

FROST THE ZONE AND THE ZEN MASTERS

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Robert Frost never meant much to me as a poet, that is not until about a year ago. It was his celebrity that got in my way. Frost was that rare thing for a poet, read and beloved by a large public during his lifetime. Who of us old enough to remember, do not recall the image of that white-haired old man standing in the cold at President Kennedy's inauguration, the wind so strong, the sun so bright, he could not read the lines he had prepared, and reciting from memory instead, his poem "The Gift Outright." Yes, he was popular all right and he relished and nourished his popularity, appearing often as the congenial old New England sage at public poetry readings, and on TV talk shows. People who had little truck with poetry generally flocked to hear him and he drew large television audiences whenever he appeared. He was so universally known and liked, the government sent copies of his poems to G.I.s overseas and, what's more, they read them.

From my perspective as a college English major however, his public acclaim was a negative. I thought anyone so broadly popular must be too obvious, too much on the surface, to have staying power. Now I know better. I've seen yet again how limiting preconceptions are.

My respect for Frost developed while I was preparing a poetry class for my course at the Institute for Learning in Retirement. Most of you know the ILR was founded by our fellow member Aaron Levine as a service to the retired community. Some of you have contributed by leading courses there, others by taking them.

Because poetry is intimidating to some, I thought to ease my class into it by discussing one or two of Frost's better known poems, poems I thought would be easy for them to understand. That is when I began to see how uninformed my notions about Frost were. Reading him attentively, as I was obliged to do to lead class discussion, brought home to me that while many of his poems are simple and immediate on the surface, they have depths that should, and I believe will, make them a permanent part of our literary heritage.

Ironically, Frost knew there would be people who would not get beyond his more obvious meanings. He once said to a friend, in that wry, knowing way he had of talking, that he wrote his poems in parables, "SO the wrong people wouldn't understand them and be saved." He might well have directed that remark to me, but as I've said, I know better now.

What I want to do in the brief time we have here is to show something of why I have come to believe Frost's poems will remain a permanent part of our literary tradition, why I think they raise for us large existential questions, and provide insights which can help us in our struggles with those questions. In doing this, I will read one of Frost's poems, and relate to aspects of Western and to Eastern experience, what I believe he wants to show us by it. The example of his work I will use to do this is his poem titled "Mowing." Frost once said in a letter to a friend that he felt he had come so near to what

he longed to get at with his poetry in this poem, that he almost despaired of coming nearer.

The deeper levels of "Mowing" cannot be easily grasped in one reading, so let me first say something about the poem.

As you will hear, it expresses a feeling that comes over Frost as he mows a hayfield. This feeling is something he intuits in the act of his labor, as he works in the sun on a soundless day, his scythe sweeping rhythmically in his work. He says his scythe "whispers" something to him. It is something he feels is true, but that he cannot quite grasp. This is why he says in the poem the scythe only "whispers" to him and does not speak.

While he can't explain what his feeling is, he does know what it is not. He says it is "no dream of the gift of idle hours," by which he means he is not daydreaming. Nor, he says, is the feeling that comes over him as he mows the "easy gold of fay or elf," meaning it is not generated by superstition or by illusion. The feeling is something more than these, for mere daydreams and fanciful imagination would be too weak, he says, to account for what he experiences in the work, what he describes as a feeling of "earnest love." What he concludes is that it is the fact of the labor itself, performed as it is in a state of self-forgetfulness, that allows him to be integrated with the surrounding scene, that gives rise to this positive feeling, the "earnest love" he experiences. He reveals his sense of losing himself in his labor in the penultimate line of the poem where he says, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."

It is, of course, the poet speaking in "Mowing" and not his scythe. The "my long scythe" of the poem is not just the tool he uses literally in his mowing. The whispering scythe is also a metaphor for his work as a poet. His poetic work, he tells us in the poem, is "Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers (Pale orchises)." The flowers, "pale orchises" as he calls them, are his poems. The sweep of his scythe, and figuratively, the work of his poetry, he says, not only whisper something to him, but, as they work, they scare a "bright green snake," a figure in his poem to which I will allude later.

With this attempt to help you better understand it, here is Frost's poem, a sonnet of 14 partially rhymed lines:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound-
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

So what is this state to which Frost feels he is brought by the rhythmic sweep of his scythe? What is it about his engagement in the labor of mowing that creates in him this sense of connectedness of which he sings, and that gives rise to his feeling of "earnest love?" Has he touched something real, something universal, something we can find in our own experience, or that reported by others? Or is what Frost believes he experienced after all, only a delusion, a state of self hypnosis, a flight of poetic fantasy expressed in words beautiful to hear, but signifying nothing?

It seems to me Frost's poem does touch something real, for I believe I have had this same feeling. Perhaps you have as well. There were those times, for instance, when this feeling came over me while playing sports, those moments in a game when I lost myself in the action and felt united, connected, with everything around me, when I was no longer self conscious and became one with the game and all that surrounded it. Those times when my perceptions of duality vanished, and everything was simply "there," with no divisions. When this happened, I did not think about the moves I should make. Mental effort did not distract me from the flow of play. Responses came smoothly as in a dance, without intellection, without thought. I lost all sense of myself as a separate actor. I was just there, "with it," with the ball, the other players, the crowd, the scene. Everything became as one, all united with everything else. And, yes, I believe the integrity I felt, the wholeness I experienced, could be called what Frost called it, a feeling of "earnest love."

Athletes know this feeling. They call it the "Zone," and they value it highly. Fans are referring to this state, though I think unwittingly, when they remark that an athlete is "playing out of his mind." This, too, is what coaches want when they admonish players to "get out of their heads," and to "get with it."

Admonitions to get into the Zone don't work, of course. Asking an athlete to "get out of his head," that is, to think about not thinking, is self defeating. It only makes him more self conscious. So long as he is self conscious, whether it is thinking about not thinking, or how he will move, or caring about the crowd, or having concern for results, he is out of the Zone and back in his head. He is distracted, separated from the natural flow of the action. He has lost that smooth-flowing, effortless, unthinking motion, that is so completely integrated. We all remember the parable of the centipede. He could walk fine until he was asked to think how he did it.

Frost, too, may have experienced this sense of being in the "Zone" while playing games, this feeling that he says came over him while mowing, for he once remarked in a television interview, "It's a strange thing that I [did]. I played games and I suppose I don't think anybody can think right in this world who didn't play games sometime in his life."

It is not only while playing games that I have experienced the "Zone." I've seen it can happen in any context in which we lose ourselves in what we are doing, when we lose our sense of separate self and feel one with all around us. Another incident which led me to the state Frost voices in his poem occurred one day while I was working in my garden. My wife and I had taken a vacation that spring, and before leaving, I prepared

my beds, set out the broccoli and cabbage plants started indoors under lights, and sowed the seeds of the early crops; radishes, peas, onions, turnips, kohlrabi and carrots; all carefully laid out in rows with the soil between scrupulously tilled to open it to the air. Before planting, I dug in compost from bins I have working year round. We were not to be gone long, and I left with the complacent belief that I would return to a clean garden of emerging plants. It was not so. In the previous fall, I had thrown into the compost heap weeds that had gone to seed. Consequently, I came home to find my beds so filled with weeds I could hardly see the rows I had spaced out. In frustration at what seemed to me an endless weeding job, I began tearing indiscriminately at the offenders. Aggravated with thoughts of the burden of the work I foresaw, I was distracted from any real connection with what I was doing, and from any effective progress. About the time I was thinking to give up the job as endless, the story of Sisyphus, as told by Albert Camus in one of his essays, came to me. You may know it. As punishment for offending the gods, Sisyphus was doomed to push forever a rock to the top of a hill, only to see it roll back each time he reached the height. In our ordinary way of looking at things, one could hardly think of a more terrible punishment, but we are told that Sisyphus defeated the gods, that the endless and fruitless labor the gods had imposed on him did not cause him the agony of mind they intended him to feel. How could this be, our way of viewing the world constrains us to ask? What was it that made Sisyphus victorious?

He triumphed by making the rock his, by losing himself in its feel and texture, and by letting the movement of his straining body become one with all around him. He let go of all thought of the absurdity of his task, and gave himself up entirely to the reality of the scene. And by being there, with his rock, the sky, the sun, and his movement on the hill, he was happy, he felt consummated.

Remembering Sisyphus, I, too, let go of my agitated thoughts about the profusion of weeds I was tearing at so angrily, and allowed myself to experience them, to make them mine, and to become theirs, so to speak. I saw their colors and textures, and knew the feel of them, as I took them away from my emerging plants. I felt the sun and spring air, and caught from the corner of my eye the furtive flight past me of the blue bird nesting in the box at the corner of my garden. I gave up all care for the results of the work, and let myself fall into the flow of things there, as they were, in the moment. When I awoke from my state of self-forgetfulness, my "dream" as Frost puts it in his poem, my garden was free of the weeds. But it was not the result, but the state itself, the sweet dream of unity, that mattered; that sense of connectedness, that "earnest love" Frost experienced as he lost himself in his mowing, and that Sisyphus knew in his victory on the hill.

It seems this sense of unity, this feeling of connectedness may be experienced most keenly when events bring home to us that these lives of ours, which ordinarily we perceive as separate and apart, as standing over and against what surrounds us, must end; when we come face to face with the reality that these discrete entities which we conceive ourselves to be will dissolve back into the earth. Many of us have known people who, when they realize they are dying, say they experience life differently, and that they know a happiness that they had not known before. Paradoxically, the realization that we are mortal can shock us out of our perceptions of duality and into a feeling of unity; take us out of our every day distractions from life, and connect us to it.

For example, I believe this sense of connectedness is what the writer Malcolm Cowley experienced when he made a fateful decision to become a pilot in a French air squadron in World War I. As he tells the story, he was in Paris in the early summer of 1917, on leave from driving a munitions truck for the French army, not a proud occupation in those days when his friends were enlisting in various flying corps and getting killed with astonishing dispatch. In the Lafayette Escadrille, for example, a pilot's average expectancy of life was something less than three months. Nonetheless, he decided to enlist as an American aviator, knowing that he would make an incompetent pilot and believing that he would probably be killed with greater dispatch than the others. His decision made, he relates that suddenly, everything changed for him. The chestnut trees in the Champs-Elysees seemed greener, their blossoms pinker, the girls on the sidewalk more beautiful, and the sky an unprecedented shade of blue, as if his senses had been sharpened and his capacity for enjoyment vastly increased by his felt imminence of death. Humming a silly wartime song, smiling at passers by, he went to a restaurant and ordered what seemed to him the best meal he had ever eaten, washed down with a bottle of miraculous wine.

Cowley's fateful choice to become an aviator made him realize that his life was limited, that it would end. The awareness that he would likely die, no longer in the abstract, not as the conceptual awareness we all have, but there, imminent and real, caused him to experience life differently than he had done before. He did not despair. He was not depressed. He did not feel isolated and alone. Quite the opposite. He felt connected and quintessentially alive. He experienced the world as beautiful and smiled on it with compassion. He knew what it was to be one with it. Was this the "earnest love" Frost felt? I believe it was.

Cowley's feelings are not unlike Stephen Crane's who, while on an assignment as a reporter, was nearly drowned when his ship sank at sea and he was cast adrift in a small boat with three other men. Crane relives his experience in his classic story "The Open Boat," where he refers to himself as the "correspondent," and relates the feelings that came over him from his near-death experience. He recounts that as each slaty wall of water approached the frail boat and shut out all else from the view of the men in it, it was not difficult to imagine that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water to swamp the little boat. One might think that fear would be his primary emotion, but it was not. As the enormous walls of water came rushing forward as though to engulf him, he experienced what he calls, a "mystic thing," and found a terrible grace in the move of the waves as they came in silence, save for the snarling crests. Working the oars in shifts with the other men to the point of exhaustion, as they struggled together to save themselves from an implacable sea, feelings of unity and compassion came over him, feelings that he, the cynical reporter, had not experienced before. This is how he describes those feelings:

It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood that was here established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him. . . . there was this

comradeship, that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life.

These episodes bring forward again, albeit in different contexts, the question Frost's poem raises. Is there a way of experiencing the world that our usual way of thinking, our ideas of separate self, obscure? In pondering these existential questions, we do well to remember that people in other cultures do not perceive themselves and the world as we do in the West.

This was brought home to me when I was stationed in Japan as a young officer during the Korean War. Callow and provincial as I was, I could see, nevertheless, that there was something very different about the Japanese way of engaging the world. I found this expressed in the quiet serenity of their homes, in the loving way they cared for their fields, the way they arranged flowers and performed their tea ceremony, even in the care with which they wrapped a simple gift. I didn't understand it then, but I sensed their deep rapport with nature, their organic connectedness that was so different from the way we Americans, posted among them in our separate enclaves, related to the world.

It was not until years later when I read a book by the Japanese scholar, D.T. Suzuki called Zen and Japanese Culture that I came to have a clearer understanding of what I had seen in the Japanese approach to life, for it is Zen that shows best the way Japanese people engage the world.

Zen is not a philosophy, nor is it a religion. It is a state of being in which the oneness of things is directly experienced. There is no separating intellection, no dividing conceptualizing in Zen. This makes it impossible to convey fully in words, for words are merely concepts, they are only symbols. That is, they are abstractions we employ to grasp aspects of the world mentally, and to rearrange and to reconstruct them in our minds. Words are symbols we employ to divide and describe what we call reality, they are not reality itself. Words mediate reality, they do not communicate it as it is. At the same time we think to grasp the world with words, we separate ourselves from it, isolate ourselves in the mental realm of our ideas, in the activities of our minds, and retreat from the immediate, from our direct contact with things. We withdraw to that separate conceptual world we have constructed within our thinking brains.

To put it in Western philosophical terms, we embrace the Cartesian view which begins with the premise that ours is a separate existence, which proposition is proved by the fact we think. The cogito ergo sum, the "I think therefore I am" of Rene Descartes, is the antithesis of Zen, for it assumes a duality. It starts from the premise that it is our human thought that establishes our existence, and it results in our seeing ourselves as separate thinking subjects looking out at a world of objects. It assumes our relationship to the world is one of "I here, it there." It is what the hebraist Martin Buber calls the "I-It" relationship to the world. The relationship he contrasts with the "I-Thou," that is, the experience he describes as connectedness, as relatedness, as unity.

It would seem that if we are to apprehend the world as Frost does in his poem, we must let go of our Cartesian dualism and experience things directly, for in separating them out and manipulating them mentally we distort them. This is the reason for the Zen admonition "no mind." So it is also the aim of the koans Zen Masters impose on their disciples. When the Master demands to know of the student "what is the sound of one hand clapping", he does not expect an answer, for there is none. His purpose is to tease his pupil's mind to exhaustion, so that at last he gives up all attempts at thought, and experiences a sudden awakening, an awakening that involves a loss of self consciousness, a loss of any sense of a separate thinking self, or any conceptual analysis that divides the world of the one into the world of the many. It involves an integration, an awakening to the reality of wholeness that Zen calls "enlightenment."

This is not "enlightenment" as we have thought of it in the West. As I've said, it is not our Cartesian way of experiencing the world. It has nothing to do with our empiricism, which is the view that knowledge comes only from particular sense data which the mind recombines to form an understanding of itself and the world, the empiricism which is the enabling tenet of experimental science. Rather, it is an awakening to the realization that our minds are not only limited, but can operate to alienate us, isolate us from our natural primordial connection to the beauty and love of the universe.

This way of experiencing the world has allies among those who have been engaged in Western philosophical thought. For example, the German existentialist Martin Heidegger is said to have remarked to a friend after reading one of Suzuki's books on Zen, "If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings." Heidegger's basic belief was that the great error in Western philosophy has been the Cartesian dichotomizing of the intellect which has operated to cut us off from unity with Being. The word he coined for the relationship between us and the world he believed to be real was "dasein," by which he means simply "being there," or as an athlete might say, "being with it!" This mode of being in the world is characterized by relatedness and caring, relatedness to our surroundings, relatedness to our fellow man, and caring about them, being one with them. This seems to me to be inherent in the "earnest love" Frost felt while mowing, and is the compassion and brotherhood Malcolm Cowley and Stephen Crane experienced. Of course there is much in Heidegger's philosophy that is not in Zen, and much in Zen that is not in Heidegger. Still, despite their disparate cultural sources, this Twentieth Century thinker finds fundamental elements of his own thought in the Eastern tradition of organic connectedness.

The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead arrived at a similar place, albeit by a different path as well. In his treatise Modes of Thought he asserts that connectedness is of the essence of all things, and that when we abstract ourselves from this connectedness we distort our own reality and any other fact we look at as a separate object. That is, no fact is merely itself, something to be seen apart from all else, and this of course includes ourselves. In every single fact there is the environmental coordination of all that surrounds it, a coordination that is requisite for the reality of its existence. This environment, this milieu, as thus coordinated and unified, is the whole universe. Is this not what Frost wants to show us in his poem; that by losing our

perceptions of a separate self in the sweep of life in the moment, and by letting ourselves be dissolved in all that surrounds us, we will come closer, find ourselves nearer to reality than our ordinary way of experiencing the world allows to us?

Turning again to Frost's poem, you will recall he says there that his mowing "scared a bright green snake." What might we derive from this image? Read literally, it is merely the retreat of a colorful creature before the mower's menacing blade. But words in poems are not simply denotative. They are connotative as well. They echo our cultural myths and traditions, and to encounter the snake in art is to be reminded of the part it played in the story of our fall from Paradise. What I believe the poet wants to show us is that in his mowing, in losing himself in his work, in entering the "Zone," as it were, he has intuited that primordial state of union we knew in the Garden, that self-forgetful innocence, that psychic wholeness, we lived before the Fall; and that it is the fear of our redemption that scares the snake.

What Frost shows us in his poem is subjective, of course. It is intuitive, and being so, it is not subject to the kind of objective demonstration required by our scientific approach to questions of knowledge. Some of you here are learned men of science, and you may dismiss all this as mere metaphysics in the reproachful sense of that term. If you believe that all we can know is derived from sense data, that is empirically, then what I've been saying will not resonate.

Frost himself would never argue the point. He knows poetry is not argument, but imaginative insight; that it is the expression of spiritual vision, not the objective proof of knowledge. So, as I've said, Frost would never make the claim that the experience he relates in his poem is a discovered universal truth, a means of redemption for all of us. He would never say to us, for example, what Wordsworth claims as a certainty for the power of intuition in "Tintern Abbey":

While with an eye made quiet by the power
of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

Frost has had his vision, and has tried by means of his poem to express it so that we might feel it's truth as well. Too guarded to make universal claims for his intuitive powers, or for ours, what Frost does do is raise this question: "Is there a principle of love secretly moving in all of us, an "earnest love" as he calls it, arising from an actual state of unity, a unity of which we are not ordinarily aware, and which we abuse by our ideas of separateness?" He does not answer for us. As he says in the last words of his poem, he leaves it to us, that "hay to make."
