different from that of Bergson. Nevertheless, he continued to praise Bergson, not as an enthusiastic admirer but as a challenger of the established scientific orthodoxy of materialistic monists regarding evolution. Thus, on January 1, 1917, he wrote to Louis Untermeyer: "What I like about Bergson and Fabre is that they have bothered our evolutionists so much...."²⁵ Yet over the next several decades, in his further pursuit of Santayana, Frost discovered that apart from their agreement regarding Bergson, in his basic philosophy he thoroughly disagreed with his former Harvard teacher.

Frost's highly diverse but essentially critical response to Santayana as a man of letters and as a philosopher extended over six decades, and it illuminates basic elements in his own conception of creative evolution. In 1960, during Frost's interview for the *Paris Review*, he was asked whether Santayana interested him while he was the Spaniard's student at Harvard in 1898, and he responded:

No, not particularly. Well, yes. I always wondered what he really meant, where he was headed, what it all came to. Followed that for years. I never knew him personally.... But I admired him. It was a golden utterance—he was something to listen to, just like his written style. But I wondered what he really meant. I found years afterward somewhere in his words that all was illusion, of two kinds, true and false.²⁶

Lawrance Thompson claimed that Frost's initial response to Santayana was rage and hatred against his teacher's satirical and cynical condemnation of all idealistic thinking as naïve self-deception.²⁷ But Frost's own words indicate that his first reaction was far more ambiguous and complex. He admired the

philosopher's "golden utterance," his patrician grace as a speaker, and the subtle cadences and concise simplicity of his polished prose style, with its crisp epigrams and luminous personal insights that so often conveyed a magisterial profundity. But Santayana's literary brilliance obscured his basic philosophical principles, so that Frost "wondered what he really meant" and "where he was headed." Only after he had followed his former teacher for many years did he discover that Santayana believed that all religions and philosophies were merely forms of true or false illusions, myths that only credulous people accepted as true.²⁸ Through further reading in Santayana, Frost came to realize that this conviction was the logical outcome of the philosopher's materialism, naturalism, and agnosticism, all of which were incompatible with Frost's dualistic philosophy.²⁹

Frost's dualism of mind and matter always maintained a balance in their respective claims, but with a bias in favor of mind or spirit. Santayana's whole philosophy was permeated with the opposite conviction; that "the realms of matter...is the true matrix of mind."³⁰ The superiority of matter over mind was not limited to science, but applied to every aspect of human thought and actions. Santayana even asserted that the sonnets he wrote at Harvard as an undergraduate assumed the sovereignty of matter over mind: They "pointed out well enough where a mature solution might be found: in obedience to matter for the sake of freedom of mind."³¹ Matter or physical nature sets the standard for both empirical facts and for values in art and religion: "...Our senses, no less than our poetry and myth, clothe in human images the manifold processes of matter."³² Unlike Frost, Santayana admired both Herbert Spencer and Bertrand Russell, because in their comments on ethics, aesthetics, and every acceptable

form of idealistic thought they perceived mind as rooted in material nature and the biological nature of man.

Santayana found no difficulty in reconciling his belief in the primacy of matter with his religious inheritance as a Roman Catholic: "...The Latin and Catholic is hopelessly materialistic even in his religion...."³³ This belief is the basis of his lifelong intellectual epicureanism and pious reverence for Catholicism, which he denied was in any way contradictory: "Being at once a beast and a spirit doesn't seem to me a contradiction. On the contrary, it is necessary to be a beast if one is ever to be a spirit."³⁴ Unlike the dualism in Frost's philosophy, which involved construing spirit in terms of matter and matter in terms of spirit, Santayana was simultaneously an absolute material monist and a strict spiritual monist, with each theory mutually exclusive on its own terms, without interactions between them. But whenever this equivocal and ambiguous relationship between matter and spirit appeared headed toward a dissolution, Santayana resolved the problem in favor of materialism. "My whole description of the spiritual life is...an extension of my materialism and a consequence of it."³⁵ In "A General Confession" he admitted that his Catholicism "is a matter of sympathy and traditional allegiance, not of philosophy," which enabled him "to love the Christian epic, and all those doctrines and observances which bring it down into daily life."³⁶ In his belief that every philosophy and religion was either a good or bad illusion, Santayana clearly perceived Catholicism as a good and valid illusion. It is small wonder that William James, his colleague at Harvard, characterized his views on matter and spirit as "moribund latinity."

Since Santayana's philosophy was so wholly at odds with Frost's, including his conception of creativity and creative evolution, the poet's critical negative response to Santayana's condemnation

of New England Puritanism is an important dimension of his intellectual life. In contrast to Catholicism as a good form of religious illusion, Santayana believed that Calvinism was a false and evil illusion, which warranted his strong condemnation. Calvinist Puritanism liked its biblical religion pure, without any contamination from pagan philosophy, sensual art, or Roman Catholic superstitions. In 1940, Santayana recalled that when he was a young instructor in philosophy, his Harvard colleague "Royce felt how much I hated the worship of a Calvinistic God."³⁷ He acknowledged that his Spanish origins and early religious orientation made him strongly opposed to New England Puritanism and modern America: "...My Catholic background and Latin mind placed me in conscious and sometimes violent contrast with old Boston, and with the new America that has grown up for the most part after my day."³⁸ His hatred of New England Puritanism and its influence upon modern America is a major theme in many of his publications during the four decades after Frost had been his student at Harvard. Since Frost's whole background was in the tradition of Protestant dissenters, and because he held very positive views of America, Santayana's criticism opposed some of Frost's most cherished and essential beliefs.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, perhaps as part of his critical reaction to Santayana, Frost developed his own unique conception of New England Puritanism. He also became a strong defender of American society against all such critics. Yet he seldom made a public issue of his positive beliefs regarding Puritanism and America. But when Santayana published *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel* (1936), Frost felt compelled to respond publicly to its savage indictment of New England and Puritanism. His particularly strong reaction was due to the book's

long run as a best seller, which he believed would popularize a fallacious interpretation of Puritanism, New England, and creativity.

The Last Puritan is a fictional autobiography of a retired professor of philosophy, who describes and comments fully on all aspects of the Yankee descendants of the colonists of Massachusetts. The setting is Boston, a city converted by its Calvinist origins into "a moral and intellectual nursery, always applying first principles to trifles." To underscore his theme, Santayana elaborated it in a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue elucidates "Puritanism self-condemned." The chief protagonist, Oliver Alden, is the last Puritan, because "in Oliver Puritanism worked itself out to its logical end." He convinced himself, on Puritan grounds, that it was wrong to be a puritan, yet "he remained a puritan notwithstanding."³⁹

Oliver Alden is a latter-day Boston Brahmin, "a self-inhibited Puritan" at war with "the living forces of nature," who is incapable of having any spontaneous feelings of enjoyment; his self-control makes him admit that he hates all pleasures and what is called "having a good time." He is obsessed by an "absolute conscience," which imposes duties on him based upon rigid social conventions. In short, he is the embodiment of Santayana's earlier non-fictional accounts of "the genteel tradition."⁴⁰ He is the genteel tradition at bay. In total contrast to the Calvinist "thin-spun race" represented by Oliver is his Catholic cousin, Mario Van de Weyer. He is a complete cultural epicurean; a carefree, irresponsible but lovable rascal; a kind-hearted rogue; a Romantic Don Juan favored by women. His outward happy paganism hides an inward religious grace; he embodies the rich and sensual charm of the Mediterranean world.⁴¹

Frost not only thoroughly digested this fictional account, he paid special

attention to the epilogue, which presented the final tragedy of the last Puritan: "A moral nature burdened and overstrong, and a critical faculty fearless but helplessly subjective—isn't that the true tragedy of your ultimate Puritan?" The novel's final sentence made a strong lasting impression on Frost: "After life is over and the world has gone up in smoke, what realities might the spirit in us still call its own without illusion save the form of those very illusions which have made up our story?" The poet's immediate criticism of Santayana's account of Puritanism and New England, of the philosopher's religious and historical inadequacies, was merely a prelude to his ultimate rejection of that thinker's whole philosophy, which culminated in the belief that every form of idealism was an illusion. In a letter to Lawrance Thompson (June 12, 1948), Frost wrote: "The last pop of poppycock was for Santayana to say 'true illusion and false illusion, that is all there is to choose between.'"

The enormous differences between Santayana and Frost regarding Puritanism, America, and creativity in the arts and evolution, can be explained to some extent by their early lives, in their family background, particularly their religious upbringing. They were both brought to New England as children—Santayana from Spain in 1872, at age nine, with a Catholic inheritance; Frost from California in 1885, at age eleven, with a Protestant inheritance compounded of Presbyterian, Congregational, Unitarian, and Swedenborgian elements. Santayana's whole intellectual and cultural orientation derived from the ancient traditions and lifestyle of Latin Europe; Frost's entire psychology and value system were centered in the new world, in the promise of America to grow from a raw and primitive colonial society into a great nation. Baker Brownell, Santayana's student during his final year at Harvard, has summarized well those aspects of the

philosopher's life that provided Frost with one of his main critical points:

Though he lived in America forty years from childhood to middle age, was educated there in ... public school, college and university, held the famous Walker traveling fellowship from Harvard two years, wrote eleven of his books and earned his living there as a teacher of philosophy until he was fifty, Santayana never admits that he was more than an alien in our midst, a friendly observer without ties or burdens, an Athenian exiled by practical compulsions in Syracuse. He retired from teaching in January, 1912, left these shores immediately, and, I believe, has never returned.⁴²

To Frost, Santayana had neither sympathy with, nor understanding of, America. In essence, he resembled such American expatriates as Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, whose aesthetic and cultural orientation became predominantly European.

As young men, both Santayana and Frost were aware that throughout New England, orthodox Calvinism had long been replaced in many Congregational churches by the far more liberal and secularized theology of Unitarianism. Salvation was no longer restricted exclusively to the small minority of God's elect, but was available to all of humanity. But whereas Santayana was highly critical of Unitarianism, regarding it as Calvinism turned inside out, an abandonment of Christianity, Frost wholeheartedly accepted the transmutation in Calvinism as a positive improvement in the broad range of Augustinian Christianity. To Santayana, the changes in Puritanism were superficial, as was evident in his severe criticism of Emerson's transcendentalism and William James's pragmatism and psychology, those quintessential formulations by the founders of "the genteel tradition." Frost was well aware that New England Puritanism still retained some of the prime cultural constituents

of the old Calvinist tradition.

During the brief period that his mother, sister, and he had to stay with his grandparents, after arriving from California, he experienced their sour disposition and harsh disciplinary attitude over trifles that often characterized the Puritan temperament. Moreover, at first, as he readily admitted, he did not like his New England neighbors. But in time he came to appreciate the candor, freshness, and originality in Yankee speech, a basic Puritan trait, which became so essential in his poetry. He also learned to admire the enormous courage, discipline, and self-reliance that derived from New England Puritanism, traits that were so vital in artistic creativity and in the development of a strong civil-social order as the chief mechanism in creative evolution for man as a species.

Frost's conception of the changes in Puritanism is clearly evident in his poem "The Generations of Men" (1913), which placed him at the farthest pole from Santayana and other critics of New England Puritanism, while it sharpened his beliefs regarding both artistic production and creative evolution. His poem explored the modern Yankee Puritan "pride in ancestry," voiced by a young man and woman, distant cousins who meet by chance during a reunion of the Stark family. Regarding their original Calvinist inheritance, they note: "The life is not yet all gone out of it." They are liberal toward new arrivals in New England: "One mustn't bear too hard on the newcomers." For decades Frost strongly approved of the waves of immigrants that flocked to America during the nineteenth century and later. In "The Generations of Men" the young couple voice Frost's view of himself as expressed in a letter to Louis Untermeyer (June 30, 1919): "Half of me has been here nine generations, the other half one generation, which makes me more representative I think than if I was altogether of old

stock. I'm an ideal combination of been-here-since-the-beginning and just-come-over." The young man in the poem voices Frost's own latitudinarian conviction on how to regard Puritanism:

But don't you think we sometimes make
too much

Of the old stock? What counts is the
ideals,

And these will bear some keeping still
about.

III

Restoring a public awareness of the enduring "ideals" of New England Puritanism became an important theme in Frost's intellectual life, particularly during the decade of the 1930s.⁴³ It also provided an important element in his conception of creative evolution. It would take a substantial study to describe in detail Frost's defense of New England Puritanism. Here it is sufficient to summarize his main thesis regarding the ideals and achievements of New England, to note his rebuttal of those who demonized the Puritans, and to perceive the connection between his view of Puritanism and his conception of artistic creativity and creative evolution.

Frost was in substantial agreement with the portraits of New England Puritans painted by Samuel Eliot Morison in *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930), and *Puritan Pronouns* (1936), and especially by Perry Miller in *The New England Mind* (1939). Miller's book shattered the narrow and unhistorical view of Puritans as inhibited by their strict moral code of behavior: "...Even in the shadow of their creed the Puritans were not sexually inhibited.... They read secular poetry, played musical instruments, cracked jokes, and imbibed prodigious quantities of alcoholic beverages."⁴⁴ According to both Miller and Frost, it was also a serious mistake to regard Calvinism as an original and self-sufficient concep-

tion of Christianity. In his first chapter, "The Augustinian Strain of Piety," which established a frame for his entire study, Miller made it clear that Calvinism was merely an extreme modern form of Augustinian Christianity. On this vital point Frost agreed with him. But Frost refined upon Miller, and also insisted that Puritanism, in its basic Augustinian theology and piety, was to be found in every religion—not only in the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican forms of Christianity, but also in Judaism and even in the pagan mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. To Frost, a Puritan was anyone who was willing to put moral bounds on what he wanted, including not only pleasures of the senses, such as "wine, women, and song," but also such things as political power. A Puritan was essentially an ascetic regarding pleasure and power. He was as much a practitioner of restraint through prudence and temperance as he was a person devoted to recognition of, and abidance by, right moral principles. His opposite, Frost believed, was the self-indulgent hedonist and the undisciplined egocentric.⁴⁵

Frost knew that his highly eclectic and original conception of Puritanism as self-restraint regarding personal pleasure and power was highly remote from how most people understood it. On June 30, 1955, during his poetry reading at the opening session of the Bread Loaf School of English, he threw down a challenge: "I thought if I came up again some evening, I'd like to talk about Puritanism—in Greek, Roman, Early Roman, New England, and later Roman...." To whet the interest of his audience, he added: "Wait until you hear me on the subject.... Come up and I'll really shock you."⁴⁶ A month later, on July 28, he returned to Bread Loaf and spoke informally "On Puritanism, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein." It is noteworthy that he placed Puritanism at the head of these seminal modern thinkers. To those who had the common

conventional view of Puritanism, Frost's reflections were undoubtedly a shock.

He first noted that for many years he had thought of the pagan puritanism of the ancient Greeks and Romans: "Everything about Diana and Minerva had something to do with chastity and all that—and restraint." He remarked that among English poets "the mockery of Chaucer" and "the severity of Langland" were early indications of the rise of modern Puritanism, which culminated in the sixteenth-century religious explosion of the Protestant Reformation. Milton was to Frost "the great poet of Puritanism," and his "Comus" was the perfect example of a Puritan poem. In politics, Frost contrasted two American presidents in relation to Puritanism: "There were no checks in [Franklin D.] Roosevelt," because "he would have taken the presidency as many times as you would give it to him, in contradiction to George Washington who had checks within himself." Among contemporaries whom he knew personally, Frost designated as puritanical the American Catholic poet Louise Imogene Guiney; the Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo; the humanist Irving Babbitt; and a Catholic reporter on the *Boston Post*, whom he characterized as "one of the most learned people, with his Irish wit...an old Puritan" who liked to quote Saint Thomas Aquinas's aphorism: "The virtue of all virtues is prudence."

Frost then recalled that in "Comus" Milton "talks like a Socialist...that's a kind of Puritanism," and therefore, he contended, "Marx is a Puritan, Karl Marx." If the Protestant Reformation was an Augustinian Puritan revolt, so too, Frost believed, was its Catholic counterpart: "Another thing...the Puritans gave us is the great counterrevolution—Loyola and all that...." By logical extension through history, he concluded, "We all may go back to the Roman church in the end. I'm not saying we won't. The tremendous blow Puritanism struck over three or

four or five hundred years there in history—that'll be forgotten.... Sometimes when I don't think I know any good Puritans in the Protestant church I go see my Catholic Puritans, and they're there." More and more during the 1940s and 1950s, Frost came to believe that among his contemporaries, religious Jews and Roman Catholics were far more likely to be Puritans than were Protestants.⁴⁷

Instead of perceiving Puritanism as Frost did, in the ancient pagan Greek and Roman mythology, and in Judaism and the whole tradition of Augustinian Catholic and Protestant Christianity, the critics of New England Puritanism "get it all narrowed down to a certain kind of people that came late to America...Plymouth Rock people and the Mayflower people" These narrow-minded critics, lacking in historical and theological perspective, "like to talk about witchcraft and Salem."⁴⁸ They ignore the transformations of Calvinism, of "puritanism bursting through its age-long repressions,"⁴⁹ the "puritanism [that] didn't repent [but] relented a little and became Unitarianism."⁵⁰ As a consequence, such prejudiced critics ignored the vital intellectual, political, and cultural achievements of the best among New England Puritans.

Frost liked to remind his listeners that New England Congregational Puritans were the first to establish many of the academies and universities in America—not only Harvard and Yale, but such colleges as Amherst, Williams, Dartmouth, Bowdoin, Middlebury, and many other schools scattered around New England. These colleges provided the models for American education. Frost noted that "the Puritan movement...scattered teachers...all over the United States."⁵¹ Puritans were also pioneers in women's education, founding Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and Vassar. Compared with any other city, Frost observed, Boston was "where there were more college-educated people," and New England "was

the most collegiate community the world ever saw."⁵² Although the primary purpose of the men's colleges initially was to educate their clergy, they admitted the laity, and the curriculum always included, not only biblical studies, but the extensive requirements in the whole European cultural tradition comprehended by the medieval quadrivium and trivium, albeit purged of its Catholicism. In the Puritan educational system, the liberal arts and humanities, including science, were well preserved and much honored. Puritan education enhanced the cultural life of America, and it thereby made possible the evolutionary development of civil society, contributing in the process to Frost's conception of creative evolution.

Frost was well aware that after America achieved its independence, in the early decades of the American republic, as the course of empire moved westward, the New England Puritan "ideals" that "will bear some keeping still about" mentioned in his poem "The Generations of Men," were diffused throughout the Middle West. Frost knew that when Connecticut became a state in 1786, its leaders had retained a legal claim to the area on the south shore of Lake Erie around Cleveland, Ohio, which they called "the Western Reserve." He also remembered that during several decades before 1825, Congregational pioneers from Connecticut had migrated "in ox-drawn, canvas-covered wagons" over the route marked by the Erie Canal and settled in that area. As John F. Fulton, a biographer of one of their most famous descendants wrote: "Here in the Western Reserve they had finally established what was said to be 'the largest, strongest, and most characteristic single, compact colony in the West, the last distinct footprint of Puritanism.'"⁵³ Frost regarded these pioneers as the early forerunners of those who migrated westward before and after the civil war. Imbued with this acute sense of

American history, Frost began his sustained public attacks on those who, like Santayana, had traduced the whole New England Puritan cultural tradition.

Within a year after the publication of Santayana's *The Last Puritan*, on June 8, 1937, Frost delivered the commencement address at Oberlin College, entitled "What Became of New England?" He deliberately chose that school as the place to inaugurate his plan because it had been founded by descendants of New England Puritans. He opened his address with the thematic contention that New England had diffused its "ideals" in education, politics, and culture throughout America: "Friends, graduating class of 1937 and New England—once removed, perhaps, as Western Reserve; twice removed, from Wisconsin; four times removed, like me, from California—but New England."⁵⁴ He first disposed of those critics who had described New England as "a decadent and lost society." He noted that as early as 1913 it had "cost me some pain" that critics of *North of Boston* had praised the book for his skill in picturing that region in decline.⁵⁵ He objected to Ford Madox Ford's reference to New England independent farmers as a "peasantry," that had "dried up and blown away in three hundred years." Conversely, he praised Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865* (1936), except for "a slight suggestion of the Spengler history—indication of decline." Clearly, Frost was painfully aware that many others besides Santayana had a highly negative understanding of New England Puritanism.

One of the major themes in Frost's important address was the vital contribution of New England to the future social and political development of the United States as a constitutional democracy: "What was New England? It was the first little nation that bade fair to be an English-speaking nation on this continent...with its capital at Boston." He noted

that "people in Virginia remarked the rapid development of the little nation there.... The little nation that was and was to be gave itself, as Virginia gave herself, westward, into the great nation that she saw coming, and so gave help to America." Long before New York became the chief channel for European migrants to the United States, Frost observed, "New England...was the port of entry of our freedom." Regardless of their exclusive theology and conscious religious intention, the Puritans were to Frost part of the large unfolding historical design that ultimately produced in the United States a social and political nation of disparate peoples.

The Calvinist religious "covenant of grace," based upon a fixed compact between the Puritans and God, could not long be restricted to those who regarded themselves as "God's elect." With each new wave of immigrants, the original vision of an Edenic world recovered, an earthly paradise, a "new Jerusalem," a shining city on a hill, yielded increasingly to the idea of an open society, wherein the monolithic Augustinian concept of the city of God was transformed into the multiple secular city of man. In time, the Calvinist theocracy evolved into the expanded and secularized "Commonwealth of Massachusetts," based upon a social contract theory that anticipated the post-revolutionary constitutional democracy of the United States. Thus the New England social covenant of a common citizenship of free men changed American social relationships from the medieval concept of fixed status within an hierarchical system into the open status of voluntary contractualism of free individuals with equal civil and legal rights under constitutional law.⁵⁶ As all this makes clear, New England was to Frost not merely a geographical region, but a capacious metaphor to live by, an evolving way of American life, in which the Puritan virtues of faith and courage

provided the principles, beliefs, and disciplined actions that helped to create a great new nation.⁵⁷ The creation and expansion of a just and free civil-social order was a crucial element in Frost's conception of creative evolution.

In saying that like New England, "Virginia gave herself, westward," the very language of Frost's Oberlin College address anticipated his poem, "The Gift Outright," which he called his history of the United States in sixteen lines. The shift from a dependent English settlement and colony to an independent American nation, filled with the promise of a great historical destiny, reached its climax in the final lines of that poem:

Such as we were we gave ourselves
outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of
war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would
become.

New England Puritanism provided not merely the westward direction of national expansion; its work ethic also helped to shape the cultural character of the American people. In addition, it gave Frost his own political orientation regarding the conflicting claims to legal sovereignty advanced by a regional and central authority. The structure and the traditions of the Congregational Church, with its sovereignty vested in the local parish, provided him with the model for his social individualism and for his conception of a geographical, democratic, political sovereignty centered in "states rights," as opposed to a wholly dominant centralized and hierarchical federal authority.

In his Oberlin College address, moreover, Frost assailed those critics who attacked New England Puritanism as deficient in aesthetic sensibility. He complained that "they want to rob the Puri-

tans of art." But "there was Boston," with its simple but "beautiful architecture," and he noted that although the Puritans did not have a theatre, they did not "mind a play if it was in a book—Cotton Mather had one of the first folios of Shakespeare—and you could read a play in Boston." Furthermore, in the domestic arts, "there were ten silversmiths in Boston before there was a single lawyer."⁵⁸ But the poet's strongest defense of the Puritans was his recognition of their achievements in literature. At Bread Loaf, Frost noted that, from the colonial beginnings to the modern era, the list of Puritan writers read like a roster of America's greatest writers: Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, Philip Freneau, Bryant, Barlow, Franklin, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Melville, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, Dickinson. In addition to these giant figures from the past, there were such moderns as Robinson and Wallace Stevens, and a whole host of lesser known writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Even an expatriate poet such as T.S. Eliot was in essence a New England Puritan. Clearly, these writers contributed heavily to the formation of America's high culture. Whereas Frederick Jackson Turner believed that "the wilderness masters the colonist," Frost contended that the Puritans transformed the moral and aesthetic character of the "unstoried" and "artless" western lands and "enhanced" them into the civil-social features characteristic of modern America.

One of the most significant interpretations Frost ever made was to link the creative power in literature and the arts with the Puritan modification and renewal of language. This vital connection permeated his whole dualistic philosophy. It also was the basis of his conception of creative evolution, and as such it underscored his criticism of Santayana's philosophy, especially that writer's severe strictures against New England Pu-

ritanism. At Oberlin he noted that "the whole function of poetry is the renewal of words, is the making of words mean again what they meant." Later in his address, he connected this statement with the whole Puritan tradition:

And the thing New England gave most to America was the thing I am talking about: a stubborn clinging to meaning; to purify words until they meant again what they should mean. Puritanism had that meaning entirely: a purifying of words and a renewal of words and a renewal of meaning. That's what brought them to America and that's what kept them believing.... They saw there was a meaning that was not elusive.⁵⁹

The Puritan "renewal of words" and "renewal of meaning" through language is at the aesthetic core of Frost's entire literary enterprise in forming his plain colloquial style in both poetry and prose. It also constitutes the pith of his belief in creative evolution as the primary force in the development of civilization. Puritanism provides the nexus between ethics as a check upon the will and the passions, and aesthetic creativity in providing form in both art and the structured order of civil society.

In Frost's poem, "The Generations of Men," the young speakers imaginatively "consult the voices" of their Puritan ancestors, and regarding their great-grandmother Stark, the man recalls that "Folks in her day were given to plain speaking." This construal of the simplicity, directness, and concreteness of Puritan language touches what both Frost and Perry Miller regarded as perhaps the most important moral and intellectual trait of the earliest English Puritans. In their religious rebellion against the elaborate liturgical forms of worship purveyed by Rome and Canterbury, their passion for "plain speaking" based in Scripture characterized their sermons. Miller devoted an entire chapter to "The Plain Style" of the Puritans, explaining that "for three or

four decades before the settlement of New England" the syntax and plain style of Puritan preachers was "prominent in the intellectual inheritance of New Englanders."⁶⁰ Following his English models, Increase Mather's "low style" and "naked simplicity" in preaching set a standard for many Congregational sermons. Frost's defense of the linguistic originality in the work of New England Puritans is perhaps best appreciated when perceived historically, as part of the revolution in the English prose style achieved by their scientists in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Thomas Sprat showed in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) that the Puritan members of this scientific community were instrumental in establishing the plain style as the proper vehicle for scientific discourse.⁶¹ Charles Darwin was wholly in the Puritan tradition in writing his scientific works.

In light of the poet's defense of this linguistic originality, his strong criticism of Santayana at Oberlin takes on enormous significance. It provides a means of understanding his conception of creative evolution. Frost believed that Santayana's extremely harsh criticism of both New England Puritanism and America was based upon his misunderstanding of the original and full meaning of words. Such phrases as "all men are created free and equal," "a God-fearing man," "divine right," and so on, were treated obtusely by the philosopher; his materialism and rationalism gave him only a superficial and literal-minded discernment of language as a vehicle for comprehending these ideas. It is small wonder that Thompson recorded that Frost said repeatedly that "Santayana is the enemy of my spirit."⁶² In 1937, at Oberlin, Frost recalled his first encounter with him almost forty years earlier:

In 1897 I was sitting in a class in college when I heard a man spend quite the part of an hour making fun of the expression that we were all free and equal. So easy to

dismiss.... You can get out a theory that meanings go out of things, you can call it disillusionment. You can get disillusionment of a phrase such as fearing God and equality. And then you can form a religion like George Santayana. He lets you see that there is nothing but illusion, and it can be just as well one kind as another. There is illusion that you are unconscious of, and there is illusion that you become conscious of later.... But you should go right on anyway because there's no proof, all is illusion. You grow to be a sad person....⁶³

Frost concluded his criticism by noting in regard to such heterogeneous subjects as witchcraft, modern industrialism, and the New Deal, that "you can make it all illusion with a little help of Santayana. He says right out in his philosophy that there are two kinds of illusion, two kinds of madness: one is normal madness, and the other is abnormal madness."⁶⁴ Frost's appreciation of the great irony in Santayana's thought was unique: he alone saw that the philosopher's exaltation of reason and his insistence on the sole reality of matter ended in the woeful sadness of complete illusion, whereas the Puritanism that he so savagely criticized provided a constant renewal of meaning through language in the creative and evolving life of American civil society.

IV

In general, scholars and literary critics have ignored the vital role of Puritanism in Frost's aesthetic theory, in his practice as a poet, and in his conception of creative evolution. He believed that two important elements were necessary for a poet's creativity to produce successful and enduring art. One of these was bold emotion—the passion to "set us on fire" and "set us revolving,"⁶⁵ a wild and sensuous Dionysian frenzy that energizes a poet's sensibility, consciousness, memory, and fictional imagination. But

in itself such a Rousseauistic discharge of raw impulses and feelings is not enough to produce durable poetry. As Frost objected: "There is no greater fallacy going than that art is expression."⁶⁶ A true poet knows how to make his emotions "jet at one outlet only," so that his images and metaphors are compressed and remain focused on his theme, and do not "ooze off" and become "turned loose in exclamations." Frost called such raw emotions "sunset raving." In his Notebooks he recorded: "Creation is the boldness. How to be with caution bold is the problem."⁶⁷ Clearly, the second essential element in creativity involved the Puritan virtues of self-restraint in all its aspects. These included the poet's belief in himself and his art, and his prudence, caution, disciplined will and courage, which controlled and directed his emotions through "the prism of the intellect." Thus the fusion of mind and passion in Frost's aesthetic theory and conception of creativity was summarized in his phrase "*mens animi*." He thought it fitting in the mythology of the ancients that Apollo, not Dionysus, was the god of poetry.

The social, ethical, and aesthetic self-restraint that provided the Apollonian qualities in Frost's Puritan conception of creativity, both in poetry and in the evolution of man in society throughout recorded history, derived from both ancient classical and epic literature and Scripture. To Frost, the perfect example of a Puritan poet who exemplified his conception of creativity was John Milton. He possessed the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic virtues at their fullest development. His courage in overcoming his blindness, his erudition, his serene self-confidence, and his mastery of his craft transformed the chaotic elements in nature and human affairs into the abiding forms of his poetry, thereby enabling him to create the greatest epic in the English language.

In a letter to G.R. Elliott (April 22,

1947), Frost defined his own particular Puritan tradition. He noted that his “approach to the New Testament is rather through Jerewsa[lem] [sic] than through Rome and Canterbury.” Thompson’s chapter on Frost’s Puritanism, “Yes I Suppose I am a Puritan,” is too rooted in the conventional misconceptions of that religio-cultural tradition, too literal-minded in its exposition, too monistic in its philosophical orientation, and too isolated from both the poet’s aesthetic theory and his practice. Like many literary critics who follow him, Thompson displays no awareness of the relationship between Frost’s Puritanism and his conception of creative evolution.

In 1959, during the symposium on “The Future of Man,” in strong opposition to Sir Julian Huxley’s belief that changes in human species were “more or less accidental,” Frost contended that the mechanism of evolutionary changes in man, “the best guide of all,” is “passionate preference.”⁶⁸ A few months later, on May 5, 1960, during a Senate hearing in Washington, D.C., when he testified in favor of a proposal to establish a national academy of culture, Frost reiterated his thesis of how mankind has “come up” through evolutionary changes: “I think it’s passionate preference. Passionate preference. It’s done in all ways—in the arts more than anywhere else.”⁶⁹ For Frost the connection between aesthetic production and creative evolution as a vital instrument in human culture included but transcended Darwin’s mechanism of change through natural selection. Passionate preference was Frost’s chief principle of natural selection. Creative evolution was man’s “best guide upward” and included for Frost the initial intention, purpose, and design of God or nature in the universe. His ultimate rebuttal of Sir Julian Huxley is in his poem “Accidentally on Purpose,” particularly in the concluding lines:

Grant me intention, purpose, and
design—
That’s near enough for me to the Divine.
And yet for all this help of head and
brain
How happily instinctive we remain,
Our best guide upward further to the
light,
Passionate preference such as love at
sight.

Thus Frost made central to evolutionary changes in man the very aesthetic principle of creativity most lacking in Darwin’s theory.

At first sight, Frost’s appeal to “passionate preference” may seem the equivalent in his conception of evolution to Darwin’s strong case for “sexual selection” in the fourth chapter of *The Descent of Man* (1871). Both are in their respective contexts the essential but not exclusive mechanism of evolutionary changes in man. But Darwin’s “sexual selection” is wholly based upon biology, whereas Frost identified his principle as “that inexorable thing in us, Biblical thing... passionate preference for something we can’t help wishing were so.” The poet’s principle derives from the scriptural injunction for man to “increase and multiply.” It involves the profound difference between primitive man’s biological lust in a state of nature and historical man’s social, moral, and religious conception of love in a divinely ordained institution of marriage. As Frost noted in his “Letter to the Amherst Student,” his creative evolution transcends Darwin’s adaptive principle of a mechanistic natural selection: “In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself.”⁷⁰ Frost’s creative evolution goes beyond the scientific explanation of man as a biological creature composed solely of matter; it also includes the aesthetic and religious dimension of man as a creature who possesses spirit.

On several other occasions Frost confirmed his belief that creative evolution

includes far more than can be explained by Darwin's naturalistic theory. The practical concerns and life of man within an historically developed complex society was far more in harmony with the poet's conception of creative evolution than it was with a theory centered wholly in a primitive pre-civil state of nature. Considered metaphorically, both conceptions of evolution provided basic myths by which mankind could live. On March 10, 1961, during an interview with Earl Ubell for the *New York Herald Tribune*, the poet acknowledged his great "attraction to science," and once more repeated his boyhood witticism regarding evolution: "God made man out of prepared mud." Ubell then recorded: "However, he prefers the myth to live by—the Garden of Eden, the fall of man.... He prefers it to live by, rather than the story of the descent from an albino monkey."⁷¹

In March 1961, during his state-sponsored visit to Israel, Frost rejected some of the historical accounts by his Arab guide regarding places and events mentioned in the Bible, but then, according to Thompson, he declared: "At least, he said, they offered greater elevation and moral significance than the evolution myths created by Charles Darwin."⁷² Frost's preference for the biblical norms by which to live is expressed negatively in the concluding lines of his poem "The White-Tailed Hornet":

Our worship, humor, conscientiousness
Went long since to the dogs under the
table.
And served us right for having instituted
Downward comparisons. As long on
earth
As our comparisons were stoutly
upward
With gods and angels, we were men at
least,
But little lower than the gods and
angels.
But once comparisons were yielded
downward,

Once we began to see our images
Reflected in the mud and even dust,
'Twas disillusion upon disillusion,
We were lost piecemeal to the animals,
Like people thrown out to delay the
wolves.
Nothing but fallibility was left us,
And this day's work made even that
seem doubtful.

Frost believed that, along with the heroic tales of epic literature, the biblical account of man's epic story came much closer to the daily life of man, and the record of human experience throughout history, than Darwin's biological account of man in his theory of evolution.

But Frost's creative evolution did not reject Darwin's theory; rather, it supplied a supplementary exposition of how man continued to evolve throughout history, beyond biology. To the poet, art is man's nature, as well as biology. His conception of creative evolution represents the culmination of the long intellectual and cultural tradition that validates Perry Miller's observation that "Puritan theorists sought to unite in one harmonious system both science and religion, reason and faith."⁷³ This system also embraced many cognitive strains of Frost's total philosophy: his dualism of spirit and matter; his faith in metaphorical thinking; his belief that science is merely one of the humanities, and not a separate and self-sufficient subject; his conviction that human nature differs qualitatively from all other forms of animal life, in kind, not merely in degree; and, finally, his concept of creative evolution includes the constant "renewal of language" and "renewal of meaning," which he identifies with his original notion of Puritanism as a basic element in man's power to produce both art and civilization.

1. Henry Fairfield Osborn, "Aristogenesis, the Creative Principle in *Origin of Species*," *The American Naturalist* (May-June 1934), Vol. LXVIII, No. 716, 193-194. Forty years earlier, Osborn had published a book, *From the Greeks to Darwin* (New York, 1894), which almost a century later was dismissed by Ernst Mayr as "too uncritical to be still useful." See *The Growth of Biological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 872. However, Mayr did not mention Osborn's later article, which appeared when the modern synthesis of Darwin's theory was nearly completed. Osborn's Latin phrase, *Nullae speciae no rae*, is probably best translated as "no new species." 2. *Ibid.*, 195. It is noteworthy that Darwin himself admitted that scientists as yet knew nothing about the origins of life. 3. Quoted by Alan Ryan in "Wise Man," a review of Berlin's life and work, *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1998, 34. 4. See Peter J. Stanlis, "Robert Frost at Bread Loaf," *Frost Centennial Essays*, III, 245-246. 5. Henry David Thoreau, *The Journals*, VI, 30. Quoted in an essay by Scott Slovic, "An Approach to Thoreau and Eisley," *Weber Studies* (Winter 1992). 6. Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin: 1809-1882* (New York, 1958), 43-44. Darwin wrote his autobiography in stages between August 1876 and his final illness in 1881. 7. *Ibid.*, 85. 8. *Ibid.*, 138. 9. *Ibid.*, 139. Samuel Butler believed that Darwin's theory was so deeply rooted in matter that it had destroyed his ability to retain the concept of mind in the universe. See William Irvine, *Apes, Angels and Victorians* (New York, 1955), 273-274. 10. *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (1903), I, 98. 11. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (1911), II, 171. For other examples of Darwin's lament over his loss of aesthetic sensitivity, see 189 and 273. See also *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, I, 324-326. 12. In a letter to Canon Farrar (March 5, 1867), Darwin referred to his schoolboy failure to appreciate the humanities: "I am one of the root and branch men." *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, II, 441. His self-denigration was exaggerated. 13. Harvey Breit, *The Writer Observed* (New York, 1961), 69. See also Edward C. Lathem, *Interviews with Robert Frost*, 124. 14. Two other of Frost's poems that may be read as variations on the theme of "The Most of It" are "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "Desert Places." Important points of similarity to "Two Look at Two" are to be found in "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." 15. For a detailed account of Thompson's explication of Frost's response to Bergson, see *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915*, 381-383 and 579-581; *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, 624-626. 16. Thompson made far too much of Frost's recorded remark "that he was a dualist in his thinking and a monist in his wishing," and that therefore "he was at least emotionally sympathetic with anyone like Plato who made the leap beyond dualism of the known to the all-controlling 'One' of the unknown." *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, 243-245. Thompson then went on to

interpret Frost's poem "I Will Sing You One-O" as a "hymn to Oneness," that is, a commitment to monism. But Frost expressly rejected Plato's philosophy, and repeatedly made it clear that he was a philosophical dualist. 17. *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, 625. 18. *Ibid.*, 624-626. 19. John F. Sears, "William James, Henri Bergson and the Poetics of Robert Frost," *New England Quarterly*, 48 (1995), 350. Much that Sears writes about Frost's poetics is wholly valid. 20. It is noteworthy that at the same time that Santayana's criticism of Bergson appeared, Arthur O. Lovejoy published "Bergson and Romantic Evolutionism," *University of California Chronicle*, XV, No. 438 (October 1913). There is no evidence that Frost ever read Lovejoy's article. 21. George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine* (New York, 1913), 69-70. 22. *Ibid.*, 64. 23. George Santayana, "Apologia Pro Mente Sua," in *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, 1940), 499. 24. *Physical Order and Moral Liberty: Previously Unpublished Essays of George Santayana*, ed. John and Shirley Locks (Charlotte, N.C., 1969), 307-308. 25. *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, 47. 26. *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose & Plays*, ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York, 1995), 884-885. 27. Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915*, 244-245. 28. Santayana's conviction that all beliefs are merely forms of illusion was explicitly stated in *Winds of Doctrine* (1905), 51-52. He repeated this conviction with many variations in his subsequent writings. 29. For explications of Santayana's basic philosophical beliefs see *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York, 1941). The antithesis of Santayana to Frost is most evident in William Ray Dennes, "Santayana's Materialism," 419-443; Sterling F. Lamprecht, "Naturalism and Agnosticism in Santayana," *Animal Faith and Spiritual Faith*, ed. John Locks (New York, 1967), 147-163. C.A. Strong, Santayana's college friend and companion for many years, identified him as an agnostic in "Santayana's Philosophy," *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 448-449. 30. George Santayana, "The Harvard Yard," in *Persons and Places* (New York, 1944), 188. As one scholar has noted: "Through all his work, Santayana offers a recurrent reminder that our life cannot be divorced from its natural environment, within which it must seek its fulfillment." Newton P. Stallknecht, *George Santayana* (Minneapolis, 1971), 9. Regarding Herbert Spencer, Santayana wrote: "I agreed with his naturalism or materialism, because that is what we all start with." *Persons and Places*, 242. See also 243. 31. George Santayana, "College Studies," in *Persons and Places*, 241. 32. *Ibid.*, 240. 33. *Ibid.*, 230. 34. *Ibid.* See also George Santayana, "A General Confession," in *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 12-13. 35. George Santayana, "Apologia Pro Mente Sua," in *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 504. 36. *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 7. 37. "Apologia Pro Mente Sua," 498. For a typical ex-

ample of his criticism of "a Calvinistic God," see *Winds of Doctrine*, 353. **38.** *Ibid.*, 531. **39.** Santayana, "Prologue," *The Last Puritan*, 6. **40.** *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (1931) is a non-fictional prelude to *The Last Puritan*. Eighteen years earlier, in "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," Santayana wrote: "Calvinism...is the expression of the agonized conscience. It is a view of the world which an agonized conscience readily embraces." *Winds of Doctrine* (1913), 189. **41.** Santayana's main fictional characters are based upon his student friends at Harvard. Edward Bayley, of an old New England Puritan family, was the model for Oliver. Ward Thoren, a recent Catholic convert, provided the basis for his portrait of Mario. See *Persons and Places*, 184 and 231-234. **42.** Baker Brownell, "Santayana, the Man and the Philosopher," *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, 51. **43.** In a letter to Richard H. Thornton (1 October 1930), Frost repeated his belief in the importance of the enduring "ideals" of Puritanism. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 288. **44.** Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (New York, 1939), 60. **45.** For an account of Frost's conception of Puritanism, and his rebuttal of those who criticized it on intellectual and aesthetic grounds, see Peter J. Stanlis, "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," in *Frost Centennial Essays*, III, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, Miss., 1978), 195-197. **46.** Robert Frost, "On Taking Poetry" (June 30, 1955), and "On Puritanism, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein" (July 28, 1955), Reginald L. Cook, ed., *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, 75-87 and 88-105. **47.** Frost once remarked that his *Masque of Reason* and *Masque of Mercy* were best understood by Jews and Catholics. "The other, the lesser sects without the law...they don't get it. They're too apt to think there's rebellion in them.... But that isn't in them at all. They're not rebellious. They're very doctrinal, very orthodox, both of them." "Paris Review Interview," in Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (1960), 891. In an interview on April 5, 1959, Frost said: "The only Puritans left these days are the Roman Catholics." *Interviews with Robert Frost* (1966), 198. **48.** *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, 93. **49.** *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (December 18, 1931), 218. **50.** *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, 76. **51.** *Ibid.*, 94. See also 95. **52.** *Ibid.*, 93. For an account of how the Puritans combined biblical studies and the ancient classical literary tradition, see Perry Miller, "The Intellectual Heritage," *The New England Mind*, 89-108. **53.** John F. Fulton, *Harvey Cushing: A Biography* (Springfield, Ill., 1946), 6. **54.** Robert Frost, "What Became of New England?," *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 755. **55.** Frost was especially pained by Amy Lowell's review in *The New Republic* (February 20, 1913), in which she wrote: "Mr. Frost's book reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of our New England life; at least in its rural communities." Frost believed that, as a direct descendant of a famous New England

Puritan family, she should have known better. Like other critics, she confounded the simplicity of Frost's fictional characters with simple-mindedness. As Frost noted in a letter to Louis Untermeyer (March 10, 1938), the people in *North of Boston* were not merely poor people but "people of simplicity or simple truth miscalled simplicity." In his poem "New Hampshire" (1923), Frost has Amy Lowell show contempt for the state of New Hampshire: "She said she couldn't stand the people in it," and when the speaker in the poem "asked to know what ailed the people," she answered: "Go read your own books and find out." **56.** During the summer of 1940, Frost urged students at Bread Loaf to read Perry Miller's account of how Puritan theology evolved from a covenant of grace between God and the Elect into a social and political contract that provided a democratic basis for American society. See Perry Miller's two chapters, "The Covenant of Grace" and "The Social Covenant," *The New England Mind*, 365-431. **57.** It is significant that starting with Frost's second book, *North of Boston*, practically every title of his subsequent books of poetry reflects some aspect of New England geography or physical nature. Yet far from being a regional poetry, Frost's New England was a metaphor for all of America. **58.** Robert Frost, "What Became of New England?," *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 756. The following summer, in June 1939, during a conversation with students at Bread Loaf, Frost again defended the aesthetic character of New England Puritans. See Peter J. Stanlis, "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," *Frost Centennial Essays*, III, 195-197. **59.** *Ibid.*, 756 and 757. **60.** Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 335. See also 341 and 349. **61.** For a detailed account of the Puritan revolution in English prose style, as applied to both religion and science, see Richard Foster Jones's four articles: "Science and Criticism in the Neo-Classical Age of English Literature"; "Science and English Prose Style in the Third Quarter of the Seventeenth Century"; "The Attack on Pulpit Eloquence in the Restoration"; and "Science and Language in England of the Mid-Seventeenth Century." *The Seventeenth Century* (Stanford, 1951), 41-160. **62.** Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, 691. See also 692. **63.** Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, 756 and 758. In his poem "The Black Cottage," Frost alluded to Santayana as a man who denied Jefferson's principle that all men are created equal in the sight of God. **64.** *Ibid.*, 758. **65.** Robert Frost, "Too Anxious for Rivers." **66.** Robert Frost to Sidney Cox, 19 September 1929, in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 361. **67.** Robert Frost, Notebook No. 001714, 71, in the Baker Library, Dartmouth College. Quoted with permission of the Robert Frost Estate. **68.** The term "passionate preference" was not original with Frost. It is highly ironical that he was so enamoured of this phrase, which he repeated on several occasions, because it originated in the very man whose

philosophy he so despised. In noting Walt Whitman's democratic uniformity in multiplicity in *Leaves of Grass*, George Santayana wrote: "...Occasionally the beauties of democracy are presented to us undisguised. The writings of Walt Whitman are a notable example. Never, perhaps, has the charm of uniformity in multiplicity been felt so completely and so exclusively. Everywhere it greets us with a passionate preference." *The Sense of Beauty* (New York, 1896), 112. Whereas Santayana applied "passionate preference" to Whitman's conception of democracy, Frost applied it to religion and the arts as sources of man's creativity in making evolutionary changes in the culture of society. **69.** *Interviews with Robert Frost*, 226. It is signifi-

cant that Alfred North Whitehead, whose views on science and religion were similar to those of Frost, also connected evolution with aesthetic creativity: "The problem of evolution is the development of enduring harmonies of enduring shapes of value, which emerge into higher attainments of things beyond themselves. Aesthetic attainment is interwoven in the texture of realization." *Science and the Modern World*, 117. **70.** Robert Frost, "Letter to the Amherst Student," *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, 106. **71.** *Interviews with Robert Frost*, 256. **72.** Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963*, 288-289. **73.** Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 77.

The Powers of Moral Darkness in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*

George A. Panichas

I

IN *NOSTROMO* (1904), as the literary critic F. R. Leavis observes, Joseph Conrad presents a public theme confluent with private histories, each one of which gives us a private theme. "These histories," Dr. Leavis goes on to say, "are of the main characters, each of whom enacts a particular answer to the question: What do men find to live for—what kind of motive force or radical attitude can give life meaning or direction?"¹ This is essentially a moral question that *Nostromo* seeks to scrutinize in carefully rendered detail, and ultimately to judge in discrete and proving ways. Transcendent life-principles and values are in decisive evidence here and wield discriminatory power in the unfolding story of Conrad's novel.

The question posed by Leavis is, in fact, at the moral center of *Nostromo*: It is one with which the characters themselves must struggle, and in which the reader inevitably finds himself an active participant. The answer to this question requires effort, for in order to answer it the reader must plunge to the depths of one's being, there to confront the full, exposed self in

all of its extremities and severity of self-appraisal. This process is a demanding one, heightened as it is by the particular configurations of the novel's locale, set in a Latin American state, in the town of Sulaco, a coasting port on the Atlantic seaboard of the republic of Costaguana, situated "in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Plácido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud."

Early on in the novel we become aware that the visible signs of "the sanctuary of peace sheltering the calm existence of Sulaco" are cruelly deceptive. Disorder in the form of recurrent military revolutions plagues Costaguana. Social and political breakdown is clearly the "public theme" that *Nostromo* registers, and that affects the "private histories" and destinies of the novel's characters. Here we collide with the agents of destruction—with "revolutionary rabble," a "crazy mob," murdering "bandits," as Conrad describes them. Confronting these insurrectionists in all their wrath is a strong theme in this novel. But the insurrectionism is intimately tied to men and women who define their internal character, or lack of character, in terms of their role and conduct in a world in constant flux.

Moral responsibility and courage of

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