

THE HUMANISM OF ROBERT FROST:
A STUDY IN PARALLELS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION		Page 1
Chapter		
I. THE TRADITION OF HUMANISM.		5
II. MODERN HUMANISM.		15
Ethics Predominant: The Humanism of Irving Babbitt The Law for Man and the Law for Thing Concentric Experience and Eccentric Experience Man as an Ethical Being and Man as a Pathetic Being Mediation and Renunciation The Limitations of Sobriety Sensibility Chastened: The Humanism of Henry David Thoreau		
III. HUMANISM IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST . . .		70
The Parallels with Babbitt Some Strange Resistance In Itself There Are Roughly Zones On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind The Strong Are Saying Nothing The Parallel with Thoreau: Frost the "Sensibilitist"		
IV. DELIGHT AND WISDOM		131
CONCLUSION.		159
BIBLIOGRAPHY.		163

INTRODUCTION

When we read a philosophical poet, we need to know what his philosophical position is. Unless we do, we are in danger of missing some of the strength of his poems, and in danger of placing the wrong emphasis upon his 'mood' poems which do not suggest philosophy.

We have the word of Robert Frost himself that a poem should provide not only delight but wisdom. A forthright assertion like this by a poet has been very rare since Western poets began to take seriously Poe's severe attack upon didacticism in poetry. The assertion is an implied invitation to the reader and critic to examine the poems of Frost for his convictions about how to live.

I propose to demonstrate that Frost belongs in the tradition of humanism. In Chapter One I shall define humanism, briefly describe its tradition, and show its principal emphases--mainly its prescription for a delicate balance between the demands of the One and the demands of the Many, between the power in man that relates him to permanence and the power in man that relates him to change. I shall try to define the humanism that goes beyond naturalism but stops short of religion, for this is the kind of humanism that I find in the poetry of Frost.

Chapter Two will be a description of the modern humanism that is eclectic yet independent, that selects ideas from both naturalism and religion yet maintains its autonomy. Frost values separateness too much to identify himself with any 'movement'; however, certain ideas that keep appearing in Babbitt's many books and essays occur repeatedly with astonishing similarity in the poems of Robert Frost, are indeed the very cornerstones of his moral architecture. These four major ideas in Babbitt's doctrinal humanism will carry us toward an understanding of Frost's humanism:

1. Human life is dualistic. Although man is a creature of time, he is capable of a different quality of life from other living creatures, and does not fulfill himself unless he transcends his purely natural self.
2. Human life has a center. Wisdom is possible. The individual can find standards by which to correct his temperamental bias and achieve centrality.
3. Inner work by the individual, a conscious willing to overcome imperfections, is necessary to achieve the important kind of human reform; and this reform is not possible by the exterior manipulation of whole groups.
4. Man is finite, with some inevitable ties with Nature; not divine; and therefore in danger of deluding himself if he goes too far towards renouncing the world.

But these four ideas will not entirely define the humanism of Frost. One of his emphases that may properly be called humanistic is missing in Babbitt, or is present only half-heartedly. This missing quality in Babbitt may be supplied by Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau believed in the possibility of joy in response to Nature, joy without a surrendering of

one's humanity by running man and Nature together and thereby justifying the view of man as an animal. Thoreau believed in the chastened sensibility, the sensibility trained to respond without serving sub-human impulses.

The discussion of Frost's humanism in Chapter Three will parallel the five lines of modern humanism laid down in Chapter Two, four from Babbitt and one from Thoreau. I will analyze and quote from many of the poems of Frost to show that these humanistic themes are not incidental with him, that he returns to them again and again.

Although Babbitt and Frost were friends, there was undoubtedly no conscious cooperation between them as American humanists; so I will not be discussing the 'influence' of one upon the other or the precise source of their thought; but I will instead try to show parallels in their ethical thought, and, with the help of Thoreau, an important divergence in their attitudes toward love of Nature, a divergence that has great significance for Frost's poetics.

Whether a humanist allows ethics to predominate in his thought or whether he makes room for a rich sensibility will affect his attitude toward art. Nature and art are the two principal realms where the phenomenal self may be exercised. The discussion of a humanistic aesthetic in Chapter Four will be a comparison between Babbitt and Frost. Babbitt has made theoretical statements about art, and he has criticized literary works. Frost has spoken in prose about his poetics, and he has written poems.

Babbitt's cautious attitude toward the cult of Nature and the cult of aestheticism is born of his fear that twentieth-century man, already too prone to drift, can be strongly appealed to by the idyllic imagination. The decline of traditional ethical values is accelerated by a wrong use of the imagination. Frost is a philosophical poet who has lived most of his life on New England farms. Like his spiritual ancestor Thoreau, he has his own interests in Nature and art. Perhaps a study in parallels of these outstanding American humanists can sharpen our understanding of the humanistic spirit.

In a study of humanists, no mountains can be removed, but perhaps one or two New England rocks may be used to pry another a little.

CHAPTER I

THE TRADITION OF HUMANISM

Every age has its gross as well as its vulgar errors. The one-sidedness of the United States in the twentieth century is best summed up in the idea of naturalism. The evidence of imbalance is everywhere: two appallingly destructive wars; steadily increasing production not only of deadly weapons to accommodate current or anticipated hostilities, but of lethal machines to enable bored or 'busy' men to travel farther and faster; acceleration of crime and divorce rates that are beginning to alarm even the professional tabulators; widespread political cynicism that assumes corruption as a norm; an intellectually impoverished school system dedicated to fostering rudimentary social and technical skills; churchmen who perform on commercially-sponsored television programs or who sell millions of books purporting to harmonize a mechanistic psychology with religion; and enormous increase in vulgar and infantile forms of entertainment to help the monotony-ridden industrial and commercial workers combat or forget their ennui.

These symptoms of distortion and shallowness evoke prescriptions for reform which are themselves one-sided. Some social critics assert that our troubles arise from an

inadequate devotion to science; and the newspapers and magazines of the country are full of urgent pleas to young people to specialize in scientific studies. Some put their trust in Congress to pass laws which will bring about salutary social change. Others want to expand the activities of police Big Brothers or the Community Chest. Some, obsessed with psychology's discovery that neuroses feed on inhibitions, advocate emotional license or, more honorifically, 'adjustment.'

These different kinds of social charlatanry have in common an acceptance of the outwardness of human reform. Though naturalism got us into many of our troubles, most of the well-known programs for alleviating them are themselves variations of naturalism. The overwhelming popularity of science has resulted in a rather vague substitution of knowledge for wisdom, in a widespread belief that the question of how the individual should live is obsolete because he is trapped in a social determinism, and thus the way to affect him is to make surveys and then work for large utilitarian changes in the society as a whole. The commanding prestige that science has acquired has made many people skeptical about the part of human life that cannot be examined scientifically. How large numbers of people behave and what they say they believe can be charted by social scientists who may then measure the statistics by utilitarian or pragmatic standards. But speculations about right conduct and the pursuit of perfection or wholeness in the life of the individual

have been largely discredited as belonging to the realm of illusion, though they are probably inevitable (in the light of man's fate to be a somewhat introspective creature), but not valid, not 'true,' not strictly verifiable.

Naturalism, this 'modern' way of viewing the life of man, though clearly dominant now, has been opposed persistently by two traditions that have wielded such power in human affairs that remnants of them have endured even into the atomic bomb era, and occasionally even a scientist refuses to follow science to its disinterested End. Religion and humanism, though differing in emphases, have very important similarities which unite them in the struggle against naturalism. Both assume that man is different from other forms of life in the universe, that his happiness depends upon spiritual power, or morality, rather than physical force. Reason, will, and imagination--the specifically human attributes--demand a certain quality of life. Man cannot fulfill himself by merely living. Both religion and humanism call for the individual to reform his 'natural' self, to use the attributes not shared by other forms of life, and to achieve thereby a higher quality of inner being. It is this inner life of character and spirit that saves man from the sheer diversity, even chaotic changefulness, of other phenomena, that gives point and meaning to human destiny.

Religion and humanism agree in stressing humility as the cardinal principle of individual reform. Egotism is the great undoer of human beings, the great destroyer of character

and of peace. The central reality of life for the religionist or humanist is that the natural self must be rigorously and steadily controlled, if not subdued. This is the chief point of conflict with the proponent of naturalism who celebrates the harmony of man and Nature, and relegates moral and spiritual values to the realm of illusion, useful in a social and pragmatic way, but not true.

Ethical strenuousness, that can help the individual to integrity and calm in his psychology and to right action in his conduct, is the religious and humanistic way to happiness. Complacency and sloth are spiritual death.

Religion and humanism set up standards above the self by which egotism may be combatted. But here is where the two disciplines diverge. Christianity, for example, encourages the individual in the awesome effort to bring his will into harmony with God's, through belief in Christ and practice of his teachings, and claims that grace and salvation can be the fruits of this earnest and successful striving. Humanism flies lower, professing no knowledge of ultimate questions, but urging that the individual temperament can be chastened by a knowledge of "the best that has been thought and known in the world."¹ Religion calls for piety; humanism for sanity. Much religion urges asceticism; humanism finds this an extreme. Much religion is founded upon miracles; humanism is uncomfortable with them.

¹The Works of Matthew Arnold (London, 1903-1904), VI (Culture and Anarchy), 41.

Because these disciplines both assert the importance of the inner life and hold the individual responsible for achieving the depth and dignity that other forms of life are denied by their complete subservience to change, the chief divergence depends upon whether the individual perceives in himself the intimations of divinity that are asserted or assumed by religion.

Humanism and religion complement one another. Humanism's belief in the dignity of man is supported by the central religious assumption that man's spirit has a divine genesis, that it comes ultimately from God. Religion needs the humanistic criticism of inert convention, the unrelenting effort to differentiate between inward reform and outward mechanical ritual. Buddhism shares with humanism the reluctance to speculate about ultimate questions; Confucianism shares with humanism the belief that mediation is virtue.

The pivotal issues between humanism and religion are renunciation and dogma. Religion implies one or the other, or both. The humanist is skeptical of attempts to codify spirit, to assume as each organized, dogmatic religion does, that its way to reach God is the one right way. In the humanist, fear of pride in exclusiveness, in sectarianism, subdues even the desire for salvation. To the extent that a member of a particular religion acknowledges the possibility that members of other faiths (or even spiritual agnostics) might be fulfilling their spiritual destiny, he is humanistic.

Humanism has its own patriarchs: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were humanistic philosophers. They sought to preserve spiritual values without theological dogma. Socrates and Plato constructed an elaborate mythology to suggest divinity and ultimates. Aristotle's God is a metaphysical absolute, quite unworshipable. These philosophers opposed unthinking, mechanical piety on the one hand, and naturalistic, pragmatic thought on the other. They emphasized knowing the self and knowing the world. They advocated the humble pursuit of knowledge and the humble pursuit of perfection for the sake of most excellently living in the world, and not for the sake of renouncing it.

This Western humanistic tradition was carried on by the Romans, notably by Cicero, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. The guardians of classical lore during the Middle Ages, the Christian churchmen, were sometimes influenced by it enough to moderate their asceticism. John of Salisbury, for example, anticipates the Christian humanists of the Renaissance, who contributed so significantly to the general return from Christian other-worldliness that had prevailed for many centuries, to a widespread interest in right living in this world, to the return to the Greeks' interest in humanity. Though strongly committed to Christianity, Erasmus and Sir Thomas More reveal a lively interest in the world. The austerity of the Middle Ages has melted. This balance between piety and the desire to know the world is found, too, in Spenser and Milton, in Swift and Johnson. The secular

spirit is harmonized with ethical responsibility in the writings of Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, and Ben Jonson.

During the Renaissance, Christianity and humanism flowed serenely together. Most of the major humanists were Christians. But the humanist's desire for precision of knowledge led to textual work on the Bible which eventually contributed to a growing skepticism about the divine origins of the book.

After several centuries of a steadily increasing scientific development, the humanist found that the miraculous basis of Christianity made impossible an easy acceptance. Then his dilemma became acute. Unwilling to renounce the new hard-won knowledge of the universe, and yet unwilling to turn mankind over to the materialistic assumptions of science, he recognized his task as that of salvager and protector of spiritual values for a skeptical age, values that for centuries had had a metaphysical justification.

The humanist finds adequate justification for ethics and the pursuit of perfection in the wholeness they give to man's life. So he would preserve the values of religion apart from their metaphysical concomitants. In the nineteenth century Emerson, Thoreau, and Matthew Arnold were engaged in this kind of salvaging as they perceived disharmony between Christian theology and the burgeoning scientific explanation of natural phenomena. Arnold presents the humanist's approval of a science that does not presume to exceed its function of compiling information and generalizing

about natural phenomena:

It is the habit of increased intellectual seriousness, bred of a wider experience and of a larger acquaintance with men's mental history, which is now transforming religion in our country. Intelligent people among the educated classes grow more and more sceptical of the miraculous data which supply the basis for our received theology.²

Arnold finds the soundness of Christianity not in its dogma, theology, and church organization, but in "the personality and word of Jesus."³ The great contribution of Jesus was to advance the spirit of man by exemplifying in his own life and death and in his teaching the superior profundity and positiveness of annihilating self-love through agape to the Hebraic fearing and fleeing from sin. Arnold eloquently expresses the humanist's unwillingness to give all to piety, though:

No words of devotion and admiration can be too strong to render thanks to these beneficent forces [Judaism and Christianity] which have so borne forward humanity in its appointed work of coming to the knowledge and possession of itself; above all, in those moments when their action was the wholesomest and the most necessary. . . . And yet the lesson must perforce be learned, that the human spirit is wider than the most priceless of the forces which bear it onward, and that to the whole development of man Hebraism itself is, like Hellenism, but a contribution.⁴

The humanist attributes to man's spirituality the desire to know the universe in which he has been placed and his effort to discover how to use most fruitfully the senses, emotions,

²Works, VIII (God and the Bible), xxxi-xxxii.

³Ibid., p. xxxiii.

⁴Works, VI (Culture and Anarchy), 132-133.

and intelligence he has been mysteriously given, and to use them for sweet and enlightened living in this world. Arnold includes science among "the best that has been thought and known in the world."⁵ Whereas the advocate of naturalism believes that scientific knowledge has nullified all of Christianity, the humanist would separate Christianity's sound wisdom of the inner life from what appears, from a modern perspective, to be an elaborate mythology for a credulous era in the history of Western man.

It is common to find the word "humanist" applied to widely varying groups of thinkers in this century. The Unitarians, reacting violently against the supernaturalism of Christianity, assert the continuousness of man and Nature, yet call themselves humanists though they advocate merely social reforms. Some scientists, emphasizing the increased physical comfort of man that results from their disinterested study of the world of appearances, call themselves humanists. Both of these groups, while sharing the complete humanist's skepticism of dogma and theology, deny or ignore the idea of inner work within the individual. Both assume man and Nature are at one. Still another group, called Christian humanists, assenting in the idea of man's will effecting a higher quality of life within, but believing that the pull toward sin is so great that no merely secular philosophy will prevail, hold that the resources of control within the individual can only

⁵Works, VI, 41.

be appealed to through rich and awesome symbols and rituals, and that without the impressive weight of supernatural authority few people can secure the depth in their lives that they are potentially capable of. These men are humanistic in their recognition that decorum and criticism are needed to keep religion dignified and pure.

Twentieth-century humanists who follow Arnold in affirming the reality of spirit yet stopping short of religion are rare. America was the scene of a powerful humanist movement in the 1920's and 1930's. Of its chief members--Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Stuart P. Sherman, Norman Foerster, Gorham B. Munson, G. R. Elliott, and T. S. Eliot--only Babbitt and Foerster remained loyal to an independent humanism. Sherman abandoned humanism for humanitarianism, and the others eventually moved into religion.

Babbitt had another unofficial ally, though he never publicly acknowledged him. Robert Frost has consistently espoused a humanism that is distinct from both naturalism and religion. These two men have important affinities: both were born into a period dominated by naturalism; both lived many years in New England with its traditional Puritan idealism; and both have as an ancestor Emerson, whom Arnold names "the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit,"⁶ whose own life was spent in making the best values of the past intelligible to nineteenth-century Americans.

⁶Works, IV (Discourses In America), 368.

CHAPTER II

MODERN HUMANISM

Ethics Predominant: The Humanism of Irving Babbitt

Irving Babbitt wrote persistently in the service of civilized standards. He sought to discover the cause of the terrible shallowness and hollowness that have been gradually pervading the life of the Western world since the Christian religion ceased to be immediately felt by nearly everyone as the guide to right knowledge and conduct. This is Babbitt's purpose, to diagnose the ailment of modern life; so we do not find him "trying to give rounded estimates of individuals--delightful and legitimate as that type of criticism is--but to trace main currents as a part of my search for a set of principles to oppose to naturalism."⁷ The Christian ideas of grace and conversion imply the possibility of a life for man different from the life of rocks, plants, and animals. Though man, like the other forms of life, exists in a universe of time and change, he, unlike them, can will to control the natural impulses that lead him to commit sins; he can assume responsibility for leading a more nearly perfect

⁷Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (Boston, 1919), p. xvii.

kind of life, a life indeed approaching the divine. Babbitt applies the word naturalism to those ideas about the universe and human life that have gained the ascendancy over the Christian view. As our view of outer reality has undergone tremendous change, as we have come to assume the materialism, mechanism, and determinism of science, to take scientific hypothesis as truth and scientific theory as commandment, so has the general idea of human life and its meaning been terrifically diminished. Man has become identified with Nature. A monism has replaced the Christian dualism that credited man with the possibility of a different life from the rest of creation. Free choice, virtue, and responsibility have become refined delusions; conversion a kind of egocentric madness; ethics a convenient social control.

This assumption by many people that man and Nature are at one gives us "a world that has gone wrong on first principles."⁸ Babbitt approves of the modern principle that individual experience is a sounder criterion than outer authority, but he argues that because humane values were in the past given sanction by organized religion, their validity is not therefore dependent upon organized religion or dogma. He charges that the scientists and their followers are incomplete positivists insofar as they leave out ethics. Our experience in living, not theological authority, forces us to affirm the higher will "as a psychological fact, one

⁸Ibid., p. 367.

of the immediate data of consciousness, a perception so primordial that, compared with it, the deterministic denials of man's moral freedom are only a metaphysical dream."⁹ In book after book and essay after essay Babbitt seeks to illustrate how so tremendous an omission has vitiated all the important civilized human activities--education, government, criticism, art, love--how the unwarranted importation into human life of the assumptions of science has caused confusion and distortion about the way human beings should try to conduct themselves. Because he breaks with the past in disclaiming theological authority as a mode of knowing, and appeals to individual experience, and because his method of rehabilitating man's ethical nature is to present evidence ("not a set of theories but a body of facts"¹⁰) of the distortions caused by the naturalistic view of man, Babbitt claims for himself the title of ethical positivist.

Babbitt distinguishes two kinds of naturalism, somewhat at odds with each other, but very closely related at important points, and both proceeding from the assumption that man and Nature are at one: scientific naturalism and sentimental naturalism. The first has led to the widespread misconception that a man's primary aim should be to secure comfort for himself and his fellows by concentrating upon a materialistic progress, by developing efficient methods for

⁹Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay At Definition," in Humanism and America, ed. Norman Foerster (New York, 1930), p. 39.

¹⁰Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xvi.

the production of goods that can make life physically easier. The second has led to the general approval of individual temperament and impulse, to the tendency to call that good which is natural, and to the assumption that society (or social institutions) must bear the responsibility and blame for individual aberrations and weaknesses. In short, with the naturalistic view of life, progress, virtue, and reform become social matters, and not individual ones. Babbitt's persistent theme is that the scientific naturalist and the sentimental naturalist distort human life by emphasizing too exclusively one side of man.

The Law for Man and the Law for Thing

Babbitt uses as an epigraph for his first book, Literature and the American College, these lines from Emerson's "Ode, Inscribed to W. H. Channing":

There are two laws discrete
Not reconciled,--
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

This dualism between man and Nature is the major assumption of Babbitt's New Humanism. A sharp distinction must be made between human nature and physical Nature, for a different kind, a different quality, of life is available to man than is available to the other species of life on the earth. Babbitt attributes most of the confusion in modern life to a general neglect of this distinction. Both the scientific naturalist and the sentimental naturalist neglect the law

for man and "attempt to erect on naturalistic foundations a complete philosophy of life."¹¹ Other forms of life drift with the naturalistic flux, are powerless to resist. Man, too, may submit to the emotions, impulses, and desires that link him with physical Nature, but Babbitt asserts that man becomes human insofar as he develops his ethical self by exercising control over his natural self.

Since the scientific dogmas of materialism, mechanism, and determinism have come to dominate the thought of Western Civilization, there has been much celebration--even glorification--of the 'natural' instinctual side of life. The major premise is, of course, that man is another 'thing' caught in time and change and, subservient to their laws, he best fulfills his destiny by following his impulses and thus perfecting his harmony with outer Nature.

The sentimental naturalist, assuming that only the Law for Thing operates within himself, has no standard but himself by which to measure his behavior. Thus his temperament, his moods, his feelings become right and appropriate because he has them, and they seem to correspond nicely to physical Nature because they too undergo constant change. Obeying impulses and indulging the senses and emotions are 'virtues,' are the highest end of human life. The sentimental naturalist bathes in subjectivity and exults in it.

The chief point of difference between the sentimental

¹¹Rousseau and Romanticism, p. x.

naturalist and the scientific naturalist is that the man of science struggles to overcome subjectivity. But this does not lead him to affirm the human law. He works with the assumption that we can 'know,' in a demonstrable way, only about phenomena that come under the Law for Thing. If he does not overtly deny the human law, he ignores it in practice. So the scientific naturalist is, like the sentimental naturalist, preoccupied with the Law for Thing. He tries to keep personal whim and prejudice from coloring his findings as he seeks to explain the physical universe and the physical life of man.

Occasionally someone professes to find in this scientific disinterestedness the remedy for the ethical shallowness of modern man. This is the burden of Walter Lippmann's prescription in his book, A Preface to Morals:

To become detached from one's passions and to understand them consciously is to render them disinterested. A disinterested mind is harmonious with itself and with reality.

This is the principle by which a humanistic culture becomes bearable. If the principle of a theocratic culture is dependence, obedience, conformity in the presence of a superhuman power which administers reality, the principle of humanism is detachment, understanding, and disinterestedness in the presence of reality itself.¹²

Lippmann proposes that scientists are appropriate models for moderns to imitate in their pursuit of perfection:

They have developed an elaborate method for detecting and discounting their prejudices. It consists of instruments of precision, an accurate vocabulary, controlled experiment, and the submission not only

¹²Walter Lippmann, A Preface To Morals (New York, 1929), pp. 220-221.

of their results but of their processes to the judgment of their peers. This method provides a body in which the spirit of disinterestedness can live, and it might be said that modern science, not in its crude consequences but in its inward principle, not, that is to say, as manifested in automobiles, electric refrigerators, and rayon silk, but in the behavior of the men who invent and perfect these things, is the actual realization in a practicable mode of conduct which can be learned and practiced, of the insight of high religion. The scientific discipline is one way in which this insight, hitherto lyrical and personal and apart, is brought down to earth and into direct and decisive contact with the concerns of mankind.

It is no exaggeration to say that pure science is high religion incarnate.¹³

Because Lippmann calls this detached adjustment to the cosmos "humanism," Babbitt rebukes him and charges that this is "a flagrant misuse of the word":

It is well that a man should adjust himself to the reality of the natural order and, as a preliminary, should strive to be objective in the scientific sense; but humanism calls for an adjustment to a very different order that is also "real" and "objective" in its own way. It insists in short that there is a "law for man" as well as a "law for thing," and is in this sense dualistic.¹⁴

Only by obedience to the Law for Man can we rightly apply the knowledge we compile about the Law for Thing. An assiduous working only according to the scientific law is at best shallow and may easily turn into something horrible for man.

If scientific discipline is not supplemented by a truly humanistic or religious discipline the result is unethical science, and unethical science is perhaps the worst monster that has yet been turned loose on the race.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., pp. 238-239.

¹⁴Humanism and America, p. 33.

¹⁵Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 383.

The Law for Man implies "an element of oneness somewhere, with reference to which it is possible to measure the mere manifoldness and change."¹⁶ Human experience, Babbitt argues, leads to the conclusion that happiness is not possible if one relaxes and drifts with the flux of his temperament, and that only a shallow complacency can follow from a one-sided scientific working according to the Law for Thing:

The supreme maxim of the ethical positivist is:
By their fruits shall ye know them. If I object to
a romantic philosophy it is because I do not like
its fruits. (Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xvi.)

Growth as a man is different in kind from growth as an object of Nature:

If man as a natural phenomenon grows by expanding,
man as man grows by concentrating. He proves that
he is set above nature, not so much by his power to
act, as by his power to refrain from acting.¹⁷

Here Babbitt is implying that man can exercise will in controlling his impulses. Whereas Lippmann asserts that what modern man has lost is the conviction that "there is an immortal essence presiding like a king over his appetites,"¹⁸ Babbitt seeks to salvage this essence--or higher will, as he calls it--by affirming it "as a psychological fact,"¹⁹ resting on intuition but confirmed by experience. Babbitt illustrates this distinction between human life and mere physical life when he writes that

character as Aristotle uses the word implies something that man possesses and that a horse or tree does not possess--the power namely to deliberate

¹⁶Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xii.

¹⁷Irving Babbitt, The New Laokoon (Boston, 1910), p. 201.

¹⁸Quoted by Babbitt in Humanism and America, p. 39.

¹⁹Humanism and America, p. 39.

and choose. A man has a good or bad character, he is ethical or unethical . . . according to the quality of his choice as it appears in what he actually does. (Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 47.)

The danger of a preoccupation with science is that the individual will work too exclusively within the Law for Thing and leave undeveloped within himself his best potentiality, that he will, in short, neglect to develop himself as a whole man. The consequences which the sentimental naturalist must suffer are much severer. He not only ends as a fraction of a man, but his constant acting upon impulse leads to ever-increasing chaos in his personal life. Looking for self-fulfillment and happiness according to the principles of emotional expansion and self-indulgence, he spends his days chasing phantoms which must ever elude him because the Law for Man, which he neglects to harmonize his physical and emotional self with, precludes human happiness except by an intelligent self-control:

The chief use of any widening out of knowledge and sympathy must be to prepare man more fully for the supreme moment of concentration and selection, the moment when he exercises his own special faculties. Now, to select rightly a man must have right standards, and to have right standards means in practice that he must constantly set bounds to his own impulses. Man grows in the perfection proper to his own nature in almost direct ratio to his growth in restraint and self-control.

(The New Laokoon, pp. 201-202.)

Naturalistic life and humanistic life are opposed principles, Man, who combines within himself these opposed principles, is not human in merely being born. He must obey his intuition of the Law for Man, and control that part of himself that is

subject to the Law for Thing. To be human is to be engaged in an unceasing moral struggle within oneself, to refuse the allurements of a sensuous and emotional revery in order to achieve the kind of happiness appropriate to man.

In the essay, "The Bicentenary of Diderot," Babbitt vigorously attacks Diderot for explaining away this inner moral struggle as a fiction that had been preserved by outmoded creeds and institutions:

Is the 'war in the cave' artificial, after all? Suppose it be true, as the humanist asserts, that deep down in the breast of the individual man, far more primary and immediate than either thought or feeling, is a power of control over thought and feeling, a something that may be defined experimentally as the back pull towards the center. In that case, the 'war in the cave,' so far from being artificial, the mere prejudice of outworn dogmatisms, is a fact of formidable import. To deny this fact in the name of 'nature' is to be guilty of a monstrous mutilation of human nature. Hope for the future may lie in the man who will plant himself resolutely on this fact and refuse to be drawn away from it into some phantasmagoria of the intellect or emotions; who will subject to a stern scrutiny from the point of view of this fact the fluent assumptions of both scientific and sentimental naturalists; who will deal with the 'law for man' even as the Baconian has dealt with the 'law for thing,' and look with at least equal disdain on the apriorist and the builder of systems; who will take issue with the men of science, not because they are hardheaded, but because they are not hardheaded enough; whose complaint of the positivists will be that they are not sufficiently positive; who will be ready, in short, to react in the name of the modern spirit against the great expansive movement of the past century, of which Diderot is rightly held to be the universal precursor.²⁰

Babbitt does not rest his ideas on an uncritical accept-

²⁰Irving Babbitt, Spanish Character and Other Essays (Boston, 1940), pp. 119-120.

ance of tradition and authority. He approves of the modern spirit that uses experience as the test of the validity of theories about human life; but he insists that, though life may be a dream (i.e., we cannot get final answers to our metaphysical questions), it is not entirely an uncontrollable dream, and if we act on the assumption that it is and fail to manage it carefully, this dream can "turn into a nightmare."²¹ The idea that the dream can be managed leaves room for human will and implies that some objectivity is possible. As the scientist strives for objectivity in exploring the Law for Thing, so the humanist can compare the results of man living in accordance with the naturalistic drift, with the results of man living in an effort to "do inner obeisance to something higher than his ordinary self, whether he calls this something God, or, like the man of the Far East, calls it his higher Self, or simply the Law."²²

The part of human life that comes under the Law for Man can be observed and generalizations can be drawn from this observation as validly as the scientist can study the phenomena of physical Nature. The humanist deals with facts of human nature. The human law makes "demands for unity, measure, purpose."²³ The purpose of life is happiness. Happiness is achieved by grasping the unity at the heart of

²¹Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xiv.

²²Irving Babbitt, Literature and the American College (Boston, 1908), p. 60.

²³The New Laokoon, p. 216.

the change and applying the law of measure to one's naturalistic desires and impulses. A knowledge of the permanent that exists at the heart of the change "results from experience,--experience vivified by the imagination."²⁴

Happiness depends upon an insight into ethics, man's link with the permanent, and happiness is not a matter of chance and caprice any more than scientific knowledge is. Babbitt praises the scientist who refuses to be an airy metaphysician, on the one hand, pretending that he has the answers to the whole of life, and a mere collector of facts on the other. The true scientist uses imagination but is careful to check his intuitions with the facts. And this, too, must be the method of the humanist:

Now the true humanist deals with his facts in a somewhat similar fashion: only the facts on which he is fixing his attention are of an entirely different order. His imagination is disciplined to law, but this law is not the "law for thing." He is tracing cause and effect, but these causal sequences are not the ones that occur in physical nature. Because there is in us, in Lowell's phrase, something that refuses to be "Benthamized," the romantic idealist looks with suspicion on a cause-and-effect philosophy and the keen analysis by which it can be established; but any other than a cause-and-effect philosophy is likely to fall into sheer unreality; inasmuch as reality means practically the reality of law, and law in turn means that as a matter of positive observation there is a constant association between certain phenomena either in time or space--an association that exists quite apart from the desires or opinions of the individual. If there is not a human law that is thus objective, so that the person who violates it exposes himself to certain consequences in much the same way that the person who puts his finger into the fire exposes himself to certain consequences, then the human law is not worth going in

²⁴Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 391.

search of. A sceptic of the type of Hume would affirm, indeed, that the very idea of cause and effect is not objective but subjective, that it arises from man's "propensity to feign." But even if we go to the extreme of scepticism and look on life merely as a "dream whose shapes return," it remains true that these returning shapes bear a certain constant relationship to one another; so that they are susceptible of study from the point of view of the only problem that finally matters--the problem of happiness or unhappiness. Of cause and effect in any abstract and metaphysical sense, the critical humanist is willing to avow his ignorance; just as the true man of science admits that he cannot grasp the ultimate essence behind the phenomenal relationships he is busy in tracing.²⁵

This passage is a good illustration of Babbitt's moderation. He tries to mediate between the medieval distrust and renunciation of the senses and emotions--that link man to the physical universe--and the modern glorification of the physical and emotional in man. He stops short of declaring for religion (although "I range myself unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists")²⁶ while seeking to preserve the humane values that were for centuries borne forward by religion. His method is scientific in that he tests the modern exaltation of emotion by its fruits and accumulates evidence to support his thesis that life pursued according to the Law for Thing results in shallowness and confusion and unhappiness.

²⁵Irving Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership (Boston, 1924), pp. 233-235.

²⁶Humanism and America, p. 39.

Concentric Experience and Eccentric Experience

Babbitt's idea that there is a Law for Man by which people control their natural selves in order to become human implies that moral choices are not a matter of whim, that wisdom is possible, that standards exist. Babbitt defines the word "work" using this distinction. Work according to the Law for Thing results in material, utilitarian progress; but work according to the Law for Man results in spiritual improvement, in greater humanness or even in religion. The scientist who works diligently only according to the Law for Thing, and the emotionalist who drifts with his own moods are both succumbing to spiritual indolence, the greatest human deficiency:

To allow one's self to revolve passively on the wheel of change (samsāra) seemed to the Oriental sage the acme of evil.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 261.)

But to avoid complacency and to struggle against our worst selves, we need some kind of model. We can find this, Babbitt says, in the idea of central human behavior. Our chief task as men is to correct our own aberrations according to what is normal and central in human life:

Each man has his idiosyncrasy (literally his "private mixture"). But in addition to his complexion, his temperamental or private self, every man has a self that he possesses in common with other men.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 47.)

Ethical behavior is the great centralizing force in human life. What should unite men is the universal intuition that

the best self should be cultivated by checking the impulses of the ordinary self. This kind of work gives a oneness and a permanence to human life, saves it from the tyranny of incessant change which other kinds of life must suffer.

A man's happiness depends much upon his ability to mediate between his animal self and his spiritual self. Babbitt finds distortion in the asceticism of the Middle Ages as well as in the pursuit of sensual and emotional thrills of the modern era:

The human mind, if it is to keep its sanity, must maintain the nicest balance between unity and plurality. There are moments when it should have the sense of communion with absolute being, and of the obligation to higher standards that this insight brings; other moments when it should see itself as but a passing phase of the everlasting flux and relativity of nature; moments when, with Emerson, it should feel itself "alone with the gods alone;" and moments when, with Sainte-Beuve, it should look upon itself as only the "most fugitive of illusions in the bosom of the infinite illusion." If man's nobility lies in his kinship to the One, he is at the same time a phenomenon among other phenomena, and only at his risk and peril neglects his phenomenal self. The humane poise of his faculties suffers equally from an excess of naturalism and an excess of supernaturalism.

(Literature and the American College, pp. 27-28.)

Babbitt does not deny the claim that the senses and emotions make upon us, so he does not advocate asceticism. Neither does he advocate a one-sided intellectual development. A preoccupation with the intellect results in 'pride of intellect,' as a preoccupation with the senses and emotions results in shallowness. The key to human happiness is the imagination, and the imagination must cooperate with the intellect in the service of the higher will. Will is the

humanizing attribute, but imagination is necessary to save one from arid intellectualism or delusive emotionalism.

The point of nearly all of Babbitt's analysis of Romanticism is that the higher will can provide men with insight into the profound truth that happiness cannot be achieved according to the principles of change and expansion that govern naturalistic life. Men must accept their finiteness and also their specifically human ability to rein in their naturalistic impulses. Happiness is primarily an ethical matter, depending upon one's ability to resist the tremendous, overpowering desire to drift with one's ordinary self and pursue what is really unattainable while ignoring "the here and now and their positive demands on his character and will"²⁷:

The essence of the mood is always the straining of the imagination away from the here and now, from an actuality that seems paltry and faded compared to the radiant hues of one's dream. The classicist, according to A. W. Schlegel, is for making the most of the present, whereas the romanticist hovers between recollection and hope. In Shelleyan phrase he "looks before and after and pines for what is not." He inclines like the Byronic dandy, Barbey d'Aurevilly, to take for his mottoes the words "Too late" and "Nevermore." (Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 92.)

Like Arnold, Babbitt believes that the past should be used, not as an inexorable authority, nor as an idyllic land to escape into, but as a means of correcting one's eccentricity and achieving centrality. Babbitt's claim to modernity is that he examines the results of living according to one's

²⁷Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 90.

eccentricities and finds evidence that this mode of living is inimical to the kind of happiness that is available to men as men.

For Babbitt happiness is not a wild, intense, and glamorous thing. It is a matter of right action in the present, according to the insight one has into his best self. It grows not from the pursuit of thrills, but from the patient acquiescence in the limitations of human experience and from the persistent effort to check one's expansive impulses. Babbitt believes that "there is a centre of normal human experience,"²⁸ and that "to get away from what is normal and central is to get away from wisdom"²⁹:

The basis for right conduct is not reasoning but experience, and experience much wider than that of the individual, the secure possession of which can result only from the early acquisition of right habits. (Democracy and Leadership, p. 106.)

This passage suggests well Babbitt's idea of the steady pressure at which life must be lived. The Romantic, dependent on thrills for happiness, disparages habit as the destroyer of spontaneity. Another passage, from Babbitt's comparison of idyllic imagination and moral imagination, explains that the individual must not rely upon his own spontaneity for happiness, but must found his conduct upon the wisdom distilled from the experience of the race:

Rousseau undermined humility in the individual by substituting the doctrine of natural goodness for

²⁸Ibid., p. 153.
²⁹Ibid., p. xxii.

the older doctrine of man's sinfulness and fallibility. The forms and traditions, religious and political, that Burke on the other hand defends, on the ground that they are not arbitrary but are convenient summings up of a vast body of past experience, give support to the imagination of the individual; the imagination, thus drawn back as it were to an ethical centre, supplies in turn a standard with reference to which the individual may set bounds to the lawless expansion of his natural self (which includes his intellect as well as his emotions). (Democracy and Leadership, p. 109)

Key words in Babbitt's vocabulary are "wholeness," "symmetry," "design," "proportion." He is with Arnold in hating one-sidedness. A good part of Rousseau and Romanticism is devoted to an attack upon the romantic over-emphasis of particular attributes, over-emphasis that can lead, says Babbitt, not only to unhappiness but to insanity. Ordinary men are happiest not when they are complacently accepting their particular temperaments and moods, but when they are concentrating upon the whole of life and are fulfilling their human ability to struggle against what is ignoble in themselves. Extraordinary men, or geniuses, are happiest not when they are spontaneously following their eccentricities, but when they are deliberately developing "the architectonic gift . . . the power so to unify a subject as to keep its every detail in proper subordination to the whole."³⁰ Imagination helps a person relate his theory of life (based upon his observation of the experience of the race) to the particular events of his life that call for practical decision and action.

³⁰Ibid., p. 56.

Because Babbitt makes happiness dependent upon ethical strenuousness and because he emphasizes the need for humility in accepting one's imperfection and struggling to overcome it, his thought inevitably has a sober cast. It is important, though, to distinguish this sobriety from the melancholy that accompanies the disillusionment of the romantic egoist who has allowed himself to be deluded into expecting more from life than life can give. Babbitt's sobriety is akin to Dr. Johnson's. Both of these men fear the triviality and self-delusion that go with the courting of glamor and enthusiasm. Both see man as a creature doomed to a restlessness that impels him to seek an escape from human limitations by making imagination an ally of the emotions and pursuing the sensational, the strange, the wonderful, the bizarre. Both see happiness as a steadiness, a sanity, growing from a patient acquiescence in the reality of man's dualism, a facing of the imperfection in human nature that necessitates a lifelong spiritual strenuousness, a perpetual effort to avoid lapsing into either complacency or acedia. Genuine human excellence cannot be made glamorous and exciting without inviting shallowness or madness. The idea that life must be lived at a steady pressure recurs again and again throughout Boswell's Life of Johnson. Johnson frequently admonishes Boswell that he must not allow himself to long for what is unattainable, for a kind of happiness that life cannot provide. The theme of both Rasselas and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" is that most people are

seeking happiness after a wrong principle, that the imagination deludes them into the pursuit of dreams, phantoms. Johnson's sobriety appears most clearly, perhaps, in his warning to the scholar in "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Even if a man is able to avoid the most insidious deceptions that people are susceptible to, he still may not achieve a state of felicity:

Yet, should thy soul indulge the gen'rous heat
Till captive science yields her last retreat;
Should reason guide thee with her brightest ray,
And pour on misty doubt resistless day;
Should no false kindness lure to loose delight,
Nor praise relax, nor difficulty fright;
Should tempting novelty thy cell refrain,
And sloth effuse her opiate fumes in vain;
Should beauty blunt on fops her fatal dart,
Nor claim the triumph of a letter'd heart;
Should no disease thy torpid veins invade,
Nor melancholy's phantoms haunt thy shade;
Yet hope not life, from grief or danger free,
Nor think the doom of man revers'd for thee:
Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes,
And pause awhile from letters, to be wise;
There mark what ill the scholar's life assail,
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the gaol.³¹

The same spirit, profound awareness of the "doom of man," pervades Imlac's answer to the prince's exuberance over the comforts achieved by Europeans, "Human life is everywhere a state, in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."³²

Like Johnson, Babbitt refuses to be tricked into seeing happiness as "a far-off divine event."³³ He concentrates upon "the here and now and their positive demands on

³¹The Works of Samuel Johnson (Oxford, 1825), I, 16.

³²Ibid., p. 226.

³³Democracy and Leadership, p. 229.

. . . character and will."³⁴ He is highly sensitive to the danger of a wrong use of imagination.

Even though human beings, on their naturalistic side, are subject to the Law for Thing, their imagination makes them vulnerable in a way that animals are not:

The desires of the animal . . . work within certain definite limits. They are not, like those of the primitivist, inordinate, the explanation being that they are less stimulated than the desires of the primitivist by the imagination.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 184.)

Thus a man runs the risk of unhappiness and even of insanity when he yields to the indolent 'natural' temptation to ignore the whole of his being, and brings his imagination into the service of eccentricity. Although Babbitt disparages mere formalism ("going through the motions"³⁵), he asserts that in conventions we find reflected

the element of oneness in man, the element which is opposed to expansive impulse, and which is no less real, no less a matter of immediate experience, than the element of irreducible difference.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 49.)

Yielding to one's eccentricity, of course, implies an acceptance of the diversity and change that govern life on the naturalistic plane of being, and Babbitt vigorously attacks as sophistical any attempt to dignify life on this level with philosophy or religion. Rising above the naturalistic plane to the humanistic plane or the religious plane involves spiritual conversion, a genuine struggle against the impulses that men possess in common with animals:

³⁴Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 90.

³⁵Democracy and Leadership, p. 277.

Now, speaking not metaphysically but practically and experimentally, man may, as I have said, follow two main paths: he may develop his ethical self--the self that lays hold of unity--or he may put his main emphasis on the element within him and without him that is associated with novelty and change. In direct proportion as he turns his attention to the infinite manifoldness of things he experiences wonder; if on the other hand he attends to the unity that underlies the manifoldness and that likewise transcends him, he experiences awe. As a man grows religious, awe comes more and more to take the place in him of wonder. The humanist is less averse from the natural order and its perpetual gushing forth of novelties than the man who is religious, yet even the humanist refuses to put his final emphasis on wonder (his motto is rather nil admirari).

(Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 49-50.)

Thus to court the strange, the wonderful, the bizarre, the glamorous, is to live according to a wrong principle. The end of human life is happiness, and happiness according to the human kind, growing from purpose and control. This necessitates a concentration upon the center of human experience, an effort to find standards outside one's own eccentric moods and traits, and to perfect oneself as a man and not as an animal. Babbitt believes that the effort to live in accordance with sane, normative, ordinary experience will seem colorless only to one who indulges in the idyllic dream of life that men cannot realize, who indiscriminately finds all the humanizing and civilizing habits and customs not advantages and blessings but impediments to his irresponsible preoccupation with his own temperament.

Man As an Ethical Being
and Man As a Pathetic Being

If man is viewed as a creature who unites within himself two opposed principles, who can be aware of the senses and emotions that push him toward a naturalistic mode of existence and of the insight into human virtue that acts "as the back pull towards the center"³⁶ and impels him to seek a perfection after the human kind that calls for control over his animal self, then the responsibility for decisions and actions and their consequences lies with the individual. He is an ethical being. If, however, man is viewed simply as a hapless subject of the Law for Thing, in whom will is only a delusion, no such responsibility is appropriate. If he experiences unhappiness, he is not blameable. He is a pathetic being.

Babbitt believes that human civilization and, indeed, human happiness depend upon the exercise of will by the individual. The will is superrational and thus takes precedence over both thought and feeling. It is the individual's power of control over his life, enabling him to achieve a happiness appropriate for human beings. To exercise the will is to become human or religious. Babbitt conceives of three planes on which people may live: the naturalistic, the human, and the religious. Because they are spiritually indolent, the tempting thing is to drift with their changing flow of

³⁶Spanish Character, p. 119.

moods and impulses. This is living on the naturalistic plane. Becoming human involves a conversion of one's ordinary self, a resistance to the easy animal-like existence. Babbitt differentiates humanism from religion by stipulating that the humanist imposes the law of decorum upon his ordinary self, whereas the religious man dies to his ordinary self. As a humanist Babbitt does not call for asceticism, but for control over the senses and appetites lest they lead one to excess and unhappiness. Conversion is thus a matter of inner spiritual working by the individual. This is a point that Babbitt reiterates many times in his writings. Man is divided against himself and must by his own spiritual diligence control what is ignoble in his nature.

But people are so addicted to pride and egocentricity and so ingenious in concealing the fact from themselves that even though they deny or ignore the Law for Man and live on the naturalistic level, they sophistically try to dignify their immoderations by calling them 'virtues.' It is common to find moderns who blatantly glorify the instinctual life, but there is a more subtle and insidious way of dignifying naturalistic excess. Babbitt presents Rousseau and Diderot as examples of men who deny the validity of the struggle between good and evil within the individual and who, conceiving of man as wholly good in his natural, uncivilized state, transfer the struggle to a different arena and hold that social institutions and conventions are the corruptors of the individual. This view leads to the fallacy of humani-

tarianism, the idea that reform is a matter of external work. This "myth of natural goodness,"³⁷ Babbitt charges, encourages a person in pride and complacency and strengthens him in the appalling naturalistic one-sidedness of physical work but spiritual indolence. Thus the individual gets a philosophical sanction for blaming society for his own evil, and for avoiding the inner work that would make him human.

Babbitt notes here a close cooperation between the sentimental naturalist and the scientific naturalist:

Both are prone to look upon man as being made by natural forces and not as making himself. To deal with the substitutes that Rousseauist and Baconian have proposed for traditional morality, is in fact to make a study of the varieties--and they are numerous--of naturalistic fatalism. The upshot of the whole movement is to discredit moral effort on the part of the individual.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 163.)

The idea of progress is implicit in the effort of both to justify a one-sided feeling and working on the naturalistic level:

Both Baconian and Rousseauist are interested not in the struggle between good and evil in the breast of the individual, but in the progress of mankind as a whole. If the Rousseauist hopes to promote the progress of society by diffusing the spirit of brotherhood the Baconian or utilitarian hopes to achieve the same end by perfecting its machinery.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 137-138.)

Babbitt attacks humanitarianism as a confusion of the planes of being, as an attempt to get, on the naturalistic level, a value that is appropriate only on the humanistic or religious levels. Whereas the individual should hold expansive emotions in check for the sake of happiness, humani-

³⁷Democracy and Leadership, p. 77.

tarianism leads him to a greater indulgence of them in the name of 'virtue.' Toward unfortunate man, good by nature but corrupted by the society he is born into, the appropriate feeling is pity, or sympathy. A person's 'goodness' then is measured by his ability to feel pity for his fellow men or by his effort to reform society as a whole by utilitarian adjustments of the social machinery. The effort to base charity or brotherhood on sympathy and service can only result in a parody of these Christian values, for the evil in himself that the Christian is called upon to combat goes unrestrained when a person indulges in indiscriminating pity for mankind or when he tinkers with the social organization and tries to effect reforms through political action or to increase the physical comfort of his fellows. Humanitarianism is deceptive and vicious, Babbitt suggests, because its representatives

wish to live on the naturalistic level, and at the same time to enjoy the benefits that the past had hoped to achieve as a result of some humanistic or religious discipline.

(Democracy and Leadership, p. 47.)

The idea of discipline fades when people see human perfection as the achievement of a "'far-off divine event' . . . a paradise of peace and brotherhood."³⁸ This misconception of the kind of perfection, or happiness, available to men seduces the individual into an indolent acquiescence in the drift of ideas that are popular mainly because they call for no moral

³⁸Ibid., p. 229.

strenuousness. It is comforting to think that all the horrors of several centuries' concentration on the Law for Thing will disappear one day when everyone will live by the spirit of brotherhood and enjoy the luxuries produced by the scientific apostles of service.

Babbitt's point is that few people have the specifically human strength to accept the real issues of life, to struggle for happiness and peace while recognizing the inevitable opposition between the spiritual and the physical in themselves. In this sense, New Humanism is selective, aristocratic; as, indeed, strenuous Christianity is:

One whole side of Christianity has put a tremendous emphasis on selection--even to the point of conceiving of God Himself as selective rather than sympathetic ("Many are called, few are chosen" etc.). We may be sure that stalwart believers like St. Paul or St. Augustine or Pascal would look upon our modern humanitarians with their talk of social problems and their tendency to reduce religion to a phase of the tenement-house question as weaklings and degenerates. (Literature and the American College, pp. 10-11.)

Most people are seeking an excuse for drifting:

But if it is a question of drifting, there is only one direction in which one can drift and that is towards barbarism. Civilization is something that must be deliberately willed; it is not something that gushes up spontaneously from the depths of the unconscious. Furthermore, it is something that must be willed first of all by the individual in his own heart. Men who have thus willed civilization have never been any too numerous; so that civilization always has been and, in the very nature of the case, always must remain something precarious. (Democracy and Leadership, p. 229.)

Babbitt steadily refuses to cheapen his idea of conversion by pretending that civilization, or humanness, is easy to attain

or is available to great numbers of people:

The majority at any particular instant in Greece or elsewhere is almost sure to be unsound, and unsound because it is one-sided.

(Literature and the American College,
p. 24.)

Most people want to believe that their egocentricity is to be accepted as natural and that any evil they commit can be atoned for by their feeling of sympathy for mankind in general.

Babbitt attacks humanitarianism on logical grounds because it does not account for evil (inasmuch as institutions, the alleged source of evil, are composed of individuals who are naturally good), and on practical grounds because it encourages a complacency that obviates human reform and happiness. He takes literally the predominant idea of Greek tragedy that a person who commits excess is inevitably punished. Man is an ethical being. He becomes good and happy as a man, not by assuming that he is naturally good and blaming society for evil and unhappiness, but by fronting the evil in his nature and controlling it. He is responsible for his actions. He can use his own experience and the experience of the race to learn to apply the law of measure to his life and to avoid eccentricities of temperament that can lead to one-sidedness and distortion.

When the principle of evil and the possibility for controlling it are transferred to society, the way is open for the individual to dodge his ethical responsibility and to confuse and distort the idea of human happiness by making it a quest for a chimerical brotherhood or for progress

according to the Law for Thing through increasing control over physical Nature. Goodness must begin in humility, Babbitt believes. The individual must avoid pride. He must be aware that in his natural self is a great potentiality for evil. If he assumes natural goodness, he chases phantoms in his quest for happiness, because even the indulgence of the soft emotion of sympathy requires judgment and discrimination. The love of a Christian is achieved at the expense of his egocentricity. The 'brotherhood' of a humanitarian is achieved at the expense of his humanity. The New Humanist advocates a mediation between sympathy and selection:

To state this truth more generally, the true mark of excellence in a man, as Pascal puts it, is his power to harmonize in himself opposite virtues and to occupy all the space between them (tout l'entre-deux). By his ability thus to unite in himself opposite qualities man shows his humanity, his superiority of essence over other animals.

(Literature and the American College,
p. 22.)

Mediation and Renunciation

Babbitt's New Humanism has been disparaged by several critics, notably by T. S. Eliot, because it professes to maintain its independence from religion. Religion, of course, for these men implies an acceptance of the traditional Church in a way that is inimical to Babbitt's whole temperament. Yet it is quite clear that Babbitt recognizes that he is treading close to religion:

The solution of this problem as to the relation between humanism and religion, so far as a solution

can be found, lies in looking upon them both as only different stages in the same path. Humanism should have in it an element of religious insight: it is possible to be a humble and meditative humanist.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 380.)

This last phrase illustrates Babbitt's reluctance, even when talking about the similarity of the two, to penetrate beyond humanism into religion.

Both New Humanism and religion take account of a dualism in human life and call for the individual to resist his natural self in the interest of developing his best self. Both, therefore, allow for man the possibility of a life different in kind, in quality, from the existence of things on the naturalistic level. Thus Babbitt says they lie "in the same path." A hint of the difference between the two approaches may be gathered from the way the central defect of man is expressed by each. Whereas the Christian attributes this defect to Original Sin and thus embraces a complete metaphysical explanation for man's plight, Babbitt (like Buddha) suppresses metaphysics and concentrates upon a fact that can be observed during any era: man is spiritually indolent.

Although Babbitt can say that "religion is in its purity the very height of man,"³⁹ he fears an uncritical acceptance of it. He frequently suggests that the Middle Ages was a period of general one-sidedness and that the Renaissance helped to liberate Western man from the tyranny

³⁹Humanism and America, p. 47.

of mere traditionalism. He cannot approve of religion without individualism.

Babbitt does not expect New Humanism to have a mass appeal. His implied criticism of Catholicism is that it coerces many imperceptive people into belief, and he finds this as bad as complacent drifting. Like Milton, Babbitt suspects reform that does not come out of the individual's awareness of a dynamic struggle between good and evil within himself. He holds, indeed, that the superiority of Christianity to Greek philosophy is its idea of liberty:

We have been enlightened by the Christian experience above all and the great new principle it brought into the Occident, namely, the separation of the temporal and spiritual powers, and all the consequences that flow from this principle either directly or indirectly, especially the idea of individual liberty that ultimately rests on this distinction, and of which neither Aristotle nor Plato has any adequate conception.

(Democracy and Leadership, pp. 31-32.)

Babbitt is realistic about how hard it is for people to be "moderate and sensible and decent"⁴⁰ without attempting the awesome effort to renounce the world. Renunciation can become thoughtless and mechanical, hence not profound, not salutary. Babbitt's hope for civilization is that enough individuals will exercise an enlightened virtue, the only kind that counts in actual human experience; but he does not fall into the delusion of thinking he has a popular formula. Thus Eliot's charge that Babbitt is "trying to

⁴⁰Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xxi.

build a Catholic platform out of Protestant planks,⁴¹ is unfair. If you subtract the individualism from Babbitt's thought, you cheapen it immeasurably. Babbitt has scrupulously avoided the delusion that virtue can be made attractive to everybody or even to many people.

He believes that men are so spiritually indolent that they try in every age to find easy and comfortable ways to virtue:

First, in an age of authority and accepted standards, they are induced to substitute for the reality of spiritual discipline some ingenious art of going through the motions. . . . What concerns us now, however, is not the mode of flattery that is based on exaggerated respect for outer authority, but the other main mode that flourishes in an age of individualism. The cushions that, according to Bossuet, the Jesuits put under the sinner's elbows are as nothing compared to the cushions that the sinner puts under his own elbows when left to himself. (Democracy and Leadership, p. 277.)

Babbitt's whole attack on the humanitarians grows from his conviction that they make a wrong use of individualism and encourage a superficial outer working for the sake of virtue. Mass reform is a fallacy, whether attempted in the name of tradition and authority or in the name of democracy and liberty.

Throughout his works Babbitt goes to the leaders of civilization for his examples--writers, artists, statesmen, educators. His fear is that these people, whose decisions and actions can have far-reaching consequences, are moving

⁴¹T. S. Elliot, Selected Essays (New York, 1950), p. 424.

toward naturalism. What he hopes to do at best is to caution his thoughtful contemporaries who cannot accept the traditional vehicles of humane values not to reject the values themselves, and he tries to present evidence for his conviction that a failure to recognize and live by the human law results in confusion and unhappiness:

I am attempting a contribution, I cannot remind the reader too often, to a specific problem--to the distinction, namely, between a sound and an unsound individualism. My argument should appeal primarily, so far as it appeals to any one, to those who, as a result of having broken with the traditional forms on grounds insufficiently critical, are in danger of losing the truths of the higher will entirely; who are mere modernists at a time when there is a supreme need of thoroughgoing and complete moderns.

(Democracy and Leadership, p. 317.)

Babbitt believes that if perceptive individuals independently cultivate their human selves, a convention could be arrived at which would arrest the spiritual anarchy of modern life, but a convention growing out of actual experience and not mere dogma. He does not define civilization as an achievement that can be drifted into by the masses, but

something that must be willed first of all by the individual in his own heart. Men who have thus willed civilization have never been any too numerous; so that civilization always has been and, in the very nature of the case, always must remain something precarious.

(Democracy and Leadership, p. 229.)

A Catholic platform implies an appeal to a great number of people. Babbitt is always skeptical of numbers. His humanism is always selective. The use of authority and tradition to coerce belief and righteousness will always miscarry. Babbitt says this so clearly all through the very book which

Eliot singles out to attack that the charge seems all the more irresponsible and wrong-headed.⁴²

With this individualism at the core of his thought Babbitt is able to accept the ethics of Buddha, Confucius, Christ, and Aristotle, for they all hold the individual responsible for struggling against his defects. But ultimate questions--communion, salvation and damnation, the essence of God, the Creation--do not enter Babbitt's thought. Because he uses experience as the test of the validity of belief, he is not interested in dogma and ritual. Some of the critics of Babbitt complain that he does not provide sufficient analysis of the higher will, but he asserts that "The higher will must simply be accepted as a mystery."⁴³ He consistently refuses to be drawn into metaphysical speculation. He is interested in the increased depth that religion or humanism can bring into an individual's life. This is the essence of human happiness, and he will not penetrate beyond it into speculation about salvation in an after-life. He is drawn toward Buddhism because it shuns questions about ultimates. He claims to be Aristotelian only insofar as his inquiries relate to actual experience:

Aristotle has laid down once for all the principle that should guide the ethical positivist. "Truth,"

⁴²Eliot, p. 420: "The centre of Mr. Babbitt's philosophy is the doctrine of humanism. In his earlier books we were able to accept this idea without analysis; but in Democracy and Leadership--which I take to be at this point the summary of his theory--we are tempted to question it."

⁴³Humanism and America, p. 40.

he says, "in matters of moral action is judged from facts and from actual life."

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xxi.)

Babbitt takes pains to show where he is skeptical of Aristotle, too:

Humanism is not primarily enthusiastic, whereas religion is. There is a touch of enthusiasm even in Aristotle, in general one of the coolest and most detached of thinkers, when he comes to the passage from the humanistic to the religious level. "We should not," he says, "pay heed to those who bid us think as mortals, but should, as far as may be, seek to make ourselves immortal." At the same time it must be admitted that even a true religious enthusiasm is hard to combine with poise and that this true enthusiasm has many counterfeits.

(Humanism and America, pp. 41-42.)

Babbitt fears and distrusts enthusiasm in the twentieth century as much as Swift and Johnson did in the eighteenth. He is skeptical concerning the ability of men to transcend their humanness, to be more self-denying than flesh will allow. Thus, though he is always very respectful toward genuine religious renunciation, he chiefly advocates the virtue of decorum that enables a person to reconcile the opposing forces within himself. He approves of theism at its best, but he suspects that the limitations of men prevent them from achieving it. G. R. Elliott, though a religious humanist himself, understands Babbitt's position very well. He writes that

Theism at its worst fosters, as nothing else can, the proud imaginations of the human heart. Humanism, which in one of its most important functions is a criticism of religion, is essential for sound religious humility. Religion needs the humility derivable from the consideration that happiness may be obtained without religion. Humanism is the study and practice of the principles of human happiness

uncomplicated by naturistic dogmas on the one side and religious dogmas on the other. When religion, as at present, has degraded "God's love" and abolished "God's anger," humanism will insist that the former doctrine (though at its best supreme) is no less metaphorical than the latter, and not less subject to unconscious superstition. When religion assists irreligion in softening God's laws, humanism will insist that a rediscovery of their severity is essential for right humility and happiness.

(Humanism and America, pp. 98-99.)

Babbitt does not think man is totally depraved, as the extreme religionist does. He seeks to avoid excess even here. There is a good human life to be led, short of divine; and decorum, or the ability to civilize oneself by mediating between the extremes of one's nature, is chief among human virtues. Babbitt believes in control of natural impulses not because salvation is achieved that way, but because the only kind of happiness available to man is achieved that way, and shallowness avoided. He allies himself with the religionists, but he is aware that even religion can be perverted into something monstrous:

I have been struck in my study of the past by the endless self-deception to which man is subject when he tries to pass too abruptly from the naturalistic to the religious level. The world, it is hard to avoid concluding, would have been a better place if more persons had made sure they were human before setting out to be superhuman; and this consideration would seem to apply with special force to a generation like the present that is wallowing in the trough of naturalism.

(Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xx.)

Babbitt is thinking of the astonishing record of inhumanity that has been compiled in the name of religion. He is thinking, too, of the distortion and the cruelty which individuals can commit when they allow themselves to indulge in emotions

beyond the limits of finite humanity, when they do not impose the law of measure upon their behavior.

Whereas Swift would say that men use their reason to multiply their vices, Babbitt finds the great human weakness to be a wrong use of imagination. The imagination can mislead men about their divinity even as it can deceive them about the human ability to achieve infinite emotional expansion. Because he assumes the higher will as an inexplicable supernatural phenomenon which men can be aware of, Babbitt logically must allow for the validity of religious experience, but always lurking in his thought is the fear that a preoccupation with the supernatural will lead many people toward, rather than away from, egocentricity. Babbitt believes in the supernatural, but is skeptical about the superhuman. Man is not God, and he had better be sure that he can control his natural self well enough to qualify as a human being, by mediating between the extremes he finds in himself, before setting out to develop his divine self by renouncing his natural self completely.

The Limitations of Sobriety

A mediatory philosophy invokes ethics to combat shallowness of thought and license of action. It takes account of the possibility, even likelihood, of corruption in human life. Yet it fears the possibility of distortion through asceticism; it allows for a possible right use of human resources that, misused, can cause great harm. It

will not allow a sense of sin to block out the joy that has more modest origins than holy peace. Humanism accepts the diverse claims of dualism and advocates mediation.

The humanist teaches himself to live with dilemmas. He isn't sure about eternity, but he will not give all to time. He shrinks from the easy complacency of organized groups, but he knows that there is a wrong individualism that can lead to pride. He believes in living in the spirit, but he acknowledges that the body makes legitimate demands. He wants men to be civilized, but he dreads the maladies accompanying over-civilization: effeminacy and decadence, more insidious, as Tacitus knew, than barbarism. He advocates the full use of the senses, but he hates the abuse of them.

Babbitt never underestimates the difficulty of achieving poise, this ability to comprehend extremes and yet to mediate between them. He repeats the idea many times:

Man is a creature who is foredoomed to one-sidedness, yet who becomes humane only in proportion as he triumphs over this fatality of his nature, only as he arrives at that measure which comes from tempering his virtues, each by its opposite.

(Literature and the American College, p. 23.)

Poise is the humanist's ideal. He finds abhorrent the logic of both the extreme religionist and the extreme naturalist. The extreme religionist assumes that spirit is the only reality, and there follow, logically, self-administered flagellations, fastings, hairshirts. The

extreme naturalist assumes that flesh is the only reality, and there follow, logically, either the over-refined cultivation of sensation of the aesthete, or the gluttony and voluptuousness of the brute, a carnivorousness that extends even to one's personal relationships.

When the struggle for poise is abandoned, the individual can easily lapse into a listless routine. Habitual yielding to the extreme gets one away from the human struggle between spirit and flesh, and encourages complacency. The word vital is important whether we think of spirituality or materialism. The awful deadener of human life is listlessness.

Listless routine in religion, a rigid adherence to dogma or outward forms, can lead to serious violations of the religious spirit, to gross arrogance and cruelty in the interest of dogma and ceremonial. The humanist is the enemy of tainted religion.

Listless routine in materialism can lead to shallow human relationships. The mechanical worldling, habitually treating other people as 'things,' inexorably loses his own humanity, his ability to have in his relationships with others the quality and warmth that mark off the human from the animal. Tom Jones is preferable to Don Juan. The humanist is the enemy of worldliness, but freely acknowledges the superiority of vital animal sensation to a bored and inert licentiousness, that of Hollywood characters and multi-wived millionaires.

Babbitt unceasingly attacks listless routine. The phrase "going through the motions" recurs many times in his writings. He is a conservative, and he always denies that this position can easily be won and maintained. He disparages the easy, uncritical acceptance of convention. He is an Aristotelian, and he always denies this title to those who seek an easy formula. He attacks the eighteenth-century "pseudo-classicists" for oversimplifying Aristotle's doctrine of imitation.

He attacks the pseudo-classicists as vigorously as he attacks the Romantics. Both are extremists. Babbitt knows that the Romantic movement was a gigantic reaction against the constriction of the human spirit by those who thought that rules were enough. Against the extreme of locking the spirit in formulae arose the extreme of pure spontaneity.

Whatever Babbitt's immediate subject is, he is seldom far from an advocacy of poise. Happiness and success in life depend upon an acknowledgment of the diverse claims of human nature and upon an effort to give each its due. Babbitt urges spirituality, but he warns against neglecting the side that relates man to time and change:

The human mind, if it is to keep its sanity, must maintain the nicest balance between unity and plurality. . . . If man's nobility lies in his kinship to the One, he is at the same time a phenomenon among other phenomena, and only at his risk and peril neglects his phenomenal self.

(Literature and the American College, pp. 27-28.)

The deeply-held convictions of a man get reflected in his personal life. It seems evident that Babbitt lived humanistically, that he sought mediation between the phenomenal and the noumenal. Many of the contributors to Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher⁴⁴ say this. Yet, though he probably didn't go wrong in his private life, he felt an intense public responsibility as a 20th-century member of Western Civilization. He felt himself in the thick of a bitter, unceasing battle against philosophical naturalism. He looked everywhere for symptoms of the widespread belief (if not held explicitly, at least reflected in the way people were living) that values, principles, morals, and ideals are illusions ascribable to a puritanic timidity or to a wish to glorify what is merely another form of animal life. He fought valiantly against those people and practices that would deny or nullify civilization, spirituality, wisdom, humility. This sense of being in a battle sometimes interfered with the important humanistic doctrine of disinterestedness and led Babbitt to use literature narrowly, as a source of proof texts. The polemicist is on watch to detect any hint that a writer is melting Nature and human nature together. Babbitt has nowhere shown that he felt a positive joy in that writing which celebrates the love of Nature and the joy of the senses.

⁴⁴Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher, ed. Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard (New York, 1941).

The best word he has for this writing is "solace."

It is not humanistic to be too steadily self-conscious about ethics. This obsession can interfere with the achievement of wholeness that the humanist values so highly, and can produce an uneasiness with sensuous enjoyment, or even an ascetic cast that is more appropriate to religion than to humanism. Arnold names the two great human virtues "strictness of conscience" and "spontaneity of consciousness."⁴⁵ Babbitt knows that humanism calls for this two-sided development, but he is so intent upon correcting the naturalistic bias of the age that he sometimes associates love of Nature (or intense response to Nature) with naturalism; and though he admits that non-ethical art can be acceptable as recreation, he has left no record of his aesthetic delight in works he could not morally approve of.

In Babbitt's own writings we do not find impressive testimony to the refreshment of spirit he received from Nature. We must go to the essays his friends and students wrote about him in Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher, for this testimony. As a humanist he should have asserted the legitimacy, the rightness for man, of a love of Nature that results in a heightened spontaneity of consciousness, but he felt so intensely the moral shallowness of the time that he erred on the side of strictness of conscience.

The humanist accepts his body and its demands, learns

⁴⁵Works, VI, 124.

even to be at ease with them. Socrates accepts the fact of the unruly horse though he wants the noble one to dominate. The religionist, though, deploras what is unalterable, inevitable, in human nature. Sir Thomas Browne records that he used to wish for a less vulgar way for people to procreate. Babbitt praises Sophocles as a great serious artist who wrote with ethical insight, but Babbitt deletes from Sophocles' plays the violence which always lies beneath the surface and sometimes even erupts. By making Sophocles only a moral teacher, Babbitt annihilates the poetry and the comprehensiveness of the tragedies. This is the complaint of R. P. Blackmur:

It was as if he taught music, and taught it magnificently, but only in the written score. He was right, everlastingly, about everything which may occur before the playing begins.

The figure is not as forced as it may sound. For what did he teach--what in all the enormous mass of literature that he read did he praise--but those great dead writers whose works we know precisely only as scores, with an imperfect clue to the notation even there, and which we cannot play at all. These are the writers whose ideas have survived and can be dealt with as formulas, as abstractions of the middle way, but whose poetry, what happened when their ideas got into drama, or got lodged in actuality, we must through ignorance for the most part let go by the board, unless in ourselves, in our own imaginations, in the literature of our own times, we can see the poetry refreshed. Sophocles is nothing without his violence; Antigone is a mere mechanical fanatic without her folly; Creon an ineffectual ranting without his stupidity; Ismene a mere vapor without her double charge of fear and love. In short, the whole Greek drama is nothing but exemplary if we do not ourselves supply the violence, the folly, the stupidity, the mixture of fear and love. Babbitt was not only content with the exemplary, he insisted

on its dominance at the expense of every other interest. That is why he never seemed inside his examples.⁴⁶

It is our link with Nature, our physical animality, that makes violence an inevitable component of human life. There is something wild and irrational in us that is completely tamed only by austerity or tepidness, both anathema to the humanist. A man who is not willing to surrender his physical and sensuous tone either to asceticism or to effeteness, and yet who desires cultivation, civilization, morality, must find a way of keeping this wildness alive in himself, must nourish it yet not be victimized by it; another dilemma. Babbitt saw so many people yielding crudely to this wildness and living sub-human lives that he became too wary and sometimes failed to distinguish between naturalism and spontaneity of consciousness. Spontaneity of consciousness calls for a nourishment of the wildness.⁴⁷ The emotions and senses that we share with animals make their claim, and man can neglect them "only at his risk and peril."⁴⁸

Babbitt devotes a whole chapter of Rousseau and Romanticism to an explanation of the improper view of man's relationship to Nature. Spiritual laziness makes man susceptible to the Arcadian dream, the life of a carefree

⁴⁶R. P. Blackmur, The Lion and the Honeycomb (New York, 1955), pp. 146-147.

⁴⁷Though I borrow this useful phrase, "spontaneity of consciousness," from Arnold, I use it to mean more than a free play of thought. Applied to Thoreau and Frost, the phrase suggests joy in the harmony of mind, emotions, and senses.

⁴⁸Literature and the American College, p. 28.

animal, void of restraints and responsibilities. Babbitt shows how some writers have associated the pursuit of the ideal woman and the longing for the infinite with this Arcadian view of existence. He says quite explicitly what is insidious in romantic revery:

Those to whom I may seem to be treating the nature cult with undue severity should remember that I am treating it only in its pseudo-religious aspect. In its proper place all this refining on man's relation to the "outworld" may be legitimate and delightful; but that place is secondary. My quarrel is only with the aesthete who assumes an apocalyptic pose and gives forth as a profound philosophy what is at best only a holiday or week-end view of existence. No distinction is more important for any one who wishes to maintain a correct scale of values than that between what is merely recreative and what ministers to leisure. There are times when we may properly seek solace and renewal in nature, when we may invite both our souls and our bodies to loaf. The error is to look on these moments of recreation and relief from concentration on some definite end as in themselves the consummation of wisdom. Rousseau indeed assumes that his art of mixing himself up with the landscape is identical with leisure; like innumerable disciples he confuses revery with meditation. . . . He parodies subtly what is above the ordinary rational level in terms of what is below it. He thus brings under suspicion the most necessary of all truths--that the kingdom of heaven is within us. (Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 288-289.)

Here is the humanistic insistence upon distinctions, upon the planes of being. Yet Babbitt knows that, logically, he must allow for intense response to Nature in the life of the individual, knows that it is tonic and invigorating. He makes the concession theoretically; but as the champion of doctrinal humanism, he has a public responsibility to excoriate writers who celebrate the love of Nature lest they encourage many people to replace duty with revery. The

spontaneous value of recreation can be destroyed by too deliberate an awareness of the secondary importance of it. This is academicism. This is oppressive, narrowing sobriety. In the individual's private life his moments of joy in Nature are not laden with demands of conscience. This joy, this spontaneity of consciousness, is humanistic; but if Babbitt were not somewhat uneasy about it, he would not have confined his search to negative examples of the celebration of Nature.

Justifying the love of Nature by the argument that it helps us to return to our spiritual struggle with renewed vigor smacks of pragmatism, or at best, a mechanical virtue. The Y.M.C.A. uses recreation as a lure for character building; a refined deception. The deliberateness and sobriety of motive in their organized summer camp games annihilates the joy of them. Recreation is used by them as food is by the Salvation Army.

Babbitt's too deliberate and too reserved approach to recreation is suggested by his habitual description of it as "solace":

If Aristotle were living today, it is conceivable that he might in his recreative moments find solace in a good detective story.⁴⁹

Man needs at times to relax, and one way of relaxing is to take refuge for a time in some land of chimeras, to follow the Arcadian gleam. He may then come back to the real world, the world of active effort, solaced and refreshed.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Irving Babbitt, On Being Creative and Other Essays (Boston, 1932), p. 21.

⁵⁰Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 209.

Lamb could also find an Elysium of unmixed aesthetic solace in the literature of the past--especially in Restoration Comedy.⁵¹

In general one must grant the solace and rich source of poetry that is found in communion with nature even though the final emphasis be put on communion with man.⁵²

Reluctance to make room for an unalloyed joy in the phenomenal life is more appropriate to religion than to humanism. This puritanic sobriety limits Babbitt's humanism, makes it gray. And to understand the bright and confident humanism of Frost, we need a parallel with an earlier New Englander, who can boldly celebrate joy in wild Nature even while resisting Arcadian revery.

Sensibility Chastened:
The Humanism of Henry David Thoreau

What but this puritanic uneasiness with empathic response to Nature made Babbitt in all his writings ignore Thoreau, Thoreau who was a stern critic of shallowness and immorality, who was himself spiritually strenuous, who was a traditionalist--a student of the best of Eastern and Western thought--who held the individual responsible for reforming himself?

Thoreau asserts quite emphatically his belief in the law for man as distinct from the law for thing. "Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that

⁵¹Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 92.

⁵²Ibid., p. 351.

never fails."⁵³ "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established."⁵⁴ "From exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality."⁵⁵ These statements are very much like Babbitt's principal emphases. Thoreau preceded Babbitt as an unceasing and uncompromising attacker of American pride, sloth, and complacency. Thoreau does not glorify naturalism by substituting the subrational for the superrational. He chides his contemporaries for accepting their ordinary selves and for using their energies basely to accumulate luxuries:

Lieutenant Herndon, whom our Government sent to explore the Amazon, and, it is said, to extend the area of slavery, observed that there was wanting there "an industrious and active population, who know what the comforts of life are, and who have artificial wants to draw out the great resources of the country." But what are the "artificial wants" to be encouraged? Not the love of luxuries, like the tobacco and slaves of, I believe, his native Virginia, nor the ice and granite and other material wealth of our native New England; nor are "the great resources of a country" that fertility or barrenness of soil which produces these. The chief want, in every State that I have been into, was a high and earnest purpose in its inhabitants. This alone draws out "the great resources" of Nature, and at last taxes her beyond her resources; for man naturally dies out of her. When we want culture more than potatoes, and illumination more than sugar-plums, then the great resources of a world are taxed and drawn out, and the result, or staple production, is, not slaves, nor operatives, but men,--those rare fruits called heroes, saints, poets, philosophers, and redeemers.⁵⁶

He has no faith in group reform, but places the responsibility

⁵³The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Cambridge, 1894), II (Walden), 340.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 342.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 343-344.

⁵⁶Ibid., X (Miscellanies), 284.

for reform squarely upon the individual. "Civil Disobedience" strikes at the humanitarian fallacy of justice through majority opinion, and argues for the superiority of the individual conscience:

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?--in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.⁵⁷

Thoreau makes careful distinctions about democracy, accepting its individualism but rejecting its fallacious and even tyrannical idea of rule by the majority even when unenlightened.

Thoreau exemplifies a selective use of the past, of traditions, of literature,⁵⁸ of institutions. This is humanistic individualism, not romantic egocentricity. Thoreau's writings are full of exhortations to the individual to achieve

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 133-134.

⁵⁸Cf. Ethel Seybold, Thoreau, the Quest and the Classics (New Haven, 1951), p. 85: "The classics had gone a long way with Thoreau and had served him in many ways. In utilitarian fashion they had provided material for translation and models for imitation. In them he had found the source, the corroboration, or the extension of most of his favorite theories: of language, of government, of history and myth, of poetry and music, of the sameness of the universe. As a whole they had been for him originally a reference work which he might consult in his search for truth."

right thinking and right living. He is not a member of the cult of feeling. His lapses into sentimentality are very rare. He is generally masculine and moral:

"How happy's he who hath due place assigned
To his beasts and disafforested his mind!
.....
Can use his horse, goat, wolf, and ev'ry beast,
And is not ass himself to all the rest!
Else man not only is the herd of swine,
But he's those devils too which did incline
Them to a headlong rage, and made them worse."⁵⁹

Babbitt drew the battle lines between classical and romantic too rigorously, for he seems to have excluded from the humanist camp this staunch friend of traditional humanism whose courage and integrity in the service of the principled life are reminiscent of Socrates' steadfastness. Babbitt probably rejected Thoreau because Thoreau attacks customs and institutions so relentlessly. Yet, what is Thoreau's attitude but the skepticism of modernity that Babbitt frequently praises, the refusal to submit uncritically to brute tradition or authority?

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof.⁶⁰

Thoreau consistently pays homage to the two important sides of humanism, strictness of conscience and spontaneity

⁵⁹Ibid., II (Walden), 343.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 15-16.

of consciousness. He states this double allegiance roundly, unmistakably:

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.⁶¹

This is a much bolder assertion of faith in the chastened sensibility than Babbitt ever can bring himself to make. Thoreau has the humanist's dread of stagnation and listlessness. It is this dread that informs most of his attacks upon inert convention. Over-civilization, the effeminate desire for luxury and ease, has two great consequences: it cheapens human character, makes men compromise their best selves; and it dulls and deadens their senses, mainly their response to Nature. Thoreau does not attack complexity merely out of caprice. He attacks it because it leads many people into confusion about right and wrong thinking and acting, and because it anaesthetizes the empathic nerve.

Like Margaret Fuller, Thoreau accepts the universe. Animal life is right for animals. Animals, forests, mountains, lakes, oceans, and skies all contribute to the phenomenal reality that forms a great part of human life; and we should attend to them because we have the sensory and intellectual qualities to observe and partially understand them. The appeal to Nature is vicious only when it encourages men to be complacent about their worst selves.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 327.

Thoreau wants people to be moral, but he also wants them to be sensitive and alert, to see what is to be seen, to hear what is to be heard. The wildness in us can be cultivated so as to protect us against both loss of character and loss of alertness.

Joseph Wood Krutch praises Thoreau for defining so carefully the importance of Nature to man, and for distinguishing between philosophical naturalism and love of Nature; for mediating, in effect, between Scientism and latent Puritanism:

Thoreau is the founder as well as the most important member of the school because he so successfully combined a deep personal relationship to Nature with a clear sense of the meaning of the issue between him and those who did not feel that Nature was "relevant."

The nineteenth century invented the phrase "man's place in Nature" and Thoreau made it his business ceaselessly to insist that the phrase had much more than a merely scientific implication. It did not imply merely, or even most importantly, that, for example, man was descended from the ape and therefore still ape-like in many of his characteristics-- a theory, by the way, of which he had only heard vaguely just before he died. What it really meant was that nature supplied the inescapable context of man's life, physically and spiritually; that he could not, without unhappiness and ultimate disaster, cut himself off completely from either her sights and sounds or from the sense that he and she were part of a large enterprise together.⁶²

Babbitt says that people must allow for the demands of the phenomenal life, but Thoreau follows out the implications of these demands more whole-heartedly and with a bolder confidence in the humanistic spontaneity of consciousness.

"Wildness" is vigorous. "Solace" is uneasy. The capacity

⁶²Joseph Wood Krutch, "In Back of Man, A World of Nature," The New York Times Book Review, July 22, 1951, pp. 1 and 17.

for evil lies in the hearts and minds of men, and it is the work of a lifetime not to allow the bestial to predominate over the human; but Nature is what it is without choice and without moral implications. So it is good for man to observe carefully and to respond to the different forms of Nature. It is humbling and refreshing at the same time. And Thoreau has a way of handling violence. He does not delete it:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness,--to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion, which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,--tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor

are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped.⁶³

This refusal to force human standards upon Nature, and the willingness to respond to the wildness purely, saves Thoreau from Babbitt's sober, unbalanced attitude.

For Thoreau, a healthy, alert sensibility is a counterpart of character. He saw his countrymen losing both, and he feared the consequences. He foresaw many of the lamentable consequences of industrialism, of urbanization, of over-civilization and its fatal ennui. Passage after passage throughout Walden now reads like a prophecy that has been fulfilled.

But Walden is more than an attack upon wrong ambition and complacency. It has strong affirmations. Walden is a fine-textured record of two years in the life of a man who perceived that a full human life calls for a delicate balance between ethics and aesthetics, for a double development that humanists have traditionally advocated. The book moves back and forth between these poles. Thoreau at one moment exhorts men to live with dignity and depth, and at the next reveals his own response to a phenomenon in the woods. Thoreau has all his moral and sensory antennae in operation, and he steadfastly rejects the puritanic idea that the senses are evil because they may be misused. On the contrary, he reiterates the necessity for vigorously exercising them lest

⁶³Writings, II (Walden), 489-490.

one's whole life deteriorate. He believes that the sensibility can be chastened, that responding to wild Nature need not involve a surrendering to animality.

He is interested in the kinds of trees, animals, and flowers around Walden Pond; he notices the different hues of the pond under varying weather conditions and even the color of its ice; he is curious even about the underwater topography of the pond, and makes a systematic sounding of its bottom; he is alert to all the sounds of the area and those that waft in from a distance; he tries to discover all he can about the past inhabitants of the area.

Practical people on the way to urbanization can lose the pleasure of a rich sensuous immediacy. Thoreau believes that most people are too easily coerced. They lead diminished human lives because they allow themselves to become confused about needs and luxuries. They pay for their superfluities with their characters and their sensibilities. Gross economics obliterates finer and subtler interests that preserve physical and spiritual health:

A man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread. If within the sophisticated man there is not an unsophisticated one, then he is but one of the Devil's angels.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Writings, X (Miscellanies), 270.

CHAPTER III

HUMANISM IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

The Parallels with Babbitt

No leader of civilization receives more of Babbitt's attention than the poet. The poet may both reflect and influence the contemporary spiritual state. When Babbitt traces patterns in the past, he uses poets and other literary men as indexes of general belief and practice, and he blames many of them for preparing the way for the 20th-century spiritual indolence that he so acutely feels and so aggressively fights. The traditionalist in him is probably responsible for his pronounced failure to deal with poets of his own time, even though he constantly implies that any hope for the future rests with them and other contemporary leaders.

Perhaps because Babbitt had this disdain of contemporaneity, he left it to two of his allies, less 'scrupulous' humanistic critics, to claim Robert Frost as an exemplar of traditional humanism. Gorham B. Munson published Robert Frost, A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense, in 1927, and G. R. Elliott published The Cycle of Modern Poetry in 1929.

These men did not, however, make an extensive point-by-point comparison of Frost and Babbitt to determine where

they agree and disagree. I will organize this part of my discussion of Frost according to parallel ideas in the Babbitt section of Chapter II. I believe that the four key ideas of Babbitt's humanism are recurrent themes with Frost:

<u>Babbitt</u>	<u>Frost</u>
The Law for Man and the Law for Thing	Some Strange Resistance In Itself
Concentric Experience and Eccentric Experience	There Are Roughly Zones
Man as an Ethical Being and Man as a Pathetic Being	On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind
Mediation and Renunciation	The Strong Are Saying Nothing

Frost himself offers a warning to anyone who would compare poets and scholars:

Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields.⁶⁵

This warning, though, probably is not as necessary as it might be in a study of certain other modern American poets, because Frost and Babbitt meet as philosophers. Babbitt transcends the designation of scholar, for his investigations of the past are conducted always with the purpose of discovering how to live, or as he says, of discovering "a set of principles to oppose to naturalism."⁶⁶ Some critics complain that Frost occasionally lapses in his function as artist and

⁶⁵Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1949), pp. vii-viii.

⁶⁶Rousseau and Romanticism, p. xvii.

presents his convictions too baldly, too directly. This heresy according to modern poetic standards might suggest that he writes with a philosophical motive, that, like Babbitt, he tries to say something wise about how to live. And it is this effort to have a poem end "in wisdom"⁶⁷ that provides the impact of much of his work. Frost has resisted subtle 'modern' aesthetic theories and has refused to be merely an exploiter of sound or imagery or technical effects. He has consistently hung on to meaning and moral soundness as proper requisites of a poem.

The poem entitled "Mowing" has an assertion that is strikingly like one of Babbitt's cardinal principles as a modern philosopher. Frost says, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."⁶⁸ Babbitt's most succinct statement of the thought is this:

I may perhaps best sum up my whole point of view by saying that the only thing that finally counts in this world is a concentration, at once imaginative and discriminating, on the facts.

(Democracy and Leadership, p. 14.)

The interest of both men in facts reflects the modern distrust of speculation that cannot be tested by experience. The affinity between these men suggested by this emphasis on experience is all the more worth following up because both are unwilling to confine facts to the naturalistic realm explored by science. Both are interested in issues of deeper

⁶⁷Complete Poems, p. vi.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 25.

significance to the life of man. Both have lived during an era of rapid acceleration toward naturalism when an uncritical acceptance of one's ordinary self becomes the basis for the public educational system, and when the past is interesting and important to many people chiefly as the source of questions for radio and television quiz shows.

Some Strange Resistance
In Itself

Some critics who have been just and careful in their reading of Frost feel impelled to defend him against the trite simplification and the smug dismissal of him as a naïve rustic who, obsessed with outdoor life, celebrates Nature like an indefatigable primitivist. Babette Deutsch says the poems of Frost

repeatedly remind us that the central fact in nature for himself and his kind is human nature. However interestedly he may observe such impersonal things as storms and stars, he is apt to relate his observations to some insight into humanity.⁶⁹

Readers who fail to see the accuracy of Miss Deutsch's remark must miss what is essential in Frost's poems. In many of his poems he opposes the romantic melting together of Nature and human nature. The dualism that Babbitt expounds so vigorously and so unceasingly has three major implications: quality of life distinguishes man from mere objects of Nature; this quality depends upon a potential control over environment; a person qualifies as human only to the extent that he resists

⁶⁹Babette Deutsch, Poetry In Our Time (New York, 1952), p. 62.

spiritual indolence by willing to develop his best self. Dualism is a frequently recurring theme with Frost, and he treats these implications in poems that may be arranged into three groups.

Three poems, "Tree at My Window," "Desert Places," and "The White-Tailed Hornet," emphasize that the life of man is different in kind, in quality, from the life of natural objects. "Tree at My Window" shows the similarities between the life of a tree and the life of a man, but distinguishes carefully the one from the other. Both exist in time and space; both can be "taken and tossed"; both have heads and tongues. The similarities are limited to physical characteristics, though. The tree has only a "vague dream-head"; it is diffuse; its tongues cannot say anything profound. The inner life of mind and emotions, or "inner weather," ⁷⁰ makes a man's life different in quality from a tree's.

In "Desert Places" the whiteness of snow conveys the oppressive loneliness that pervades the fields and woods, and even the person who views them. But there is a difference between the loneliness of Nature and the loneliness of man. The interior life is stressed in the last stanza:

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.
(Complete Poems, p. 386.)

This poem well illustrates Miss Deutsch's point. Frost uses an external scene as a pretext for making a statement about

⁷⁰Complete Poems, p. 318.

human life. Where a Romantic poet would end with the identification of man and Nature ("The loneliness includes me unawares"), Frost goes on to suggest doubt in the relevancy of the astronomer's naturalistic knowledge of

empty spaces

Between stars--on stars where no human race is.

Interior loneliness distinguishes man.

This idea of a different quality of life for man is handled even more deliberately in "The White-Tailed Hornet," where Frost disparages the modern practice of "downward" comparisons. There could hardly be a more emphatic statement of Babbitt's argument that confusion and shallowness result from an exaltation of instinctual behavior as the norm for human life. Men fail to develop their best selves when they relax into a complacent acceptance of the 'natural':

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.
(Complete Poems, pp. 361-362.)

This indictment of modern life is strikingly similar to Babbitt's complaint that the loss of standards set above the self is vitiating human life and leading twentieth-century men toward some great catastrophe.

These poems that dramatize the difference in quality between natural life and human life imply that man cannot

fulfill himself by drifting with time and change. What makes him human is a power of control. Frost returns to this idea again and again. One treatment of it, "A Drumlin Woodchuck," is humorous, but the lightness of the tone does not obscure Frost's deeply-held conviction that man has the potential ability to master his environment, to control his life. This poem is ostensibly about a woodchuck's ability to protect himself against danger, but there are hints that Frost is using his characteristic device of indirection to say something about human life:

One thing has a shelving bank,
 Another a rotting plank,
 To give it cozier skies
 And make up for its lack of size.

My own strategic retreat
 Is where two rocks almost meet,
 And still more secure and snug,
 A two-door burrow I dug.

With those in mind at my back
 I can sit forth exposed to attack
 As one who shrewdly pretends
 That he and the world are friends.

The "lack of size" makes imperative a "strategic retreat." This is the theme of separateness, one of Frost's favorites. The woodchuck's protective measures are analogous to those which the individual must take who disapproves of the general drift of his society. Frost himself has retreated from the commercial and industrial America.

All we who prefer to live
 Have a little whistle we give,
 And flash, at the least alarm
 We dive down under the farm.

We allow some time for guile
 And don't come out for a while
 Either to eat or drink.
 We take occasion to think.

And if after the hunt goes past
 And the double-barreled blast
 (Like war and pestilence
 And the loss of common sense),

If I can with confidence say
 That still for another day,
 Or even another year,
 I will be there for you, my dear,

It will be because, though small
 As measured against the All,
 I have been so instinctively thorough
 About my crevice and burrow.
 (Complete Poems, pp. 365-366.)

Frost obtrudes too obviously human dangers here to be talking only about a woodchuck. The self-reliant woodchuck protects himself against the danger of the hunt, but the self-reliant human being must protect himself against "war and pestilence" and against mob hysteria. And not only the woodchuck but the human being is "small/ As measured against the All." In the poem, "The Lesson for Today," Frost says that "Space ails us moderns."⁷¹ For sanity's sake the individual must make a strategic retreat from the vastness of the cosmos. Frost does this by concentration on human relations rather than space relations. Again, the "All" may be the American society with its obsession for material success, its faith in political action. Frost has protected his integrity as an individual by avoiding "gangs."⁷²

The theme of the "strategic retreat" appears again in

⁷¹Complete Poems, p. 473.

⁷²Ibid., p. 430.

"One Step Backward Taken." In the first seven lines Frost presents a violent natural scene:

Not only sands and gravels
Were once more on their travels,
But gulping muddy gallons
Great boulders off their balance
Bumped heads together dully
And started down the gully.
Whole capes caked off in slices.

There is such force here that even boulders are being moved along by the water, and "Whole capes" are being severed from the mainland. Man is threatened by this prodigious destructive force:

I felt my standpoint shaken
In the universal crisis.

But, unlike the sands and gravels, boulders and capes, man has the ability to retreat from the danger:

But with one step backward taken
I saved myself from going.
A world torn loose went by me.
Then the rain stopped and the blowing
And the sun came out to dry me.
(Complete Poems, p. 519.)

A literal interpretation of this poem must emphasize the ability of man to protect himself against natural destructive forces. The word "standpoint," though, may well be the pivot by which Frost swings us toward a symbolic interpretation. A standpoint may be a mental position as well as a physical one. The thoughtful individual, who perceives the distortion and confusion of so much contemporary life, can take "one step backward" from his society and, thereby, remain true to his conception of a sane human life:

I saved myself from going.
A world torn loose went by me.

Frost suggests that the individual has control over the social, as well as the natural, environment.

Control is the theme of "Riders." The idea is suggested by the word "guiders" in the first stanza. Human beings are riders,

And though none too successful at it, guiders.

The second stanza is a figurative description of the human condition:

What is this talked-of mystery of birth
But being mounted bareback on the earth?
We can just see the infant up astride,
His small fist buried in the bushy hide.

The infant seems helpless as he desperately tries to hold on to the animal's mane. This is the analogy to the plight of a human being whose natural self is an animal of wild desire and impulse. Though the animal in man is like "a headless horse" that

runs unbridled off its course,
And all our blandishments would seem defied,
We have ideas yet that we haven't tried,
(Complete Poems, p. 345.)

Rationality, a specifically human resource, can enable us to ride out our lives and to be undominated by our worst selves. "Riders" is Frost's vigorous denial of determinism.

"The Master Speed" defines man's source of control, and hence his superiority to natural objects, as a power of detachment, of disinterested thought. Frost uses the word "speed" to differentiate man from merely natural objects. The "speed" that gives man preëminence in the universe

has nothing to do with physics; it is the ability to transcend the flux of Nature by getting a perspective on time and change, on physical objects and human history:

You can climb
Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,
And back through history up the stream of time.
And you were given this swiftness, not for haste
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
But in the rush of everything to waste,
That you may have the power of standing still--
Off any still or moving thing you say.⁷³

(Complete Poems, p. 392.)

Control is not automatic or accidental. It must be deliberately willed. Many of Frost's poems affirm the indispensable role of the will in human life. The much-anthologized "Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening" is a 'will' poem. The clear-cut distinction between man and Nature is emphasized in these two lines near the end:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep.

(Complete Poems, p. 275.)

⁷³Frost has said that poets read "cavalierly" and "let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields." I believe that many burrs from Thoreau's Walden have stuck to Frost. Here is the theme of "The Master Speed": "With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another."

(Writings, II, 211.)

Anybody who relaxed into an identification of himself with Nature or who sought an escape into aestheticism would be betraying the most important side of his being. He has responsibilities as a man, responsibilities which limit even his enjoyment of the beauty of Nature. Frost's "promises to keep" are like Babbitt's "here and now and their positive demands on . . . character and will."⁷⁴

"The Onset" celebrates the idea of a persistent humanity. Knowledge gained through experience strengthens the will to endure, to resist despair. The first stanza presents the complex feeling of beauty and futility that the storm evokes, the snow

as white
As may be in dark woods, and with a song
It shall not make again all winter long
Of hissing on the yet uncovered ground. . .

This is a lovely sight and a lovely sound, yet the snowfall imparts a sense of doom to one caught in time and change, and almost leads him to despair and to drift:

I almost stumble looking up and round,
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.

In the second stanza the tone shifts immediately to optimism in the knowledge gathered from past experience. Earth, trees, and frogs have powers of recuperation and regeneration:

⁷⁴Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 90.

I know that winter death has never tried
 The earth but it has failed: the snow may heap
 In long storms an undrifted four feet deep
 As measured against maple, birch, and oak,
 It cannot check the peeper's silver croak. . .

Frost uses white snow as a symbol of "winter death," and to show regeneration he has the snow melting and flowing away as water until

Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
 And there a clump of houses with a church,
 (Complete Poems, p. 278.)

This couplet conveys the durability not only of passive trees, but of man, whose quality of life requires him to do something "To evil," to achieve an "important triumph." The emotional tone of whiteness is deftly transformed from bleakness to warmth. When the snow has melted, the white birches are an emblem of the regenerative powers of natural life, and the white church and houses remind us of man's ability to endure.

Similar to "The Onset" in structure and theme is "Once by the Pacific." Frost begins with a description of ominous water and clouds, in which we suddenly perceive a hideous giant's fierce eyes and unruly hair:

The shattered water made a misty din.
 Great waves looked over others coming in,
 And thought of doing something to the shore
 That water never did to land before.
 The clouds were low and hairy in the skies
 Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.

This seems like an intuition of some hostile force in the universe that is capable of enormous destruction, and the danger is not confined to mere physical Nature, for

There would be more than ocean-water broken
 Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.

But not all of the poem is given to depicting the danger.

These lines convey a sense of great durability and strength:

You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent. . .

The shore is supported by the cliff; the cliff is supported by the continent. This is a mind-stretching image of strength. The cliff suggests great height and weight; the continent suggests great length and depth. And this line implies that these resources of strength and protection could be utilized:

Someone had better be prepared for rage.
(Complete Poems, p. 314.)

Men can will to protect themselves against the "night of dark intent."

Frost's emphasis upon mind and will as man's defenses against destructive forces in Nature and in human nature closely parallels Babbitt's distinction between the Law for Man and the Law for Thing. In "Sand Dunes" Frost captures the tension between these two laws. Again, he presents a vivid picture of a natural force that threatens human life, then a vigorous statement of man's adequacy to think and adapt, to be undominated because he has strength of mind, a different kind of strength from that of Nature. It is not enough that the sea claims the lives of men who sail; she will even gradually and insidiously try to

bury in solid sand
The men she could not drown.

The conflict between the two laws is asserted in the third stanza:

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

The sea, working according to the Law for Thing, according to the principle of force, is not able to subdue man, who is fortified with intelligence and can act upon his perceptions, can will to adapt and change his physical circumstances:

Men left her a ship to sink:
 They can leave her a hut as well;
 And be but more free to think
 For the one more cast-off shell.
 (Complete Poems, p. 330.)

These last two lines are reminiscent of Thoreau's doctrine of simplicity. As industrialism became a more and more ominous threat to the individual's freedom and wholeness, Thoreau urged that the individual could will to protect himself against this unfavorable development in his environment by separating needs from luxuries. Frost has Thoreau's belief in the great resources of human mind and will. Men can use intelligence to see where their highest humane interests lie, and then they can use will to protect those interests.⁷⁵

All of these poems are expressions of dualism. Frost vigorously denies the central postulate of naturalism that man and Nature have a simple harmony. The 'something more' in human life that Frost implies is the source of a higher quality of life through control and will. In all these poems

⁷⁵Others have noted, in a brief and general way, the kinship of spirit between Frost and Thoreau. See Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry (New York, 1935), p. 42; and John Gould Fletcher, "Robert Frost the Outlander," Mark Twain Quarterly, III (1940), 3.

Frost implies a Law for Man as well as a Law for Thing. In his most impressive poem on the theme of dualism, "West-Running Brook," he has the classical definition of 'nature' as humanity's link with the permanent.

"West-Running Brook" is presented as a conversation between a farmer and his wife, people of diverse temperaments, who discuss a brook that flows west, though all the other country brooks flow east. The permanent white wave caused by the rush of the current against a sunken rock becomes the central image of the poem, and Frost uses it to convey symbolically his convictions about spirituality in human life.

The poem has a low-pitched beginning:

'Fred, where is north?'

'North? North is there, my love.
The brook runs west.'

'West-running Brook then call it.'
(West-running Brook men call it to this day.)
'What does it think it's doing running west
When all the other country brooks flow east
To reach the ocean?

The next few lines, though, bring in a deeper note:

'It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries
The way I can with you--and you with me--
Because we're--we're--I don't know what we are.
What are we?'

'Young or new?'

We may be justified at this point in suspecting that Frost is using the brook as a way of presenting a mythic statement about human life. The brook is unlike other brooks in that

it uses indirection. There is a hint of choice or control in the speculation that it "Can trust itself to go by contraries."⁷⁶ Directness, as John Crowe Ransom ably argues,⁷⁶ is the way of animals and savages. Indirection, going "by contraries," is more characteristic of civilized men. This ascription of complexity to the brook may be the beginning of a sustained comparison between the brook and mankind.

The wife continues:

'We must be something.
We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.
As you and I are married to each other,
We'll both be married to the brook. We'll build
Our bridge across it, and the bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me.'

The wife has a simple animism, an immediate sense of harmony with the brook, a harmony like that of St. Francis, perhaps. She even finds the brook responding to her statement. Her husband counters what he considers extravagance in her with a common-sense explanation of the wave:

'Why, my dear,
That wave's been standing off this jut of shore--'
(The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled
In a white scarf against the far shore alders.)
'That wave's been standing off this jut of shore
Ever since rivers, I was going to say,
Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us.'

⁷⁶John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York, 1938), pp. 29-54.

In the last two lines here the husband is chiding the woman for her statement about marriage to the brook. "'Ever since rivers . . . / Were made in heaven'" is an echo of the popular saying that marriages are made in heaven. However, I think we should hesitate to give all our sympathy to the man's attitude. Frost is using these diverse characters to present a comprehensive statement. The husband's chiding keeps the woman's sense of a divine presence before us. And her next statement does, too:

'It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you
It was to me--in an annunciation.'

She has the standard Christian explanation of spiritual mysteries, an explanation that is given credence by an immediate, personal revelation. And we should keep her position in mind throughout the rest of the poem.

Frost has included important words and phrases and imagery in the parenthesis inserted in the husband's last speech. Frost not only makes a vivid contrast between black and white water ("The black stream . . . / Flung backward on itself in one white wave"), but he further emphasizes this black and white imagery in his description of the "bird / White feathers from the struggle of whose breast / Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool / Below the point." A struggle in the breast seems to imply a human spiritual struggle. The imagery is consonant with this interpretation. White suggests purity, spirituality; and a human being can purify himself and enlighten his life by a spiritual struggle

within his breast. Man's life is fraught with possibilities for evil and for spiritual drifting ("the dark stream"). Spirituality is man's link with the permanent. This idea of permanence is suggested by Frost's phrase, "Not gaining but not losing."

The husband's next statement continues the light ridicule of the woman's explanation:

'Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,
As't were the country of the Amazons
We men must see you to the confines of
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,--
It is your brook! I have no more to say.'

'Yes, you have, too. Go on. You thought of something.'
The man seems to be attacking not only his wife's notion that she has received an annunciation, but her need for certainty. He considers this need a weakness. He can be secure even though he does not have minute explanations, dogmatic assurances, of divinity. So he proceeds to develop his own general position:

'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.'

Now the husband has remembered the woman's statement that "the brook/Can trust itself to go by contraries." He argues that the brook not only has a more complex way of reaching the ocean; it even "runs counter to itself." This image complements the image of the bird that has a struggle within its breast. The opposition to the current, to the compelling

flow of change, is a more primordial fact about human life than is the deterministic idea that man descended from an animal. What is uniquely human is a resistance to the stream of change, and not merely the development of a more complex nervous and conceptual system than animals. Even though it be true historically that man descended from an animal, the potentiality for resisting change, for finding a link with permanence, was somehow incorporated within us. Perhaps it took many centuries to come to fruition. But the power of will, the potential ability to save ourselves from the complete tyranny of change, is strangely in us even though we are on the way to death. A supernatural genesis takes precedence over a naturalistic development.

The woman intuits a divine revelation, and the man more cautiously offers the wave as a symbol of a supernatural power; but both have an "impatience of the steps" that go "back to the beginning of beginnings."

Next, the man admits that human beings are inevitably caught in the stream of movement and change:

Some say existence like a Pirouot
 And Pirouette, forever in one place,
 Stands still and dances, but it runs away,
 It seriously, sadly, runs away
 To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.
 It flows beside us in this water brook,
 But it flows over us. It flows between us
 To separate us for a panic moment.
 It flows between us, over us, and with us.
 And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--
 And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
 The universal cataract of death
 That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
 Save by some strange resistance in itself,
 Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
 As if regret were in it and were sacred.

The first five lines of this passage are a mediation between the extreme view of Zeno that existence is static, and the extreme view of certain Romantics that change can be exciting, inspiriting, and therefore it should cause exultation in us. This man accepts change as a central fact of existence, but describes it as a serious and sad fact. He intensifies the desolation of it by the triple denotation of nothingness: "'abyss' void with emptiness.'" Then he describes the different perspectives we have upon our changeful existence. "'It flows beside us in this water brook'"; we can see movement, change, decay in objects outside us. "'But it flows over us'"; we are aged by it, too. "'It flows between us / To separate us for a panic moment'"; we perceive physical change in one another, and we have a strong momentary sense that love and friendship can decline and even that those we love will die. It flows "'with us'"; we receive extraordinary advantages from the system of change, and there follow good words for good qualities possible in human life: "'time, strength, tone, light, life, and love.'" The ineluctable requirement for developing these attributes is that we be moving toward "'The universal cataract of death.'" But the movement toward death and nothingness is resisted. Existence has "'some strange resistance in itself.'" And the next two lines suggest that the resistance is not gratuitous, not mechanical, but a deliberate willing:

'Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
As if regret were in it and were sacred.

"'Throwing back'" intensifies the idea of willing, the purposefulness. This implies not just a slight modification in the same direction, but an active effort to resist the flow of change. The words "regret" and "sacred" suggest that man has an intuition of perfection and sublimity that he is not able wholly to achieve.⁷⁷

The next lines are a claim that the 'nature' which includes man must be defined as change and the "sacred" opposition to it that seeks to get back to a supernatural mover, "'the source'":

'It has this throwing backward on itself
So that the fall of most of it is always
Raising a little, sending up a little.
Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
The brook runs down in sending up our life.
The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
And there is something sending up the sun.
It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.

⁷⁷Cf. Hyatt Howe Waggoner, The Heel of Elohim (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), pp. 54-55. Waggoner presents a naturalistic interpretation. He argues that the white wave resisting the current is merely life resisting death. The poem, he says, "asserts the naturalness of the eddy which the current flings back upon itself. The ripple seems to be defying the current, but a hidden rock explains it. Moving ever upward against the stream it is analogous to life maintaining itself in

The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself"

This interpretation does not go beyond naturalistic philosophy. Animals try to resist death. The whole poem cannot be explained satisfactorily, I think, without invoking spirituality. Otherwise, the image of the white wave is superfluous, for the husband admits that "time, strength, tone, light, life, and love" owe their existence to change, "'The stream of everything that runs away.'" Life flows with the stream until dissolution occurs, but mere life, raw life. The resistance to the stream, though, "'this backward motion toward the source,'" is spirituality.

It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.'

The struggle toward perfection ("Raising a little, sending up a little") is the most essential characteristic of human life, is "most us.'" This is a teleological passage. Each kind of existence runs down in sending up another kind. The clock, which man creates, has significance because man has a consciousness, a consciousness that wears out. Human life is sustained by water from the brook that flows toward dissolution. The brook receives motive power from the sun that is gradually diminishing in energy. The next line, though, "And there is something sending up the sun," implies a Platonic essence that provides the motive power for the world of appearances, yet this "something" presumably does not run down.

The poem ends with a graceful encompassing of both positions, the woman's simple faith in revelation and the man's belief in the indubitable infusion into our lives of some larger will, some unchanging power for good:

'Today will be the day
You said so.'

'No, today will be the day
You said the brook was called West-running Brook.'

'Today will be the day of what we both said.'
(Complete Poems, pp. 327-329.)

There Are Roughly Zones

Since Frost distinguishes carefully between man and Nature, and attributes to man a power of control over his life, it is not surprising that he admonishes people to seek the center of human life, and to avoid the folly and unhappiness that accompany extremes. Five lines in "There Are Roughly Zones" are a concise description of what Babbitt calls the "war in the cave,"⁷⁸ the struggle which man has to make in order to overcome the moral weaknesses inherent in his animality and to live wisely:

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--
 That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?

 Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
 That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
 There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.
 (Complete Poems, p. 401.)

The motif for this poem is the threat that the severe New England weather will destroy a peach tree, but Frost as usual is talking about more than his immediate subject. There is something in man that keeps him from accepting his own finiteness, that seduces him into courting extremes. And if a catastrophe occurs (in the poem, if the peach tree dies), the fault will be "this limitless trait in the hearts of men."

The long poem, "New Hampshire," ends with a refusal to accept an extreme attitude toward the animality of man.

⁷⁸Spanish Character, p. 119.

One doesn't have to be either a puke or a prude, Frost declares; one doesn't have to be complacent about animality, or ashamed of it:

It seems a narrow choice the age insists on.
How about being a good Greek, for instance?
That course, they tell me, isn't offered this year.

A person can emulate a good Greek and mediate between the extremes in his being, and Frost holds to this conviction by making a playful evasion when he is taunted into choosing one extreme or the other:

Well, if I have to choose one or the other,
I choose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
With an income in cash of say a thousand
(From say a publisher in New York City).
(Complete Poems, pp. 211-212.)

Probably this answer isn't entirely evasive, though, because his choice of farming as a vocation undoubtedly has something to do with his wish to keep himself free to write philosophical poetry in an unphilosophical age.

A mediating philosopher sees human life as a fairly constant and uniform affair. This idea that human life has a center which people should seek is expressed in these lines from "The Black Cottage":

Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
I could be monarch of a desert land
I could devote and dedicate forever
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.
(Complete Poems, p. 77.)

This disposition to avoid extremes and to concentrate upon the center of human experience makes Frost wary of novelty and glamor, the handmaidens of change. The need for a

patient resignation to life is suggested in "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations." The poem explicitly disparages the person who expects an astronomical revelation to sear his ennui, but by implication the poem expresses Frost's disdain for the temperament that cannot accept life as it is but must be forever seeking sensationalism:

We may as well go patiently on with our life,
And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun
For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane.
(Complete Poems, p. 346.)

The phrase "shocks and changes" has an ironical edge here. People should not require unusual and bizarre events to help them fight boredom and avoid madness.

The spirit of accommodating oneself to the unglamorous, unshocking center of life also pervades the poem, "In Time of Cloudburst," the last stanza of which expresses a hope for the ability to endure the condition of man with strength and balance, like a good Greek:

May my application so close
To so endless a repetition
Not make me tired and morose
And resentful of man's condition.
(Complete Poems, p. 369.)

Frost places high value on this courageous acceptance of inevitables. In "The Times Table" he attacks the kind of acceptance that ends in moroseness,⁷⁹ strongly implying that only through moderation and balance can human life endure. The farmer who utters this gloomy aphorism in response to the horse's sigh is excessive in his realistic analysis of life:

⁷⁹Cf. Thoreau, Writings, II, 122: "We should impart our courage, and not our despair, our health and ease, and not our disease, and take care that this does not spread by contagion."

'A sigh for every so many breath,
 And for every so many sigh a death.
 That's what I always tell my wife
 Is the multiplication table of life.'
 (Complete Poems, p. 336.)

Frost's poem is not the protest of a man who thinks that people should delude themselves for the sake of 'happiness'; this is an objection to a gloomy realism that leaves a person with a sense of futility, of impotent despair; and it seems quite clear that Frost's denunciation of excessive moroseness is consistent with his denunciation of excessive hope. He sees wisdom in Aristotelian ethics.

Frost counsels modest expectations about what life can offer. This kind of temperateness is the theme of "Hyla Brook." In the summertime Hyla Brook runs dry, but the people who have grown to love it do not regret the dryness nor wish the brook different. It is irrelevant to compare this brook with others that continue after spring to flow with "song and speed." Frost even includes this unglamorous detail in his description of the brook in summer:

Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat--
 A brook to none but who remember long.
 (Complete Poems, p. 149.)

Frost's disposition to accept, and sometimes even to love, things as they are is the opposite of romantic delusion and dissatisfaction as described by Babbitt:

The essence of the mood is always the straining of the imagination away from the here and now, from an actuality that seems paltry and faded compared to the radiant hues of one's dream.
 (Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 92.)

The romantic deludes himself that the past or future offers more felicity and glamor than the present does. Only a person with a strong grasp of the here and now, and with a healthy acceptance of them, would say that "We love the things we love for what they are."

Frost is aware of the appeal that the infinite holds for men, but he consistently urges that it is sounder to accept the limited happiness that is available to men on earth, to achieve that anyway, and not go soaring on unbridled imagination in quest of a remote and rare happiness. These alternatives are dramatized in "Bond and Free." Throughout the poem Love is presented in images of bondage. Love accommodates itself to the limitations of earthly life, and tries to make the best of finite, concrete experiences. Love, it might be said, accepts the earth as it is in the daytime; and in this acceptance finds protection and comfort. The other alternative, questing for the rare and strange, is represented by Thought; and Frost carefully chooses language to suggest the vague, dreamy, night-time quality of Thought's romantic pursuit:

Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom
And sits in Sirius' disc all night,
Till day ~~makes~~ him retrace his flight,
With smell of burning on every plume,
Back past the sun to an earthly room.

(Complete Poems, p. 151.)

Whereas Love strains "in the world's embrace," Thought strains after a transcendent, distant, infinite experience. The fallacy of the quest seems to be implied by the return of

Thought to earth. The night-time mood cannot be sustained, because daylight, or man's finiteness, always keeps asserting itself and shattering the romantic dream. Happiness according to the principle of intensity ("smell of burning on every plume") is short-lived, because the human body and psyche cannot sustain the high pitch and must return "to an earthly room." Imagination must be trained to harmonize with the finite organism that it inhabits. The last stanza of the poem emphatically shows Frost's commitment to a moderate happiness based upon an acceptance of earthly limitations, for Love finds as much happiness through patient acquiescence in the finite as Thought finds through pursuit of the infinite. Frost suggests that we should not sacrifice the happiness that is attainable by men for a happiness that may not be attainable, attractive though it looks from a distance.

The attitude that felicity in human life consists of this calm, patient acceptance of limitations is expressed in the four-line poem, "Devotion." Anyone who would label Frost a Romantic poet must explain this very formidable approval and advocacy of constancy, regularity, habit. The Romantic attacks habit as the great impediment to strange, novel, intense experiences, which he would hold to be the essence of human felicity. The eloquent spokesman of this view is Pater:

To burn always with this hard gemlike flame,
to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a
sense it might even be said that our failure is to

form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.⁸⁰

Frost does not assume a stereotyped world, either, but he places character high in the hierarchy of attributes that lead to success and happiness in life. "Devotion" suggests how much in human life depends upon preserving loyalty, cultivating habit. The devotion of this poem can be devotion to one's work or art, or to one's children, friends, or mate. In spirit, it is like the statement that "We love the things we love for what they are," and not for our extravagant illusions about them:

The heart can think of no devotion
Greater than being shore to the ocean--
Holding the curve of one position,
Counting an endless repetition.
(Complete Poems, p. 308.)

Not a questing for glamor and intensity by drifting with temperamental eccentricity, but a calm, steady pulling back toward the center of life, is the dominant theme of Frost's philosophy.

Probably the weakness in man that dooms him to be always seeking more from life than life can give is conquered by a steadiness and a sanity, even if a sanity tinged with sobriety. It is this sober note in some of Frost's poems that disturbs Yvor Winters. He finds melancholy in Frost and ascribes it to his uncertainty, to his opposed

⁸⁰The Works of Walter Pater (London, 1900), I (The Renaissance), 236-237.

wishes to court the infinite and to exercise control over the imagination. As evidence of Frost's attraction to vagueness, he cites the description of the tree (in "Tree at My Window") as a "vague dreamhead." This phrase, he says, reveals a deep affinity:

Frost sees his own mind as similar to the vague dream-head of the tree, the thing next most diffuse to cloud, and the feeling of the poem is one of a melancholy longing to share the dream-like experience more fully.⁸¹

To describe vague and diffuse objects as vague and diffuse is not to wish your own mind like them. The many poems of Frost in which gloom and exaggerated expectations are disparaged would suggest that he freed himself from romantic illusion. This, I think, is the theme of "The Oven Bird." This poem presents a parallel between the commonplace bird that will not be excessively joyful and exuberant, and the poet who will not exaggerate the possibilities for rapture or even happiness. These lines suggest freedom from youthful, romantic illusion:

He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.

This poem is a companion to "Hyla Brook." Frost is resolved to make what he can of reality. These two lines imply that the poet would give up his role but that he knows how to

⁸¹Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," The Sewanee Review, LVI (October-December, 1948), 589.

write about human life honestly and realistically, without glamorous romantic exaggeration:

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

(Complete Poems, p. 150.)

The diminished thing is life-in-the-daytime, accepting the fact that some leaves have highway dust on them.

Another poem, "An Old Man's Winter Night,"⁸² reveals Frost's masculine Johnsonian sobriety; not the sadness and regret that follow upon disillusionment when one discovers that his extravagant hopes cannot be realized, but a healthy acceptance of inevitables. Frost was a young man when he achieved this penetrating insight into the reality of old age. The solitude and isolation of old age are confronted; but the sober tone is conveyed indirectly, by the clomping in the storeroom and by the sudden shifting noise of the log. Romantic melancholy is pervaded with bitterness over the loss of one's dream. An effort to see life as it is may produce sobriety, but not the melancholy born of disillusionment and regret.

On the Heart's
Beginning to Cloud the Mind

Death, the dark companion of old age, serves as a test of sentimentality in a poet. The uncertainty, fear, and grief evoked in us by death provide a strong temptation to abandon our ethical reservations about a person who is

⁸²Complete Poems, p. 135.

dying or who has just died. Few people could withhold sympathy at the sight or thought of the corpses of monumentally inhumane scoundrels. The death of even a Hitler or a Mussolini can cause a tremor of pity. So, of course, Frost would be deficient as a poet if he completely ignored the pathos in the death of Silas, the old hired man, in the poem entitled "The Death of the Hired Man." What is extraordinary in this poem about death is that Frost presents not only Mary's tender, if not sentimental, view of Silas, but Warren's ethical strictures:

'I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
 If that was what it was. You can be certain,
 When he begins like that, there's someone at him
 Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,--
 In haying time, when any help is scarce.
 In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.'
 (Complete Poems, p. 49.)

Silas is irresponsible and unreliable. He is coaxed out of his loyalty to Warren by pocket money, but when his new employer turns him out in the winter, he returns to Warren with the perennial offer to ditch the meadow, or clear the upper pasture. Frost is careful to include details of Silas' provincialism, too, his disdain for a college boy skeptical of water witching, and his inability to credit the boy's love of Latin. "He hates to see a boy the fool of books." A poet who would invite his readers to be sentimental over death must suppress or, at least, underplay negative qualities. Frost's effort to control the pathos of death by this strong appeal to responsibility suggests that he, like Babbitt, rejects the idea that man is a pathetic being.

The ending of "Out, Out--!" seems like a conscious effort to conclude a moving description of a boy's death on an anti-pathetic note:

And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
(Complete Poems, p. 172.)

At first glance, this might seem to be an ironical indictment of these people for their coldness and lack of feeling; but no matter how much anybody might have regretted the death of this boy, he literally had to turn to his affairs to avoid being overwhelmed by this ghastly event. It is this knowledge of how to preserve stability that people must use to combat the urge to sentimentalize life, Frost implies. We are subject to misfortune, sorrow, and grief, but we must accept them as conditions of life and avoid self-pity. The theme of "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" is sorrow for the people who have left bleak reminders of themselves in the spectral remains of a burned farmhouse. As a poet, Frost cannot ignore so ubiquitous an emotion as sorrow, but in his treatment of it he will not abandon his masculine judgment. He shows at the end of this poem that he resists the temptation to grieve over "what has been." A man "versed in country things" knows the phoebes' cries are constant and unaffected by human experience:

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.
(Complete Poems, p. 300.)

Only an urban bird-watcher or a Sunday poet would fall into

this pathetic fallacy, believing the birds grieve over human affairs.

This warning against a soft and uncritical view of man as a pathetic being is repeated in the poem, "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind." Frost dramatizes the warfare between our pity for ourselves (and for man in general) and our critical sense that can help us to avoid distortion and sentimentality. As he rides on a train through a Utah desert at night, he finds himself responding to the darkness and loneliness by projecting his mood upon the landscape:

The sky had here and there a star;
The earth had a single light afar,
A flickering, human pathetic light,
That was maintained against the night,
It seemed to me, by the people there,
With a God-forsaken brute despair.
It would flutter and fall in half an hour
Like the last petal off a flower.

These lines show that Frost is not immune to the common weakness of sentimentalizing life. He, too, feels this temptation to regard man as a pathetic creature. So far the very environment seems to harmonize with the pathos of the despairing people in their lonely struggle. But Frost will not yield to the distortion in this mood, for he breaks it abruptly with this critical statement:

But my heart was beginning to cloud my mind.

Then follows an emphatic assertion of the stability and continuity, the stamina and control, that these desert dwellers may nourish as they lead their isolated lives:

I knew a tale of a better kind.
 That far light flickers because of trees.
 The people can burn it as long as they please:
 And when their interests in it end,
 They can leave it to someone else to tend.
 (Complete Poems, p. 376.)

Another poem that makes this very point is "The Figure in the Doorway." A person may be isolated and yet cultivate his resources for facing a lonely existence:

The miles and miles he lived from anywhere
 Were evidently something he could bear.
 He stood unshaken, and if grim and gaunt,
 It was not necessarily from want.
 He had the oaks for heating and for light.
 He had a hen, he had a pig in sight.
 He had a well, he had the rain to catch.
 He had a ten-by-twenty garden patch.
 Nor did he lack for common entertainment.
 That I assume was what our passing train meant.
 (Complete Poems, p. 378.)

Frost is aware of his own wish to sentimentalize human life, but he combats it. There is a spiritual struggle in Frost that is best called humanistic. He seeks wisdom about how to live, but he does not want to be stunted by his philosophy. He has the philosopher's desire to live wisely and sanely, but he has the vigorous poet's desire to strain the boundaries a bit. He has a healthy tentativeness that is related to humility, to a wish not to miss alternatives that he might even disapprove of. Those who do not perceive in Frost this humanistic desire to encompass as much of life as possible get a distorted impression of his position. Winters takes "the reckless choice" in the poem, "The Sound of the Trees" as the basis of Frost's philosophy:

My feet tug at the floor
 And my head sways to my shoulder
 Sometimes when I watch trees sway,

From the window or the door.
 I shall set forth for somewhere,
 I shall make the reckless choice
 Some day when they are in voice
 And tossing so as to scare
 The white clouds over them on.
 I shall have less to say,
 But I shall be gone.

(Complete Poems, p. 195)

But Frost very seldom abandons his judgment to a fleeting mood. He usually resists whim and tries to end his poems in wisdom.

It is this ability to comprehend extremes and yet not end with a vacillating commitment to a pale agreeableness or a good-natured orthodoxy, that Mark Van Doren praises in Frost:

There is an ignoble way of avoiding extremes. It is the way of being nobody and of saying nothing; of never, at any rate, being or saying quite enough to count. But there is another way which, difficult though it may be to define, is the only way worth considering. It consists in occupying or touching both extremes at once, and inhabiting all the space between. It consists of being capable of excess while actually achieving more than excess achieves. It consists in finding that golden mean which, far from signifying that the extremes have been avoided, signifies that they have been enclosed and contained. To say this of any poet is to praise him very highly.⁸³

This admiring description of Frost uses almost the exact words that Babbitt frequently repeats as his ideal of mediation:

We have seen that the humanist, as we know him historically, moved between an extreme of sympathy and an extreme of discipline and selection, and became humane in proportion as he mediated between these extremes. To state this truth more generally, the true mark of excellence in a man, as Pascal puts it, is his power to harmonize in himself opposite virtues

⁸³Mark Van Doren, "The Permanence of Robert Frost," The American Scholar, V (Spring, 1936), 191.

and to occupy all the space between them (tout l'entredeux). By his ability thus to unite in himself opposite qualities man shows his humanity, his superiority of essence over other animals. (Literature and the American College, p. 22.)

What Van Doren perceives in Frost's poetry is exactly what Winters overlooks. Frost is not a rigid moralist, and he is seldom didactic in an obvious way. He combats narrowness by showing in his poems that he is aware of different interpretations of human experience. He comprehends the pathos in the death of Silas; he feels a rush of sadness for the burnt frame of a house that broodingly reminds him that human beings once lived there; he understands the loneliness that can afflict solitary, isolated people. For the sake of lively drama and fulness of comprehension and statement he is able to present viewpoints that he does not hold, but his commitment is usually clear. He believes that man is an ethical being, who must accept responsibility for choosing, for living wisely, for developing character; and even though he observes in himself the temptation to see man as a pathetic being, he struggles against it.

Babbitt argues that as more and more people in the Western world have denied the reality of the "war in the cave" and have come to view man as the hapless victim of forces outside himself, they have found evil in social machinery and have sought to combat it through group action, or humanitarianism. Consistent with Frost's refusal to accept the pathetic view of human life is his skepticism toward humanitarianism. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time" he

dramatizes a modern dilemma: the temptation to sacrifice wholeness in the individual to achieve group solidarity through specialization of work. Van Doren's point applies here. Frost is aware of the claims of professional wood-choppers in an age of specialization, and he is aware of the misfortune in their disorderly lives ("sleeping God knows where last night"); yet he will not docilely submit to a 'social trend' or to pathos. After setting the scene and introducing the conflict in the first stanza, he devotes five stanzas to a precise description of the weather and the time of year, as well as the sensuous and kinesthetic joy that he feels while chopping wood at this particular moment:

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
 As large around as the chopping block;
 And every piece I squarely hit
 Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
 The blows that a life of self-control
 Spares to strike for the common good
 That day, giving a loose to my soul,
 I spent on the unimportant wood.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
 You know how it is with an April day
 When the sun is out and the wind is still,
 You're one month on in the middle of May.
 But if you so much as dare to speak,
 A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
 A wind comes off a frozen peak,
 And you're two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
 And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume
 His song so pitched as not to excite
 A single flower as yet to bloom.
 It is snowing a flake: and he half knew
 Winter was only playing possum.
 Except in color he isn't blue,
 But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look
 In summertime with a witching-wand,
 In every wheelrut's now a brook,
 In every print of a hoof a pond.
 Be glad of water, but don't forget
 The lurking frost in the earth beneath
 That will steal forth after the sun is set
 And show on the water its crystal teeth.

The time when most I loved my task
 These two must make me love it more
 By coming with what they came to ask.
 You'd think I never had felt before
 The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
 The grip on earth of outspread feet.
 The life of muscles rocking soft
 And smooth and moist in vernal heat.
 (Complete Poems, pp. 357-358.)

These five stanzas give vigorous support to his admonition, in the last stanza, that serious atrophy of the individual's private life is threatened in the modern separation of "love and need." The second stanza of the poem conveys the pleasure and satisfaction in such exquisite control of the axe, in such perfect coordination and timing, that

every piece I squarely hit
 Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.

Even while Frost is trying to add strength to his utterance against humanitarianism, he acknowledges that some men have cultivated self-control so that they could be useful in bringing about desirable social change. Men like Gandhi, Debs, and Mazzini are suggested in these lines:

The blows that a life of self-control
 Spares to strike for the common good
 That day, giving a loose to my soul,
 I spent on the unimportant wood.

But Frost goes on to suggest what would be missed if he did not give a loose to his soul. In effect, the task of splitting

wood heightens his consciousness. This is its chief value; the economic motive is quite incidental. Thoreau wrote Walden as a grand testimony to this spontaneity of consciousness which he and Frost claim as an indispensable attribute of a complete human life. The whole book exudes a joy in activity, in doing things for oneself. One passage makes Frost's identical point: specialization is destroying precious joy.

There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? . . . Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.⁸⁴

Frost writes of the capriciousness of the weather at this precise moment of the year; of the care the bluebird takes not to pitch his song too optimistically and thus encourage the flowers to bloom before the end of cold weather; and of the ambiguous status of water in the spring-time: an aid to spring and a sign that winter is dying, and yet a possible ally of the frost.

The point of these precise details is brought out

⁸⁴Writings, II, 74-75.

explicitly in the sixth stanza:

The time when most I loved my task
 These two must make me love it more
 By coming with what they came to ask.

The tramps know that the conventional idea of social justice supports their monopoly upon wood-chopping, so all they have to do is wait,

And all their logic would fill my head:
 As that I had no right to play
 With what was another man's work for gain.

But Frost leaves no doubt that he is resisting this social movement as unwholesome. As men, we should have more than pragmatic need impelling us to work; so he refuses to surrender the precious human combination of "love and need." This poem censures the modern fallacy of an impersonal, quantitative solution to social problems. The individual must have aesthetic experiences in his daily life, for he is not a mere economic animal.

It is quality of life that Frost is worried about in his poem, "A Roadside Stand," too, the weakness in some country people that prevents them from working out a happiness apart from the vulgar and standardized American life, but instead makes them long for what is shallow and corrupting:

Here far from the city we make our roadside stand
 And ask for some city money to feel in hand
 To try if it will not make our being expand,
 And give us the life of the moving pictures' promise
 That the party in power is said to be keeping from us.

In these lines he brings together romantic illusion and politics, emphasizing the paradox that in a free society where the citizens could save themselves from a false, illusory

view of life, politicians are free to make utopian promises and to beguile many people into thinking that through political action the doom of man can be overcome and a social paradise achieved. He deplores the low value that is placed on independence and separateness as the ways to happiness; so he attacks the fallacy of group action, the modern humanitarianism that destroys individuals or makes them obsolete:

While greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey,
Swarm over their lives enforcing benefits
That are calculated to soothe them out of their wits,
And by teaching them how to sleep the sleep all day,
Destroy their sleeping at night the ancient way,
(Complete Poems, pp. 370-371.)

The greedy good-doers of the 19th century received this violent denunciation from Thoreau:

There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good done to me,--some of its virus mingled with my blood. No,--in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. A man is not a good man to me because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much.⁸⁵

Frost's criticism of the 20th-century faith in the group goes deep. Character is the best protection against neuroticism. When the people accept oversimplified 'plans' for security and allow their self-reliance and judgment to wither, they cannot make the indispensable human effort to reform the

⁸⁵Writings, II, 118.

self inwardly. The externality of group salvation impoverishes the spirit of the individual, confuses him, and may wreck him.

In "Build Soil" Frost attacks the humanitarians' favorite instrument, political action, and calls for clear distinctions between the good and the evil brought about by large social movements. He allows that some social gain has been made in controlling selfish political ambition. Tyrants have been restrained:

Political ambition has been taught,
By being punished back, it is not free:
It must at some point gracefully refrain.

Social gain has been made, too, in the curbing of greed. Commercialists cannot overtly exploit people as easily as they once could:

Greed has been taught a little abnegation
And shall be more before we're done with it.
It is just fool enough to think itself
Self-taught. But our brute snarling and lashing taught it.
(Complete Poems, p. 424.)

Still, though ambition and greed have been socialized ("Made good for everyone"), ingenuity, the greatest danger of all, is unsocialized, unrestrained:

Bounds should be set
To ingenuity for being so cruel
In bringing change unheralded on the unready.
(Complete Poems, p. 425.)

This is a vigorously conservative idea, reminiscent of Burke's strictures against the French Revolution. Frost is not complacent about the achievements of democracy, for people are still in danger of having their established patterns violently

disrupted. Science conspires with democracy, for

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.
(Complete Poems, p. 424.)

A healthy society cannot be created by sudden large, sweeping changes. Soundness in the society proceeds from soundness in the individuals that comprise it; therefore collectivism is doomed to abortiveness. The Western world in the 20th century is depending too much upon outward working, upon adjustments of what Arnold called machinery:

We're always too much out or too much in.
At present from a cosmical dilation
We're so much out that the odds are against
Our ever getting inside in again.
But inside in is where we've got to get.
(Complete Poems, p. 425.)

In this poem, building soil by turning it in upon itself is compared to maturing thoughts in individuals:

I will go to my run-out social mind
And be as unsocial with it as I can.
The thought I have, and my first impulse is
To take to market--I will turn it under.
The thought from that thought--I will turn it under
And so on to the limit of my nature.
We are too much out, and if we won't draw in
We shall be driven in.
(Complete Poems, pp. 428-429.)

Frost does not advocate complete withdrawal, utter isolation, as Robinson Jeffers does, but he believes that the only reform worth considering is the Emersonian kind, that which begins inside the individual. This is the only durable foundation for social change:

Don't let me seem to say the exchange, the encounter,
 May not be the important thing at last.
 It well may be. We meet--I don't say when--
 But must bring to the meeting the maturest,
 The longest-saved-up, raciest, localest
 We have strength of reserve in us to bring.⁸⁶
 (Complete Poems, p. 426.)

Frost's concession--that wholesome social change is possible when it proceeds from the ultimate source of soundness, within the individual--saves him from the coldness and hardness that a rigorous individualism might lead to. He does not throw kindness and sympathy away. Babbitt and Frost agree that doing good, helping others, is lamentable only insofar as it distracts the individual from his primary human task of trying to perfect himself. External reform of the social order is a distortion when it does not proceed from inward reform. "The Exposed Nest" illustrates Frost's sane, balanced attitude toward doing good. He commends the person he is addressing in the poem for trying to assist the young birds:

You wanted to restore them to their right
 Of something interposed between their sight
 And too much world at once--could means be found.

This right--and need--is a human one, too, of course. Children, the aged, the sick, the poor all need help, and human dignity demands that we try to provide it. Yet the health

⁸⁶Cf. Thoreau, Writings, II, 213-214: "Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. . . . It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him."

of the human spirit depends upon individualism and self-reliance, so we need wisdom and judgment even in our charitable acts:

We saw the risk we took in doing good,
But dared not spare to do the best we could
Though harm should come of it.

Frost distinguishes between a sensible kindness and a one-sided material assistance designed to take the place of interior reform. He does not try to make benevolence a substitute for spiritual soundness. This poem ends with a modest perspective upon the good deed:

I haven't any memory--have you?--
Of ever coming to the place again
To see if the birds lived the first night through,
And so at last to learn to use their wings.⁸⁷
(Complete Poems, pp. 136-137.)

The Strong Are Saying Nothing

Frost shares Babbitt's fear that a self-conscious benevolence will strengthen complacency, distract the individual from self-examination and effort at inner reform. This is humility, the profoundest link between humanism and religion. The humanist is uneasy with dogmatic answers to ultimate questions and with the idea of renunciation; but he concurs with the religionist in denouncing complacency and in rejecting short cuts to spirituality.

⁸⁷Cf. Thoreau, Writings, II, 124: "If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoestrings. Take your time, and set about some free labor."

Frost quite consistently avoids definiteness in his references to God or religion or the soul. He has no religious poems. Yet he understands, as Babbitt does, the affinity between religion and humanism. Babbitt declares:

For my own part, I range myself unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists.

(Humanism and America, p. 39.)

Austin Warren's journal has this entry about Frost and religion:

Roy Elliott was, he said, worried because Frost and Austin weren't convinced that people could be saved only within the Episcopal Church. For his part, he didn't belong to the ecclesiastical regular army but, as a plain citizen, would join the militia if war against religion should be declared.⁸⁸

"I Could Give All to Time" belongs with "West-Running Brook," "A Star in a Stone-Boat," and "For Once, Then, Something" as a Frosteian intimation of the supernatural, a testimony to the "Something," the permanence, in life that transcends time and change. The dualism of "West-Running Brook" seems to imply ethics, but in these other poems Frost does not go beyond a report that he has the intimation, does not, for example, give it the emphatically ethical cast that Arnold does in his "Eternal not ourselves that makes for righteousness,"⁸⁹ or that Babbitt does in his "higher will" that is "felt in its relation to the impressions and impulses and expansive desires of the natural man as a will to refrain."⁹⁰

⁸⁸From the unpublished journals of Austin Warren (June 14, 1938).

⁸⁹Arnold, Works, VIII (God and the Bible), xl-xli.

⁹⁰Spanish Character, p. 237.

While Babbitt insists upon the need for standards of human behavior by which to preserve the superiority of men over animals, insists, in other words, upon the reality of the Law for Man, he stops short of a metaphysical or theological justification of these standards. In the poem "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" Frost expresses his skepticism that the universe will yield us any information about ultimate questions:

Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
 In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
 On his particular time and personal sight.
 That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.
 (Complete Poems, p. 346.)

He has the humanist's skepticism toward the general efficacy of organized religion, too, for in "The Peaceful Shepherd" he blames religion along with kingship and jurisprudence for the wars that men have suffered:

For these have governed in our lives,
 And see how men have warred.
 The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
 As well have been the Sword.
 (Complete Poems, p. 319.)

Frost and Babbitt are unwilling to give to any institution or outer authority precedence over their personal experience. People have to accept as courageously as they can the uncertainty that goes with life, without renouncing judgment and without embracing an oversimplified formula for spiritual comfort. They need what Keats names "negative capability." Frost's poem, "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," has the kind of modernity that Babbitt approves of: it elevates personal experience over authority and dogma, and asserts a human

strength to endure the uncertainty of life and death without surrendering individual judgment. The poem begins with a description of seed-planting in early spring, but the possibility that Frost is glancing at the doctrine of the elect and the damned is suggested by the contrast between the weeds that are killed and forgotten and the "few selected seed":

The soil now gets a rumpling soft and damp,
And small regard to the future of any weed.
The final flat of the hoe's approval stamp
Is reserved for the bed of a few selected seed.

The second stanza conveys one of Frost's favorite themes, separateness. Men work separately, in solitude, to sustain life by cultivating the soil which will receive them when they can no longer sustain life, and as they work they can notice the beauty of "The leafless bloom of a plum." Human life must be carried on in separateness, and is subject to the same uncertainty that beauty is:

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.
(Complete Poems, p. 391.)

This is the human predicament, to get nourishment from the earth until the time to enter it. The natural processes that sustain human life also undermine it, and people can get no answers to the metaphysical questions that haunt them. Yet the strong will not despair and will not settle for dogma or for facile optimism. In this poem Frost keeps the firm line between man and Nature. He deals with the phenomena of

Nature as they affect man, but unlike Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind," he does not find the wind bearing a metaphysical message. He will not submerge man into Nature and affirm that the cyclical pattern of life and death, growth and destruction, operating in Nature are robust signals of immortality for man. And unlike the religionists Frost will not comfort himself with dogma.

It is a characteristic of the humanist to be undogmatic about ultimate questions, but while resisting the temptation to sacrifice judgment to dogmatism, he meets the counter temptation: to become proud, and to exaggerate the power and importance of man. This is the Stoic error that Babbitt attacks as he urges that humanism calls for a delicate harmony between self-reliance and humility. Frost treats this theme in the poem, "Good-by and Keep Cold." Unless this poem is interpreted as an indirect statement about how to live wisely, it is a thin and even silly composition. Usually Frost is able to say something that is plausible on the literal level and yet imply a meaning of deeper significance, as in "Hyla Brook," "The Oven Bird," "One Step Backward Taken," "West-Running Brook." But there is something absurd about a man standing in the twilight, saying good-by to an orchard, and addressing it in these words:

'How often already you've had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Good-by and keep cold.
Dread fifty above more than fifty below.'

And the reference, later on, to the orchard's heart is sentimental and strained. Yet, if this poem is read symbolically, it is a remarkable humanistic poem, warning against excessive emotionalism, against humanitarianism, against pride. Under the guise of talking about an orchard Frost expresses convictions about how men must live. He opposes the easy romantic prescription for comfort in emotionalism:

No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;
 But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.
 'How often already you've had to be told,
 Keep cold, young orchard. Good-by and keep cold.
 Dread fifty above more than fifty below.'

Man, like the orchard, is separate, isolated. This is Frost's first assumption. Any human happiness must take account of this uncompromising fact. The danger is that man may interpret this separateness as uniqueness and omnipotence, and find in this self-exaltation an excuse for ignoring the principle of wisdom that demands humility:

I wish I could promise to lie in the night
 And think of an orchard's arboreal plight
 When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
 But something has to be left to God.
 but something has to be left to God.
 (Complete Poems, p. 281.)
 (Complete Poems, p. 281.)

For Frost, as for Babbitt, wisdom in human life demands mediation, an acceptance of earthly limitations and a refusal to be complacent in self-reliance; but a stopping short of renunciation.

The Parallel with Thoreau:
Frost the "Sensibilitist"

Two lines that Frost wrote about himself in the poem "New Hampshire" and a sentence that R. P. Blackmur wrote about Babbitt suggest why the humanism of Frost cannot be defined solely with Babbittian parallels, why Thoreau must be brought in. Frost says:

I'm what is called a sensibilitist,
Or otherwise an environmentalist.
(Complete Poems, p. 206.)

Blackmur says of Babbitt:

His best students, men like T. S. Eliot for example, could not help going beyond him, where only some deep privation of imagination, some paucity of sympathy, some racking poverty of sensibility, kept him from going himself.⁹¹

Thoreau supplies for us this great lack in Babbitt. The humanism of Frost is a harmony between ethics and sensibility. Frost does not allow his philosophy, his own deep convictions about how to live, to distort his perception of the life he observes in the state of New Hampshire:

I make a virtue of my suffering
From nearly everything that goes on round me.
(Complete Poems, p. 206.)

Frost can be a philosopher yet a poet, a humanist yet a comprehensive artist who sees and hears and feels. He achieves a balance between the strict conscience and the full consciousness. He achieves this balance largely, I think,

⁹¹The Lion and the Honeycomb, p. 146.

through fidelity to Thoreau's intuition of wildness in man and Nature.

In the twentieth century, a time of the grossest commercialism, Frost has kept his integrity as a serious philosophical poet, has kept himself free to serve his art. There is a fine irony, though, in Frost's assertion that much credit belongs to Mrs. Frost, who would not let him yield to convention or economics, but consistently encouraged him to persevere as a poet. By Thoreau's standards of simplicity, marriage is an encumbrance that usually leads to conventionality, to 'respectability.' But Mrs. Frost's willingness to risk comfort and security strengthened Frost, and he pays tribute to her faith and conviction by saying that she had "som'n wild" inside her.⁹²

In "The Road Not Taken" Frost celebrates the self-reliance that enabled him to resist the temptations of conventional life and to become a poet. A passage in Thoreau's "Life Without Principle" anticipates the poem:

I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part

⁹²From the unpublished journals of Austin Warren (June 14, 1938): Afternoon with Frost. Walking around the Boston Public Gardens. "Much tribute to Mrs. Frost. He seemed painfully conscious that she might be forgotten, though all his books were as much a memorial to her as she allowed him to make them. Instead of acting as a check upon him as people thought, she was the spring: she had 'som'n wild' inside her. By the end of twenty years without recognition, he had forfeited the trust of his friends but not his wife's. She resisted any impulse on his part to 'settle down' and take a job,--e.g., become principal of the Derry Academy, where, in spite of no degree, Frost made a success. They left for England in order not to become respectable: Mrs. Frost said she went to 'live under thatch.'"

of his life getting his living. All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings it makes. You must get your living by loving.⁹³

The last sentence makes exactly the point that Frost expresses at the end of "Two Tramps in Mud Time":

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

(Complete Poems, p. 359.)

"Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?"⁹⁴ Thoreau asks. "Two Tramps" is one of Frost's most eloquent and dramatic tributes to the role of spontaneity of consciousness in human life. The joy in one's work and the joy in exercising one's senses must be trusted and must be kept inviolate, not submitted to conventionality. A man must surrender himself to unalloyed joy now and then. His health as a human being depends upon it. And he must not be timid or half-hearted about it. He must not let subservience to conventionality make him a fraction of a man. "Two Tramps" records a self-reliant resistance to an unwholesome social movement, not a fanatic attempt to combat by organization (not a loss of balance, not a national resistance), but an Emersonian and Thoreauvian resistance in the name of joy and integrity of self.

⁹³Writings, X, 260-261.

⁹⁴Ibid., II, 74.

"Not Quite Social" accompanies "Two Tramps" and "The Road Not Taken." It refers to his resolution to achieve spiritual freedom by one step backward taken from the growing convention that encourages urbanization:

To punish me overcruelly wouldn't be right
For merely giving you once more gentl. proof
That the city's hold on a man is no more tight
Than when its walls rose higher than any roof.

(Complete Poems, p. 403.)

A man could escape from the medieval walled city, and he can escape from the modern unwallled city. Frost is ever on guard against the implication of organized resistance, of humanitarian 'movements.' He retreated to the country for the sake of his spirit's health, and not to promote some political end. "I would not be taken as ever having rebelled," he insists in the third stanza.

Frost has a poem in which he reveals the unsophisticated side of a man keeping the sophisticated side from a base conformity to petty factory threats. In "A Lone Striker" he has a Thoreau-like New Englander locked out of a factory:

There was a law of God or man
That on the one who came too late
The gate for half an hour be locked,
His time be lost, his pittance docked.
He stood rebuked and unemployed.

It is wildness, Frost suggests, that keeps this man from standing there subserviently, foolishly, watching his self-respect ebb away:

He knew another place, a wood,
And in it, tall as trees, were cliffs;
And if he stood on one of these,
'Twould be among the tops of trees,
Their upper branches round him wreathing,
Their breathing mingled with his breathing.

If--if he stood! Enough of ifs!
 He knew a path that wanted walking;
 He knew a spring that wanted drinking;
 A thought that wanted further thinking;
 A love that wanted re-renewing.

This poem is a dramatization of Thoreau's point: fidelity to wildness can help a person to be true to his best self. Frost will not allow his poem to lapse into sentimentality about Nature, though. He has a concluding stanza in which this lone striker asserts that he does not advocate the abolition of factories. There is no suggestion of a general return to a primitive mode of existence:

But he said then and still would say
 If there should ever come a day
 When industry seemed like to die
 Because he left it in the lurch,
 Or even merely seemed to pine
 For want of his approval, why,
 Come get him--they knew where to search.
 (Complete Poems, pp. 355-356.)

"Birches" sounds these themes of joy, self-reliance, and physical tone. The pleasure in control of the muscles, in coordination, is implicit in these lines:

He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.

Like wood-chopping, bending birches is the recreation of separateness, of self-reliance:

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.

Undoubtedly Babbitt would like Frost's emphasis on the restorative value of recreation in these lines:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.

(Complete Poems, pp. 152-153.)

The sustained figure for recreation, the swinging of birches, though, relates recreation to wildness, and makes this poem more than an assertion that recreation enables us to return to "considerations"--responsibilities, difficulties, struggles. The emphasis of this poem is upon the wholeness and balance that joy contributes to human life.

Frost has a poem that powerfully implies what may happen when the fact of wildness in us is ignored. The motif of "A Brook in the City" is the rural-urban conflict again and the loss of health and spontaneity the human spirit suffers when stifled by the city. The urbanization of our time has smothered a deep urge. The repression of wildness necessitated and strengthened by city life makes us susceptible to indolence and neuroticism:

I wonder
 If from its being kept forever under
 The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
 This new-built city from both work and sleep.

(Complete Poems, p. 285.)

Wildness is one of Frost's major themes. He returns to it again and again. He perceives that drifting with society often exacts from the individual a lamentable cost of lowered consciousness, lowered sensibility. He shares Thoreau's skepticism of 'progress' through mechanical devices.

"The Egg and the Machine" is an angry and somewhat petulant outburst against mechanization, but it conveys dramatically Frost's fear that a mechanized civilization will snuff out wildness in the individual. His protagonist in this poem is the Lone Striker in a more turbulent mood. He threatens to pelt the locomotive with turtle's eggs, and thus assert the claims of organic life:

'You'd better not disturb me any more,'
He told the distance, 'I am armed for war.
The next machine that has the power to pass
Will get this plasm in its goggle glass.'
(Complete Poems, p. 349.)

The locomotive was very young when Thoreau made his attack:

As with our colleges, so with a hundred "modern improvements;" there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York.⁹⁵

Krutch attributes Thoreau's attitude to the fear that 'progress' would destroy wildness, the source of human health:

. . . it was the inevitable and rapid destruction of wild nature which horrified him, and his realization that this necessarily went hand in hand with what his fellow citizens regarded as progress is probably the original source of his rationalized conviction that the so-called "development" of America was, in truth, its destruction, morally as well as physically.⁹⁶

Frost confronts the full implication of wildness.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 84.

⁹⁶Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (London, 1948), pp. 59-60.

Although he usually emphasizes the positive side of wildness (as did Thoreau), he believes that people must be courageous and not deceive themselves about the violence that lies beneath the surface of life. "The Bonfire" reveals Frost's conviction that children must be taught to accept, and prepare themselves for, the fact of violence:

'Let's all but bring to life this old volcano,
If that is what the mountain ever was--
And scare ourselves. Let wild fire loose we will . . .'
.
'If it scares you, what will it do to us?'

'Scare you. But if you shrink from being scared,
What would you say to war if it should come?
That's what for reasons I should like to know--
If you can comfort me by any answer.'

'Oh, but war's not for children--it's for men.'

.
'Haven't you heard what we have lived to learn?
Nothing so new--something we had forgotten:
War is for everyone, for children too.
I wasn't going to tell you and I mustn't.
The best way is to come up hill with me
And have our fire and laugh and be afraid.'
(Complete Poems, pp. 163-166.)

The inevitability of violence is the theme of "The Flood," too. We must accustom ourselves to the idea that some violence and irrationality come from within us. It is a primordial fact of life. We must not sublimate it away by attributing it to "the devil," for "power of blood itself releases blood." These lines suggest the precariousness of civilization as we are called upon to control this great force:

It goes by might of being such a flood
 Held high at so unnatural a level.
 It will have outlet, brave and not so brave.
 Weapons of war and implements of peace
 Are but the points at which it finds release.
 (Complete Poems, p. 323.)

This thought is related to Thoreau's "tonic of wildness" passage. Human beings could not accomplish anything important, would not be capable of gusto, unless they were nourished by a great force that, misused, can do great damage, can create enormous horror. This is Frost's vigorous belief in man's spiritual struggle. Men have something to control, and they must not deceive themselves about it. Invoked wisely, wildness is a blessing; invoked irresponsibly, it is a curse.

Frost follows Thoreau in refusing to anthropomorphize Nature. Both men believe in control and morality for human beings, but they will not force human standards upon Nature. Frost's poem, "The Most of It," mentions the human desire to receive from the universe "counter-love, original response." The universe, though, does not respond with love, but with "the embodiment" of a primordial force that shares the universe with man:

As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush--and that was all.
 (Complete Poems, p. 451.)

The universe offers wildness, which man must accept and learn to use and enjoy comprehensively and wisely.

CHAPTER IV

DELIGHT AND WISDOM

A non-puritanic humanism like Frost's encourages the development of a rich sensibility. In a free and confident humanism, ethics is the compass that enables the individual to explore both human nature and the universe without fear of losing his way. The man who acknowledges that human happiness depends upon a subordination of the merely natural to the claims of something higher does not go to Nature to seek justification of his worst self. Nor does he go to art to evade responsibility. A vigorous humanism trusts the responsible individual to range widely, to develop his various resources, and to perceive and imagine the numerous possibilities of life. The concept of the best self is more than ethical; spontaneity of consciousness enters into it.

Babbitt's uneasiness with art is more complicated than is his uneasiness over the empathic response to Nature. Both art and Nature can be used as means of escape; both can be used to lull the individual into the notion that spiritual indolence is happiness. But the misuse of art has more lamentable consequences, for the misuse of art, Babbitt argues, is a corruption of the only means by which the truths

of the inner life can be shadowed forth in a changing world. Truth must be presented through illusion. This central conviction about the indispensable function of art places Babbitt squarely against those who use illusion for the sake of illusion (art as play), those who equate clarity with dullness (art as nuance), and those who exploit art mechanically as bald didacticism (art as homily). He endorses Joubert's theory:

Now Joubert remarks elsewhere that spirit and matter can come into relation with one another only through the medium of illusion; and he goes on to say some of the most penetrating things that have been said by any writer about the rôle of imaginative illusion in mediating between the lower and the higher nature of man. . . . Joubert, then, conceives it to be the rôle of the imagination, mediating as it does between sense and reason, to lend its magic and glamour to the latter, to throw as it were a veil of divine illusion over some essential truth. Perhaps this is as fair a statement as can be made of the aim of the highest art, though it may evidently become a pretext for falling into a lifeless allegory. The imagination must be really free and spontaneous, and the truth itself must not be too precisely formulated, if we are to arrive at that vital fusing of illusion and insight with the accompanying sense of infinitude that is found in the true symbol. (The New Laokoon, pp. 100-101.)

Imagination holds a special position among the human resources that can either ennoble or corrupt. Deeply convinced of this, Babbitt fears an irresponsible art and despises a mechanical art. Although his most energetic attacks are against the Romantic art that encourages self-pity and melancholy, he is profoundly aware of the pseudo-classical heresy of creation by a superficial formula. His most sustained thought on the problems of imaginative creation, in

The New Laokoon, exposes both the Romantic misuse of art to exploit and glorify individual aberration and the pseudo-classical oversimplification of Aristotle's theory of imitation. In this book Babbitt shows how the unrelenting pursuit of one's temperamental eccentricities can lead to triviality or to insanity, and how the mechanical invocation of the life of reason can become dull and flat. Imagination is the key to human happiness, Babbitt believes. Rightly used, spontaneously yet judiciously, it gives man an insight into the universal upon which happiness depends.

One of the epigraphs to Rousseau and Romanticism is Pascal's statement, "L'imagination dispose de tout." The imagination disposes of everything, controls or rules everything. The contrast which Babbitt makes between Rousseau and Pascal helps to define the humanistic use of imagination, a means of presenting insight into the universal without giving too much either to emotionalism or to asceticism:

Inasmuch as both Christians and humanists failed to plant themselves on the fact of insight, the insight came more and more to be rejected along with the special forms from which it was deemed to be inseparable. As a result of this rejection "reason" was left to cope unaided with man's impulses and expansive desires. Now Pascal saw rightly that the balance of power in such a conflict between reason and impulse was held by the imagination, and that if reason lacked the support of insight the imagination would side with the expansive desires and reason would succumb. Moreover the super-rational insight, or "heart" as Pascal calls it, that can alone keep man from being thus overwhelmed, comes, as he holds, not through reason but through grace and is at times actually opposed to reason. ("The heart," he says, "has reasons of which the reason knows nothing.") Instead of protesting against the asceticism of this view as the true positivist would do, instead of insisting that reason and imagination may pull

together harmoniously in the service of insight, the romantic moralist opposed to the superrational "heart" of the austere Christian a subrational "heart," and this involved an attempt to base morality on the very element in human nature it is designed to restrain. The positivist will plant himself first of all on the fact of insight and will define it as the immediate perception of a something anterior to both thought and feeling, that is known practically as a power of control over both. (Rousseau and Romanticism, pp. 178-179.)

This is the traditional humanistic claim for happiness through a vital rationalism. The individual is not left with the narrow choice of either abandoning himself to his impulses until he is damned, or depending upon a mystical grace to come to his aid. He can achieve happiness, wholeness, equilibrium, by exerting his will, by chastening his temperament with truth received through imaginative literature.

Babbitt charges the artist with an enormous responsibility. Illusion must be used seriously, profoundly. In the greatest artists two rare and precious abilities must converge: penetration to the universal and presentation of it under a veil of fiction. Holding this view of the artist's role as mediator between the permanent and the changing, Babbitt is vehemently opposed to any theory of art as play. We should expect him to attack any theory that entirely divorces art from ethics, that makes art only play, for this view is a concomitant--or at least an ally--of naturalism, the philosophy that confines reality to the physical, the sensuous, and the emotional. So he does attack "Schiller's assertion that 'man is entirely man only when he plays.'"⁹⁷ The

⁹⁷On Being Creative, p. 153.

humanist is right to protect his central doctrine that humanness is chiefly a matter of willing, of purposefulness. This is strictness of conscience. But if the doctrine of wholeness is to be met, the humanist must cultivate flexibility and develop spontaneity of consciousness as well. Art enables us to perceive alternatives, to imagine the different possibilities of life that our inevitably narrow individual experiences do not provide. Theoretically, Babbitt affirms this need always to range widely before settling down to enjoy the truth:

Formulae are excellent and necessary in dealing with both the human and the natural law, but must always be provisional, because both laws lay hold upon the infinite. That is why, as Emerson says, truth is "so unbottleable and unbarrelable a commodity." We need therefore to piece out our formulae with our intuitions; intuitions of the Many if we are dealing with the natural order; intuitions of the One if we are dealing with man's peculiar domain. Wisdom for the humanist . . . does not lie in putting too exclusive an emphasis on either order of intuitions, but in mediating between the two orders, between vital impulse (élan vital) and vital control (frein vital).⁹⁸

Babbitt describes many times throughout his books this idea of mediation between the two orders, but in his practice as a critic of literature he reveals an uneasy humanism.

Babbitt cannot be at ease with Romantic art for the same reason that he cannot be at ease with empathic response to Nature: he finds symptoms of the decay of standards, symptoms of moral indolence, symptoms of a general wish to make a fictional view of life serve as the real view. His

⁹⁸Irving Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism (Boston, 1912), pp. 251-252.

fullest treatment of the philosophical confusion of the twentieth century as reflected in the arts is The New Laokoon. Here he explains how influential artists, submitting to the cynical or dreamy idea that the fact of change in the universe invalidates ethical values, have subordinated design to color, purpose to illusion, symmetry to suggestiveness, and have thus blurred the distinctions between the different arts. Although Babbitt enlarges upon Lessing's critique of the pseudo-classicists, who on formal grounds confuse painting and poetry, he widens the attack to include the Romantics, whose attempt to unify the different senses through revery results in a confusion not only between painting and poetry, but between music and poetry.

This running together of the different arts and of the different genres in literature is a symptom of the general discredit of purposefulness and rationality that Babbitt finds in the modern age. He attributes this failure to make distinctions to indolence and confusion in the practitioners of the arts, and he fears that these practitioners encourage other people in these vices.

Babbitt concurs with Arnold's emphasis on the crucial importance of imaginative literature in the achievement and maintenance of civilization. Arnold thought that literature of high seriousness could engage the emotions in the way Christianity had done when its miracles were accepted as history.⁹⁹ Babbitt believes that in a changing world truth

⁹⁹Arnold, Works, IV, 2.

must be presented in the form of an illusion; therefore the good life is directly dependent upon a right use of imagination. Here Babbitt insists upon a hierarchy of values, of human interests. Art that usurps the central, authoritative place of ethics causes confusion. All important human activities must be kept in strict subordination to ethics.

Babbitt's uneasiness with art is something like Plato's. Babbitt fears that art may confuse people about what their human destiny calls them to. Art may invite revery. Babbitt fears that when man's moral struggle ceases to be the central interest of art, trivial or even pernicious doctrines may be inferred from it, and he habitually despises pleasure connected with an unsound view of life.

It is hard to quarrel with Babbitt's insistence that the greatest artists have not only aesthetic excellence but ethical soundness. We owe gratitude to the men of each generation who try to keep the noblest, most exalted and inspiring view of mankind before us. Without this view, human life can degenerate to despair, sordidness, and bestiality. The sublime visions of man's experience have impressive ethical weight. Babbitt is an unsleeping guardian of the idea that human life should have depth and nobility. From this stance he addresses himself to all kinds of criticism, and he does not delude himself or deceive his reader about his preoccupation with ethics. When Babbitt is writing, he has time to deal only with major implications. He is an inspector of architecture, and woe for the poet who

has merely tried "to build in sonnets pretty rooms," for Babbitt will make his inspection from the outside.

For this inability, or deliberate unwillingness, to respond to subtleties and delicacies of literature, Babbitt is censured by several of the contributors to The Critique of Humanism.¹⁰⁰ Most of the critics who complain of this probably do not emphasize enough Babbitt's deep sense of engagement in the philosophical struggle of his time. To one who feels civilization slipping away, empathy with what is not ethically sound is debauchery. Babbitt's position is a very ironical one. He advocates humanism, "and the essence of humanism" he says, "is moderation";¹⁰¹ but he severely violates the spirit of humanism so defined in most of his literary criticism.

After we acknowledge that the greatest artists have ethical soundness, are we to reject all the artists who do not have a profound philosophical grasp? Can we not disapprove of the regret and self-pity of Byron and yet find aesthetic control and lyricism in his expression of personal weakness? Can we not disapprove of pessimism as a view of life and yet perceive that Housman and Hardy create art in their presentation of this view? Can we not disapprove of surrealism as a serious view of life and yet enjoy the poems, plays, and films of Cocteau? One of humanism's cardinal principles is comprehensiveness, a wide view of the alter-

¹⁰⁰C. Hartley Grattan (ed.), The Critique of Humanism (New York, 1930).

¹⁰¹Democracy and Leadership, pp. 24-25.

natives. Babbitt describes this principle as comprehending extremes and filling all the space between them.

It is immoderate to allow the sense of the very best to submerge the principle of comprehensiveness. A familiarity with the grandest achievements of man is protection against enthusiastic overevaluation. The humanist needs proportion. But art may have minor excellences that the complete man would not want to miss. After you decide that Joyce's Ulysses is not as sublime as Milton's Paradise Lost, you need to know what artistic merits it has. It should not be flogged with the whip of Miltonic superiority and discarded. There is something haughty and austere about Babbitt's refusal to deal with so much contemporary literature. He must even have been dubious about Frost's literary merit, even though, as Austin Warren testifies,¹⁰² he pronounced Frost "sound" personally.

In his zeal to show a writer's philosophical limitations, Babbitt consistently neglects aesthetic achievements. After the primitivism in Wordsworth's poetry has been defined and warning signs attached,¹⁰³ nothing remains to be done with this poetry. Strictness of conscience monopolizes his interest.

This inflexibility and its most naïve consequences can be seen in Babbitt's discussion of "The Ancient Mariner," a discussion impoverished by Babbitt's fear that John Livingston Lowes' overestimation of the poem will encourage people in

¹⁰²Statement by Austin Warren, personal interview.

¹⁰³On Being Creative, pp. 34-79.

moral indolence. This is the way the onslaught is prepared for:

Tragedy that has with the aid of representative fiction or significant illusion succeeded in portraying the universal through the particular, tends to raise the spectator to its own level and, as a result of this enlargement of spirit, to relieve him of what is merely petty and personal in his own emotions. This is the true katharsis that Milton has, with the intuition of a great poet, rendered so admirably at the end of Samson Agonistes.

(On Being Creative, pp. 103-104.)

Babbitt further prepares us for his disposal of Coleridge by comparing him with "religious teachers of the past,"¹⁰⁴ St. Bernard and Buddha. This whole critique of Coleridge's effort to achieve a supernatural effect is based upon Babbitt's philosophical objections to art that pursues the improbable, the strange. Obviously one of Coleridge's aims in "The Ancient Mariner" is to achieve a dream-like mood. Further, he tries to make the mariner's experience weird and terrifying, abnormal and supernatural. Yet Babbitt examines the plot as if Coleridge had sought to achieve normality and probability. He finds the greatest weakness in the mariner's freeing himself of the albatross by blessing the sea creatures "unaware," and thereby getting "sub-rationally and unconsciously . . . the equivalent of Christian charity."¹⁰⁵ Probably Coleridge meant to emphasize the greater paradox of the mariner's blessing repulsive water snakes. Coleridge's use of the word "unaware"

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 120.

preserves the strange, mysterious quality of the mariner's supernatural experience. Babbitt attacks the poem as if Coleridge's only intention in writing it were to propagandize for naturalism. It is one thing to say that the best art will appeal to probability and to normal experience, but it is quite another thing to approach a strange and 'marvelous' poem by invoking the criteria of probable and normal experience. Babbitt is a propagandist when he does this, and he violates the spirit of humanism.

He violates the spirit of humanism not in examining "The Ancient Mariner" for its philosophy, but in stopping there, in rigidly refusing to empathize the poem. He is so obsessed with his fight against twentieth-century naturalism that he exploits his investigation of the poem as an opportunity to strike the enemy another blow. Humanism is the philosophy of wholeness through the cultivation of different kinds of excellence. If man cannot achieve the divine purity of an angel, he can at least seek to develop a control over his experience. But if the control is restricted to morality, he will invite narrowness and uneasiness with the phenomenal self; he will invite fragmentation if he does not develop his ability to perceive alternatives. The joy of empathy in aesthetic creations is comparable to the joy of empathic response to Nature.

Babbitt is playing the role of Plato's Guardian or the Indexer of the Catholic Church when he judges poetry from the effects it might have. Human beings are empathic

creatures, and one of the chief quarrels the humanist has with the institutional religionist is over the diminution of empathy, a specifically human attribute, when a presumed knowledge of ultimates is allowed to censor and dictate. The humanist cannot have it both ways. The possibility for truth, virtue, and wholeness to emerge in individuals is his grandest claim, and when he begins acting as if the specific program for general reform were known, he falls into the rigidity of the religionist and becomes uneasy with alternatives. Babbitt the Guardian is not remembering his attacks upon the didacticism and the rigid formulae of pseudo-classicism.

Fullness of comprehension, awareness of alternatives that may even be unwise, is a traditional value of humanism. Milton believed that truth and virtue emerge from a conflict of ideas:

Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with lesse danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tractats, and hearing all manner of reason?¹⁰⁶

W. K. Wimsatt claims that poetic value is different from moral value. In his essay, "Poetry and Morals: A Relation Reargued," he says that a poem may be great though immoral, and cites as his most impressive example Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra:

¹⁰⁶The Works of John Milton (New York, 1931), IV, 311-312.

The poetic values are strictly dependent--if not upon the immorality as such--yet upon the immoral acts. Even though, or rather because, the play pleads for certain evil choices, it presents these choices in all their mature interest and capacity to arouse human sympathy. The motives are wrong, but they are not base, silly, or degenerate. They are not lacking in the positive being of deep and complex human desire. It is not possible to despise Antony and Cleopatra. If one will employ the classic concept of "imitation," the play imitates or presents the reasons for sin, a mature and richly human state of sin. Imitation, on this understanding, is not prior to and exclusive of interpretation, but follows it. The interpretation and judgment are taken as presented objects. This is the meaning of the defense repeated in every generation by the poet. "I moot," says Chaucer, "reherce Hir tales alle. . . . Or elles falsen som of my mateere." "Art," says William Butler Yeats, "is a revelation, and not a criticism."¹⁰⁷

Under this view of art a humanist might even be permitted to read de Sade. Richness, complexity, subtlety, and maturity are the qualities to begin with in establishing an aesthetic or in writing literary criticism. Art may be moral, immoral, or non-moral; and a confident humanism will handle all three.

In The Critique of Humanism, R. P. Blackmur attacks this parochialism in Babbitt's approach to art. Babbitt, he says, pays too little attention to non-moral kinds of human discipline. The first claim upon the artist is "the discipline of his subject-matter," and not "that discipline which involves a view of life or the apprehension of the higher will."¹⁰⁸ This idea is more fully developed in E. M. Forster's essay, "Art for Art's Sake." Forster immediately rejects the Wildean heresy that art can be a substitute for life,

¹⁰⁷W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Verbal Icon (University of Kentucky, 1954), p. 97.

¹⁰⁸The Critique of Humanism, p. 238.

the silly idea that only art matters, an idea which has somehow got mixed up with the idea of art for art's sake, and has helped to discredit it. . . . Man lives, and ought to live, in a complex world, full of conflicting claims, and if we simplified them down into the esthetic he would be sterilised.¹⁰⁹

Like Frost and Babbitt, Forster is skeptical of social and political and astronomical order, but he is willing to allow for the possibility of a divine order (without claiming mystical experience for himself). The only other possibility for order, he asserts, is in art:

The second possibility for order lies in the esthetic category . . . the order which an artist can create in his own work. . . . A work of art, we are all agreed, is a unique product. But why? It is unique not because it is clever or noble or beautiful or enlightened or original or sincere or idealistic or useful or educational--it may embody any of those qualities--but because it is the only material object in the universe which may possess internal harmony. All the others have been pressed into shape from outside, and when their mould is removed they collapse. The work of art stands up by itself, and nothing else does. It achieves something which has often been promised by society, but always delusively.¹¹⁰

This approach to art would give humanism the catholicity which is indispensable to it. Babbitt quite deliberately sacrificed catholicity. He did not delude himself. As there is testimony that in his private life he refreshed his spirit in love of Nature, so there is testimony that he responded to nuances of poetry more delicate and subtle than its morality. William Giese writes, "The truth is that he read verse with delight as well as edification."¹¹¹ Frank

¹⁰⁹E. M. Forster, Two Cheers For Democracy (New York, 1951), p. 89.

¹¹⁰Ibid., pp. 91-92.

¹¹¹Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher, p. 13.

Jewett Mather, Jr.:

I am satisfied that Irving Babbitt's appreciation of great literature of every sort, and I mean also his appreciation of its sensuous aspects, was deep and rich. . . . He was . . . as highly sensitive to delicacy of thought as to loveliness of diction or versification, and not merely to the literature of high seriousness, though here his interest and loyalty were most deeply engaged. While we were most likely to talk of Dante, we were also likely to talk of Du Bellay and Ronsard, new reading for me, but already familiar to him.¹¹²

Willard Connely:

I remember when, urged by him, I undertook a course in the works of Virgil. "Don't be such a fool," he warned me, "as to translate your Virgil into prose. Turn it into verse. That's the only way to get the 'feel' of words, and to get some slight idea of what rhythm is, and cadence."¹¹³

The warrior defending Western Civilization against the morally indolent primitivists could not publicly acknowledge the joy he experienced in Nature, and the warrior against dilettantism and aestheticism as full-time views of life could not devote any portion of a book or an article to acknowledging the pleasure he received from delicate effects of poetry. When he writes about literature, he must inevitably play the ethical imagination against the idyllic imagination.

Probably Babbitt gave what the time most needed. He fought to reclaim literature as a positive help toward wisdom and the good life, and to discredit the aberrant ideas that only science gives valid knowledge and that literature is divorced from life. But the teacher and moralist in him

¹¹²Ibid., pp. 47-48.

¹¹³Ibid., pp. 186-187.

submerged the humanist; and in his practice as a critic he neglected the cardinal humanistic doctrine of moderation. Babbitt knew this. When Warner G. Rice asked him whether excessive advocacy would not undermine humanistic principles, Babbitt replied:

"You must not underestimate . . . what danger we face. Temperance, moderation, intelligence have been nearly submerged. If the best men want to rescue themselves they will have to come together, support each other, preach a gospel. The beam has swung far to the wrong side: every ounce possible must be thrown into the scale. . . . Everyone must risk lop-sidedness in an endeavor to redress the balance we have lost. There is now no stopping short of the most strenuous effort."¹¹⁴

But some of the humanists who were inspired and trained by Babbitt were not willing to risk lop-sidedness. There are serious implicit objections to Babbitt's impoverished aesthetic in the writing of his allies in the cause of New Humanism, G. R. Elliott and Gorham Munson; and in the writing and teaching of some of his most gifted students, T. S. Eliot, Austin Warren, Norman Nelson. Munson's literary criticism is more humanistic than Babbitt's. Destinations,¹¹⁵ brought out in 1928, has essays on a richly various group of American writers, some of whom had thus far received little critical attention: More, Babbitt, Dreiser, E. A. Robinson, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, W. C. Williams, Kenneth Burke, Hart Crane, Jean Toomer. Although Munson agrees with Babbitt's critique of Western Civilization and deeply assents to the need for a strenuous morality, he stretches

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 263.

¹¹⁵Gorham B. Munson, Destinations (New York, 1928).

out as a literary critic and tries to understand the diverse positions and abilities of these writers. He responds to aesthetic order even though ultimately he evaluates the philosophical implications of each author's work. As early as 1927 he acclaims Frost as a humanistic poet.

G. R. Elliott, too, writes criticism that keeps poetic values separate from moral values. He writes from a humanistic position, but he tries not to miss aesthetic qualities even in the work of Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Whitman. "Poetry," he writes, "is always relief from purely moral concentrations."¹¹⁶

The humanism expounded by Babbitt is marred by a puritanical timidity toward sensuous delight and lyrical joy, two human attributes that must be harmonized with, and not atrophied by, morality. The ethical self-consciousness of most of Babbitt's writing inheres in his vision of himself as the defender of human values against the popular modern thought and practice that seemed to threaten the extinction of those values, and maybe even of human life itself. If he violated the spirit of humanism, he did so not because he misunderstood that spirit, but because he felt the urgent need to fight in defense of civilized standards. He saw the enemy everywhere, and he wrote to smite him. Obsessed with his heroic struggle against so powerful and ubiquitous an enemy, he could not admit that

¹¹⁶G. R. Elliott, Humanism and Imagination (Chapel Hill, 1938), p. 5.

humanistic wholeness depends upon a private station where detachment can help one to explore the potentialities of existence.

Babbitt was haunted by the sound of the crumbling Christian edifice, and he tried to salvage its moral values in a secular form. The humanist is a secular protestant, but Babbitt was chary about the sensuous advantages which secularism offers. The predominance of ethics in his thought gives his humanism a very sober cast.

Frost, though, carries ethics lightly, not self-consciously, and he values aesthetic order. Frost notices and snipes frequently at the beliefs and practices of his time that are undermining the traditional values, but he will not sacrifice wholeness and detachment in a full-time struggle.

Mark Van Doren has made the remark about Frost that Babbitt should have made: he comprehends extremes and fills all the space between, yet ends not with a cheap compromise, but a clear, manly commitment. This ideal of humanism is the framework of Frost's ideal poetry.

It is strange that Babbitt himself did not overtly acknowledge Frost as an ally of traditional humanism, for not only does Frost return again and again to the principal themes of humanism, but in his practice as a poet he upholds many of Babbitt's aesthetic criteria. He is not a landscape painter; he has no obsession with sense impressions for their own sake; usually lurking beneath his lines about Nature is

an implied meaning about human life. He frequently creates drama in his poems; his chief interest is in people. He makes poetry not of the exotic and the wonderful, but of the familiar and the ordinary (as a poet, he is the oven-bird, not the nightingale; he is chiefly interested in life-in-the-daytime). He has steadily shunned the Romantic marriage of the sordid and the beautiful:

I can't see that a man must fill his soul with
sick and miserable experiences, self-imposed and
self-inflicted, and greatly enjoyed, before he can
sit down and write a lyric of strange and compelling
beauty. Inspiration doesn't lie in the mud; it lies
in the clean and wholesome life of the ordinary man.¹¹⁷

His rationalism appears in a refusal to blur distinctions. He assumes an intelligible universe. He shares Babbitt's fear of confusion if people avoid the classical wisdom of classification according to kind. In "Build Soil" he shows the unintelligibility of a pure socialism by comparing it to

all the loves when
Philosophized together into one--
One sickness of the body and the soul.
Thank God our practice holds the loves apart
Beyond embarrassing self-consciousness
Where natural friends are met, where dogs are kept,
Where women pray with priests. There is no love.
There's only love of men and women, love
Of children, love of friends, of men, of God,
Divine love, human love, parental love,
Roughly discriminated for the rough.

(Complete Poems, p. 423.)

The New Laokoon pleads for this kind of rational discrimination. Munson cites Frost's poem, "The Rose Family," as a humorous treatment of this love of distinctions:¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷Gorham B. Munson, Robert Frost, A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense (New York, 1927), p. 85.

¹¹⁸Gorham B. Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," The Bookman, LXXI (July, 1930), 419.

The rose is a rose,
 And was always a rose.
 But the theory now goes
 That the apple's a rose,
 And the pear is, and so's
 The plum, I suppose.
 The dear only knows
 What will next prove a rose.
 You, of course, are a rose--
 But were always a rose.
 (Complete Poems, p. 305.)

This poem conveys more than Frost's love of distinctions. The last two lines, probably addressed to his wife, are a playful claim that a poet has a right to his metaphors, that there can be a difference between the way a scientist uses words and the way a poet uses them. Poetry has reasons of its own. Though Frost would be as appalled as Babbitt by any systematic derangement of the senses, he nevertheless uses the poetic technique of synaesthesia to achieve a striking image:

The last of the light of the sun
 That had died in the west
 Still lived for one song more
 In a thrush's breast.
 (Complete Poems, p. 446.)

This stanza is from "Come In," a very anti-romantic poem expressing reluctance

to come in
 To the dark and lament.

Frost is self-assured and detached enough to use a romantic image even while attacking romantic gloom and self-pity.

He can be comprehensive because he is free from Babbitt's ethical self-consciousness. He supplies a clue to the source of this freedom in the way he talks about poetry.

Although his whole view of art and life is similar to Babbitt's, he begins at the opposite end; not with ethics, but with aesthetic qualities, sensuous and passionate. A poem, he says, "begins in delight;" he is not half-hearted about it, for he emphasizes the sound and the wildness of the poem. "The sound is the gold in the ore,"¹¹⁹ and wildness "has an equal claim with sound to being a poem's better half."¹²⁰ This is a vigorous belief in the rightness of sensuous enjoyment, without a taint of the gray New England squeamishness.

Frost claims vigorous passion and tune as the first requirements of a poem, something wild in human existence that can give delight. But the finiteness of human beings demands that this delight be presented in a pattern of meaning. The sound and the wildness cannot be captured abstractly. Technical sound resources are thin, do not allow enough variety:

The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless. (Complete Poems, p. v.)

Frost likens poets trying to achieve an abstract wildness to grasshoppers:

We bring up as aberrationists, giving way to undirected associations and kicking ourselves from one chance suggestion to another in all directions as of a hot afternoon in the life of a grasshopper. Theme alone can steady us down. (Complete Poems, pp. v-vi.)

(There is some Babbittian diction here: "aberrationists"--Frost's pun on abstractionists--"undirected associations," "chance suggestion.")

The poet and the reader are finite beings who have

¹¹⁹Complete Poems, p. v. ¹²⁰Ibid.

senses, thoughts, feelings, memories, associations. Poetry is the vital process of gaining insight into the form and meaning of these common resources. A poem "ends in wisdom," "in a clarification of life," "in a momentary stay against confusion."¹²¹ Yet there is no formula for this wisdom. Frost attacks the pseudo-classically planned effect of a poem:

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy.

(Complete Poems, p. vii.)

The poet must have the sense of spontaneous discovery as he goes, in order to generate this sense and its accompanying delight to the reader. Poetry gives the joy of discovery, and it gives point to human experience, for, as the poet and reader discover something they didn't know they knew,

the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere.

(Complete Poems, p. vii.)

This poetics is protected against verbal and emotional anarchy by Frost's firm insistence upon meaning, yet it permits a healthy scope. It does not limit the poet to morality. While declaring his preference for depth and moral soundness, Frost implies that this moral soundness may or may not be present in a poem, but that the poet mainly must have something to say, whether sound or unsound. This allows for the humanistic freedom to hear alternatives, to learn what per-

¹²¹Ibid., p. vi.

ceptive individuals have discovered.

As Frost discusses what a poet should achieve and the freedom he requires, he uses Yeats' definition of poetry:

It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity. (Complete Poems, p. vii.)

He concurs with Forster's idea of internal harmony:

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. (Complete Poems, p. viii.)

A passage in "The Ax-Helve" metaphorically expresses this inner shaping:

He showed me that the lines of a good helve
Were native to the grain before the knife
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay
For the hard work. (Complete Poems, p. 230.)

Writing a poem or falling in love ("The figure is the same as for love"¹²²) requires an initial spontaneity and vigor, a bold acceptance of uncertainty. This is the health-giving wildness that Frost believes in, the intuition that can be humanized into wisdom. Wildness is the source of freshness that, for Frost, leads not to primitivism but to wisdom. Frost celebrates the mind and the distinctions it makes, the helps to sanity and clarity, the defenses against chaos; but he hates rigidity. He believes that the mind

¹²²Ibid.

best develops in a search that has not been too carefully charted. Form is given to human experience not by timid beforehand planning. Whether we write a poem or undertake any other task, we have to go in with a bold commitment of the will, and trust other human resources--mind, senses, memory, emotions--to cooperate in leading us to grasp the form of the experience, to understand whatever depth and meaning it has. Poetry is related to our most essential need: self-knowledge.

Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament;
a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.¹²³

Frost's poetics, founded upon the idea of order in human life, is more comprehensive and flexible than Babbitt's. Frost acknowledges a hierarchy of poetic worth: the poem that has order and moral soundness, too, is more precious to us ("Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience"¹²⁴). But the fresh discovery of order where the poet and reader had not seen it before is what makes a poem, a wild commitment of the will that leads to a spreading awareness of form and meaning.

Probably much of the pleasure that Frost, a philosophical poet, enjoys and imparts to his reader, arises from the discovery that an idea about how to live well can be conveyed indirectly. There is some of the metaphysical poet's love of discordia concors in Frost. He calls this "the

¹²³The Poems of Robert Frost (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), p. xvii.

¹²⁴Complete Poems, p. v.

pleasure of ulteriority":

There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor.¹²⁵

Frost frequently uses natural objects to speak through: trees, fields, brooks, stars, sand dunes, birds, deer, bears, woodchucks, ants, hornets. And man-made objects: a wall, wood-pile, ax-helve, road, grindstone, tent. The pleasure comes from an atmosphere of suspenseful waiting to see whether the object can take the contour of the felt thought; and afterwards the recollected thought and feeling of the poem have more vigor because they have been brought earthward and given a charge of lusty finiteness, concreteness, emblemizing--an inescapable human need which the poet ministers to with his metaphors. The horror in repression of natural instincts receives energy from being mentally and emotionally fused with a brook, once bold and bright, that has now been

thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run--
(Complete Poems, p. 285.)

Interior loneliness is heightened by its embodiment in exterior "Desert Places."

The philosopher in Frost does not overmaster the poet or keep him from a full exploration of existence. In "West-

¹²⁵The Poems of Robert Frost (Modern Library), p. xvi.

Running Brook" he writes to capture the awareness of permanence. And in "For Once, Then, Something":

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.
(Complete Poems, p. 276.)

Like Hawthorne, another American humanist, Frost uses ambiguity in presenting a mystical experience; so he ends the poem uncertain about whether he saw truth or a pebble of quartz.

"Spring Pools" is frankly a poem of time and change. One kind of natural loveliness preys upon another. The snow metamorphoses into spring flowers and pools, the pools and flowers into dark summer leaves.

"The Wood-Pile" is a mediation between permanence and change:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.
(Complete Poems, p. 127.)

The last two lines evoke a startling image of change, but the man who cut and piled this wood is not haunted by the movement of phenomena toward decay. Stability for him lies in his "fresh tasks," and in the self-realization that comes from spending himself in his work and interests. In the essay, "The Constant Symbol," Frost says, "Strongly spent is synonymous with kept."¹²⁶

¹²⁶Ibid.

Frost allows a margin for non-moral poems. Sometimes he tries merely to achieve an unusual perspective, to startle the reader's consciousness by presenting (in "Range-Finding") a battlefield as viewed by a spider, a bird, and a butterfly; or by presenting a glimpse of Formic civilization in "Departmental."

Riding out a lyric mood in a poem may not be "a momentary stay against confusion," but joy and zestfulness can be celebrated purely, in a domain that conscience never enters. Lyricism is its own excuse for being, and

there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any song.
(Complete Poems, p. 316.)

So Frost writes some lyrics: "Dust of Snow," "The Aim Was Song," "Fragmentary Blue," "They Were Welcome to Their Belief," "To Earthward," "Fire and Ice," "A Minor Bird." "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is his most felicitous treatment of the traditional English theme of mutability:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.
(Complete Poems, p. 272.)

The human need for lyricism is dramatized in "The Investment." Frost first describes an old, old house that has recently been repainted and furnished with a piano. Then he moves into the consciousness of a potato-digging New England farmer whose hold on practicality impels him to

estimate the number of dinners he is harvesting, but whose imagination is nevertheless lively enough to make him wonder: have these neighbors of his been extravagant, or may they not be wise in their determination

Not to sink under being man and wife,
But get some color and music out of life?
(Complete Poems, p. 337.)

Color and music are what we miss in the public Irving Babbitt. Unless humanism can plant itself on the positive rightness of joy in human life, it is doomed to an uneasiness, a half-heartedness. The center of humanism's traditional quarrel with dogmatic, organized religion is that a sober concentration on other-worldliness can result in the atrophy of the warm and opulent senses and emotions that are nourished by time and change. Humanism must be serious and deep enough to fear moral debauchery, but it must be free and confident enough to resist the habit of lowered consciousness.

Frost strives for a balance between lyric joy and ethical strenuousness. In his practice as a poet he more nearly achieves the mediation which Babbitt celebrates as the ideal. Without distortion, without weak compromise, without important omissions, Frost lives and works by the humanistic spirit that Babbitt understands but mars by a self-conscious advocacy that makes him uneasy toward Nature and art. The stark humanism expounded by Babbitt needs the corrective of Frost's vigorous belief in joy, the graceful widening of Frost's flexible and comprehensive humanism.

CONCLUSION

Robert Frost belongs with Irving Babbitt, if not as a twentieth-century defender, then as an exemplar of the traditional humanism that is independent of both naturalism and religion. We are helped toward a definition of the humanism of Frost by noticing where he and Babbitt agree, and then by noticing where they diverge. The major parallels are in the key ideas of an independent humanism: human life is dualistic; the individual can find standards by which to achieve centrality; the individual must reform himself by exercising his will; man cannot be superhuman, and therefore should try to mediate between the demands of spirit and flesh, and not try to renounce his phenomenal self. These persistent ideas in Babbitt's prose writings appear as persistent themes in Frost's poetry.

Babbitt knows that if the individual takes himself seriously as an ethical being, he can trust himself to respond intensely to phenomena outside himself. This is one of the principal advantages of a philosophy that stops short of religion. Yet Babbitt cannot consistently affirm the rightness of an intense response to Nature because it may be misused as an invitation to revery. Friends and students of Babbitt report that in his private life he vigor-

ously sought and received refreshment in the love of Nature. However, Babbitt had a grave sense of responsibility as a defender of humane values that were, he thought, rapidly losing force. This conscientiousness colors his books and essays. When the public Irving Babbitt speaks, he is fighting the ideas that are undermining humane values. He fears that many people will take the recreative love of Nature as a full-time view of existence and believe that the Arcadian dream can be realized. This self-conscious defender of Western Civilization has to violate the humanistic virtues of moderation and comprehensiveness in order to protect other people from delusion.

For an emphatic, unqualified affirmation of the rightness of love of Nature we have to go to Thoreau, who finds in himself both a love of the good and a love of the wild. Thoreau provides a parallel for this quality of sensibility which is attuned to the sounds and sights and feelings of the environment, which will register these phenomena and not some predetermined idea of them. This strong quality in Frost saves him from Babbitt's uneasiness.

Thoreau and Frost suggest that the human sensibility can be exercised so as not only to give the individual a fuller consciousness, but also to protect him against the tepidness and even corruptness of over-civilization. Wildness can restore man to a simpler, saner perspective. Frost's attitude toward Nature is similar to Thoreau's. Though Frost will not accept the view that man is only an animal, he

believes that joy in the phenomenal life is indispensable to physical and spiritual health.

This freedom from purely moral emphases carries into Frost's poetics. It is a paradox that a humanist can fight provincialism and parochialism in such a way as to fall into these vices. A catholic aesthetic is his best protection. The humanist must be aware not only of moral art, but also of immoral art and the wide neutral band between them. Babbitt's fear that the individual can be corrupted through the idyllic imagination leads him to use literature as a source of proof texts in support of the moral view which he advocates for his own time, "a world that has gone wrong on first principles."¹²⁷ When he addresses himself to a literary work of art, he undervalues aesthetic excellences. He becomes a propagandist, championing or opposing the work's moral view but passing over aesthetic achievements.

Frost is an exemplar of humanistic philosophy. He does not lose his poise and disinterestedness in an unceasing struggle. He is free to affirm the rightness of joy for its own sake; he does not justify recreation because it enables the individual to return to his moral struggle. Art enables the individual to make discoveries, to perceive alternatives, to imagine and comprehend actions and values that he might even disapprove of. Many of Frost's poems have this laudable comprehensiveness, allowance for two or more perspectives

¹²⁷Rousseau and Romanticism, p. 367.

and the claims of each. In Frost, spontaneity of consciousness is balanced with, not submerged by, strictness of conscience.

Twentieth-century American humanism has been too narrowly viewed as a polemical struggle. The pugnacious and interested doctrinal humanism of Babbitt needs the corrective of Frost's poetic humanism, ethical yet comprehensive, responsible yet lyrical.

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