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David Schelhaas

*Dordt College*

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# Robert Frost's "Irresistible Impossibility"

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by David Schelhaas

Two giants strode across the pages of American poetry during the first half of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost. Eliot, the scholar, the sophisticate, shocked the literary world by joining the Anglican Church in 1927. Although this act may have damaged slightly his status among secular literary scholars, it made Eliot the darling of Christian literary scholars. For example, at the Christian college where I studied in the early sixties, our courses were suffused with Eliot's critical theories, Eliot's views on the sterility of modern culture, Eliot's poetry. Robert Frost, on the other hand, was admired for his folksy, homespun wisdom and wit.

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*Mr. Schelhaas is Instructor of English at Dordt College.*

At my Christian college, as I remember it now, we acknowledged that wit and praised the way Frost put conversational American speech into a metrical line. But we did not take him too seriously: "Good fences make good neighbors" and "I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep"—these were nice sentiments, but not deep. Certainly we did not consider Frost a poet with a religious dimension worth exploring.

Paul Elman, a moral theologian, writes in the same vein:

The total impression one gets from reading Robert Frost is that of a warmly human, perceptive man—the kind of person it would be fun to go haying with, or picking blueberries. His stock of ideas may lack profundity, but they do not lack interest; reading him is like a visit to the country store. . . . What we value him for especially, apart from the sheer nostalgic delight of his rural tone, is the delightful aperçu, the momentary flash of intuitive truth which commands our assent. (467)

This faint praise probably captures the attitude that many people have about Frost even today. But it is a misapprehension. Frost does more than shoot out occasional flashes of intuitive truth. His poetry is profound, and from his earliest lyrics to his last he struggled with difficult religious issues. Frost himself said to Peter J. Stanlis in 1942: "Eliot is more churchy than I am, but I am more religious than Eliot" (Stanlis 467). Frost's biographer, Lawrance Thompson, said that "Frost's religious belief provides more problems than any other part of his art—and it happens to be inseparable from his art" (qtd. in Hall xviii).

Dorothy Judd Hall says that it is difficult to identify Frost's beliefs because of his own determination to keep his personal life out of his poetry. She calls this his smoke-screen strategy, "designed to conceal his meanings in areas touching his deep-seated beliefs, yet permit revealing glimpses." These glimpses are "imbedded in the language, the metaphors, of the poetry—withheld from the casual reader, but at least partly available to the diligent" (6).

Before we look diligently at some of that poetry, we can note in passing that it seems quite apparent from what Frost said in personal conversations that he did believe in God. Sydney Cox says:

He is religious. One memorable night, in 1916, he rejected my convenient disposal of God as the summation of Most High Things, and of religion as care for things spiritual. God, he said, is that which man is sure cares, and will save him, no matter how many times or how completely he has failed. We have talked of religion repeatedly since then, and he has never recanted . . . . (41)

His longtime friend Rabbi Victor Reichert notes that Frost "loved the scriptures and likes to call himself an Old Testament Christian. He was soaked in the King James version" of the Bible (421).

But Frost frequently expressed doubt about human immortality. After asking Rabbi Reichert about the chances of life after death, Frost answers his own questions by saying, "With so many ladders going up everywhere, there must be something for them to lean against" (Reichert 418). This search for something to lean his ladder against is like Emily Dickinson's heavenly mansions "never quite disclosed and never quite concealed." Frost writes in "The Secret Sits":

We dance around in a ring and suppose  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows. (495)

Because of his personal reticence and his uncertainty, Frost's religious beliefs seem ambiguous and his poetry enigmatic. Certainly we can assert that his poetry is deep and profoundly religious. But we can also reach some tentative conclusions about it. In this paper, I will explore just two religious motifs—the mercy/justice paradox and the idea of the quest—as they appear in various poems. Further I will argue that Frost does finally reveal a belief about what man's religious goal is and how he can reach it. The revelation comes in *A Masque of Mercy*.

George Nitchie says that "The fact that he [Frost] had given it final position in the volume entitled *Complete Poems* (there were two earlier volumes entitled *Collected Poems*) strongly suggests that he thinks of it as a final statement, in terms of doctrine if not necessarily chronology" (180). Accepting that assumption, I will take answers about the goal and source found in *A Masque of Mercy* and use them to interpret some of Frost's earlier poems.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Frost's poems express the theme of the backward step, the movement toward a goal or objective, the retreat to a source—sometimes in self. Very often Frost uses the image of the quest-search to describe this movement. In no poem is this idea of the quest—the spiritual quest—clearer than in *A Masque of Mercy*.

The action of the masque takes place in the bookstore of Keeper, a social humanitarian, and his wife Jesse Bel. On a dark, stormy night, Jonah, a fugitive from God because he "can't trust God to be unmerciful," seeks refuge in the bookstore. He comes under the care of Paul, a sort of counselor who directs the action of the play. Paul shows Jonah that he is not

Running away from Him you think you are  
But from His mercy—justice contradicted. (615)

He goes on to tell Jonah that "Christ came to introduce a break with logic" (630) with the Sermon on the Mount which, as Keeper says, is

A beautiful impossibility.  
An irresistible impossibility.  
A lofty beauty no one can live up to  
Yet no one turn from trying to live up to. (631)

Here then are the goal and the quest. The goal of the quest is perfection, the Christ-like innocence described in the Sermon on the Mount. But it is impossible to achieve. The only way to attain it is through the mercy of God. For it is

. . . spoken so we can't live up to it. Yet so  
we'll have to weep because we can't.  
Mercy is only to the undeserving.  
But such we all are made in the sight of God.

Here we all fail together, dwarfed and poor.  
Failure is failure, but success is failure.  
There is no better way of having it.  
An end you can't by any means achieve  
And yet can't turn your back on and ignore,  
That is the mystery you must accept.  
Do you accept it, Master Jonas Dove? (632)

When Jonah answers:

You ask if I see yonder shining gate,  
And I reply I almost think I do, (633)

Paul replies,

Yes, Pilgrim now instead of runaway,  
Your fugitive escape becomes a quest. (633)

One attains perfection through mercy, not self;  
nevertheless, one must continue the quest for  
perfection. Jonah wants to know why:

If what you say is true, if winning ranks  
The same with God as losing, how explain  
Our making all this effort mortals make? (638)

But Paul has already answered the question:

An end you can't by any means achieve  
And yet can't turn your back on and ignore,  
That is the mystery you must accept. (632)

Jonah does accept, and after his death, Keeper also  
comes to a kind of acceptance when he says:

. . . fear is of the soul  
And I'm afraid. (641)

And Paul replies:

The fear that you're afraid with is the fear  
Of God's decision lastly on your deeds.

That is the Fear of God whereof tis written. (641)

What has been written, of course, is that the fear  
of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. In a sermon  
he gave in Rabbi Reichert's Rockdale temple, Frost  
said, "[T]he fear of God always has meant the fear  
that one's wisdom, one's own wisdom, one's own  
human wisdom is not quite acceptable in His sight"  
(Reichert 420).

But, says Frost in *A Masque of Mercy*, one must  
overcome that "fear within the soul/ And go on to  
any accomplishment" (642). At the same time,  
however, one must realize that what one does, may  
not be acceptable. By accepting one's own  
inadequacy, he/she can undertake the quest,  
beginning in self-abnegation and contemplation in  
the cellar or, as in Jonah's case, death (the death  
of the natural man as St. Paul died on the road to  
Damascus) and continuing in the effort, in "Our  
sacrifice, the best we have to offer" (641).

To summarize, our goal is the perfection and  
innocence Christ describes in the Sermon on the  
Mount. To attain this goal is impossible. Yet to  
accept the mystery of mercy—that we can't achieve  
it but must keep trying—which grows out of the fear  
of God, produces a courage of the heart that causes  
us to make the effort toward the goal even though  
it is attained through mercy.

Is Frost in apparently accepting the mystery of  
mercy affirming the basic tenets of Christian doc-  
trine? William G. O'Donnell thinks so. He argues  
that *A Masque of Mercy* affirms salvation for those  
"who live in the faith of Christ" (274). "The article  
of faith proposed for Jonah's acceptance is the  
mystery of God's love for the world, the coming  
of Christ: that the world may be saved by Him"  
(273). I am not quite as certain of this as O'Donnell  
seems to be. For although Paul says "Christ came  
to introduce a break with logic," Frost does  
not indicate that this break occurs with Christ's  
death. The break in logic was "the mercy on the  
Sin against the Sermon." Paul later tells Jonah to

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*Frost is more than a  
cracker barrel philosopher  
dispensing homespun wisdom  
and wit.*

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gaze on the crucifix and contemplate, but he does  
not suggest that he or the world will be saved by  
Christ or that Christ is God. A letter Frost wrote  
from his deathbed to Roy and Alma Elliot (12  
January 1963) indicates his continuing concern with  
the mercy/justice problem but does not provide a  
completely satisfactory answer about Christ's role  
in salvation:

Why will the quidnuncs always be hoping for  
a salvation man will never have from anyone  
but God? I was just saying today how Christ  
posed Himself the whole problem and died for  
it. How can we be just in a world that needs  
mercy and merciful in a world that needs  
justice. (qtd. in Hall 9)

That Frost believes salvation comes from God  
seems clear enough here. But whether that salvation  
comes through the atoning sacrifice of Christ seems  
less clear. Isn't Frost simply suggesting that Christ's  
death illustrates the mercy/justice paradox?

The most we can say, it seems, is that though our  
works may not be found acceptable in God's sight,  
mercy will prevail. "God is that which a man is  
sure . . . will save him" (Cox 40-41).

Now let's use *A Masque of Mercy* to better  
understand some of the earlier poems. I have noted  
that the idea of a quest toward some source or goal  
is a motif in many of Frost's poems. An image fre-  
quently used to describe this quest, especially in the

poems I will discuss here, is the mountain with a spring, fountain, or stream near its peak. A number of these poems suggest that at one time humanity possessed the innocence or perfection that is the goal of the quest. The very familiar "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is a good example of this:

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. (272)

Here we see a golden perfection at the dawn of history, followed by a gradual dimming of that Edenic dawn as ordinary day takes over. In other poems this lost Edenic state exhibits itself in images of an abandoned farm, a ruined house and a lost childhood.

Basic elements of an Eden, "such elements as a condition of innocence, a fallen condition in which one may remember or desire that lost innocence, and an attendant condition of melancholy engendered by such mixing of memory and desire" (Nitchie 77) are frequently apparent in Frost's first published collection of poems, *A Boy's Will*. We see Frost's use of the decayed house image in "Ghost House." Nothing is left of the house but flower-covered cellar walls where the narrator dwells "with a strangely aching heart" (6). The narrator has created the house in his memory, attempting to get back to the lost innocence, but, of course, he can't. Hence, the "strangely aching heart"—the melancholy engendered by a memory of the desire for lost innocence. Other images that appear here and reappear in several other poems to be discussed presently are the apple orchard, the spring (the path to which is "healed"—not used) and the "disused and forgotten road" (6).

"Reluctance," another poem in which the narrator has an aching heart, is on one level simply a lament over the loss of life that winter brings: "The leaves are all dead," "The lone aster is gone," and "the flowers of the witch-hazel wither" (43). But the lament is for more than just that. Again we see the quest: "The heart is still aching to seek,/ But the feet question 'Whither?'" (43). And the seeking must be done against the drift of things (43). Humanity, like nature, has lost its perfection. Yet

the quest for that lost perfection must go on:

. . . when to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of thing,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season? (43)

As does Paul in *A Masque of Mercy*, the speaker here suggests reason must be resisted. Even though he has lost the love for God and the season of innocence, man must not accept the loss gracefully, but make an effort to get back to the source of perfection.

In "The Generations of Men," Starks from all over the country gather near their ancestral cellar-hole. The similarities between this cellar and the one in "Ghost House" are striking. Both are overgrown with raspberry vines, both can be reached only by disused roads, and while one has a well nearby, the other has a brook below it making a wild descent from its source. Of the many Starks assembled, only two try to go back to the cellar, for it is raining and the rest apparently don't have the courage to resist going with the drift of things. Two young people, however, do have that courage and are unreasonable enough to go out into the rain and make the effort toward the source. They are young and this may be the reason they make the quest; the awareness of a lost innocence is still acute in them.

In its conclusion, the poem suggests that since they are remote enough in kinship, they will marry and revitalize the family farm. However, as the broad scope of the title "The Generations of Men" suggests, this is more than a poem about the Stark family. The ruined cellar out of which they have come could be the garden of Eden in decay.

As the two young people sit and talk at the edge of the cellar, they imagine that they see old Granny Stark (Eve?) rummaging about the cellar: "She's after cider, the old girl, she's thirsty" (98). The young man then hears the sound of the brook:

I've never listened in among the sounds  
That a brook makes in such a wild descent.  
It ought to give a purer oracle. (99)

An oracle, of course, is a medium or place by which the gods make known their divine purpose. The oracle in this poem, the brook flowing down from its source, directs the young man in diction very much like that of God to Noah or Moses in the King James Bible:

. . . take a timber

That you shall find lies in the cellar charred  
Among the raspberries, and hew and shape it  
For a door sill or other corner piece

In a new cottage on this ancient spot. (100)

The girl, however, is not satisfied with the voice of the oracle and wants to hear what Granny Stark has to say. So Granny is conjured up and says, "Son, you do as you're told!"

"You take the timber—/ It's as sound as the day when it was cut—/ And begin over—" (101). The conclusion that can be drawn from this seems obvious: Go back to the beginning, rebuild or recreate Eden. At first glance, the poem seems to suggest that this is possible. But the young man's remark immediately following Granny's directions shows that it is not:

". . . There, she'd better stop.

You can tell what is troubling Granny, though.  
But don't you think we sometimes make too much  
Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals,  
And those will bear some keeping still about."  
(101)

What is troubling Granny is that the "newcomers," the succeeding generations, have lost the qualities and characteristics of the old stock. Earlier she had said, "I should feel easier if I could see/ More of the salt wherewith they're to be salted" (101). This allusion to a verse from the Sermon on the Mount ("Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor wherewith shall it be salted?") and a similar statement in Mark 9:49 suggests that the generations of men have lost the desire to make the effort for perfection. The young man, although he realizes that to attain perfection is impossible, knows that the effort is important. "What counts is the ideals. . . ."

The young people agree to meet at the cellar again on the next day. The poem ends with the expression of the hope that it will be raining, thus suggesting the idea of going against the drift of things, coming out into the rain to make the effort toward the source.

"The Generations of Men" illustrates two kinds of innocence: The primal innocence that the human race had in its forefathers (in the garden of Eden) and the individual innocence that each person has as a child. The loss of innocence described in "The Birthplace" can be interpreted as either or both of these.

Although this poem does not strongly suggest a quest, there is the familiar setting of the house on the mountain with the enclosed spring. George Knox says "The Birthplace" can be read as ironic allusion to a pre-lapsarian state and a fall. "We may read 'father' as God, the 'chains' and enclosed spring as God's restrictions on our first parents" (372). At the same time, the poem depicts the loss of childlike innocence:

A dozen boys and girls we were.  
The mountain seemed to like the stir,  
And made of us a little while—  
Today she wouldn't know our name. (339)

In other words, the innocent boys and girls were welcome and at home in this Eden, but as adults,

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*Perfection and innocence  
are impossible to achieve,  
but the effort is all  
important.*

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"Today," they are not even recognized. This idea of lost childlike innocence may help us gain an understanding of "The Mountain"—especially the enigmatic unfinished line near the end of the poem.

The story of "The Mountain" is quite simple. A man, the narrator, exploring near the foot of a large mountain, meets an old farmer. The narrator asks him if the path they are on is the way to reach the top of the mountain and the old man replies:

"I don't advise trying from this side.  
There is no proper path, but those that *have*  
Been up, I understand, have climbed from  
Ladd's." (57)

He goes on to tell of a brook near the top that's always cold in summer and warm in winter and of a spring that is right at the summit. The narrator then asks the old man various questions about the mountain and the farmer does his best to answer them. The poem ends with the old man driving off as he replies to the narrator's questions about how long he has lived there: "Ever since Hor/ Was no bigger than a—" (60).

Although the narrator does not intend to journey to the peak of Mt. Hor immediately; he does intend to go on another day and find "the spring,/ Right on the summit, almost like a fountain" (58). The old farmer, however, does not intend to go. Although he has always intended to go, he wants the climb to accomplish something: "Twouldn't

seem real to climb for climbing it" (59). His statement sounds very much like the question Jonah asks of Paul after being told that nothing he does can have any merit in the sight of God: "[H]ow explain/ Our making all this effort mortals make?" The old farmer, it seems, is unaware of the mystery of mercy that demands the making of the effort even though it accomplishes nothing.

The name of the mountain, Hor, tells us something about the source that is similar to what we saw in "The Generations of Men." Hor was the mountain on which Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel, died. One meaning of the word "oracle" (used in "The Generations of Men") is the place (Holy of Holies) or medium (High Priest) through which the God of Judaism and Christianity communicated His will to His people. Thus with his selection of the name Hor for the mountain, Frost again seems to be saying that God or communion with God is at the source of the river, the peak of the mountain.

There is a proper path to that peak. If a person intends to climb the mountain, the place to start is at Ladd's. The name Ladd indicates that it's easier for lads, young people, to get back to the source. This idea comes out more clearly in the last few lines when the narrator asks about the spring, "Warm in December, cold in June you say?" and the old farmer replies:

'I don't suppose the water's changed at all.  
You and I know enough to know it's warm  
Compared with cold, and cold compared  
with warm

But all the fun's in how you say a thing.' (59)

Immediately after this, the narrator asks him how long he has lived there, and the old farmer (and Robert Frost) have a little fun in how they answer: "Ever since Hor/ Was no bigger than a—" If we take the statement "all the fun's in how you say a thing" and apply it to the unfinished statement of the old man, we can deduce something about the meaning of the line. Just as water is warm compared with cold and cold compared with warm, so the mountain—if one keeps in mind that youth is nearer to the source than old age—has seemingly gotten larger as the man has gotten older. He has lived there since he was a child. Then the mountain "was no bigger than a—" and the peak was not so very far away. One might argue that (since things work by contrast) to be consistent, as he got older the

mountain would seem smaller, and when he was small, the mountain would have seemed larger. But the line implies that the mountain was smaller when he was younger. Only if we understand that the child is nearer to the perfection at the peak does this final unfinished line make sense.

With "Directive" Frost again seems to be having fun in how he says a thing. The directions in the poem are given by a guide "Who only has at heart your getting lost" (520). The imagery at times seems playful when, for example, it speaks "Of being watched from forty cellar holes/ As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins" (520). Even the final directions to the source are given in a teasing manner, hidden "Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,/ So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't" (521).

But Frost is not just having fun here. Most critics would agree that "Directive" is Frost's most penetrating religious poem—along with the *Masques*, a final statement of belief. As are many of Frost's poems, "Directive" is a parable,<sup>2</sup> and in it Frost is cautious "of coming too much to the surface,/ And using for apparel what was meant/ To be the curtain of the inmost soul" (538). Since it is a parable, the passage Mark 4 to which Frost alludes may help to explain the nature of the parable.

And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: *That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand: lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.* And He said unto them, Know you not this parable? and how then will you know all parables? (Mark 4:11-13)

In response to the questions at the end of this passage George Knox asks: "Does he [Frost] mean that "Directive" is a parable through the understanding of which we may perceive the meaning of all his parables?" (366). Dorothy Judd Hall answers in the affirmative: "Many of his prior poems, unwittingly, anticipate it; those that follow must be read in the light of its existence" (107). It does seem that except for *A Masque of Mercy* this is the poet's culminating statement on the theme of the quest. Probably this is the reason he incorporates into this poem almost all of the images used in the poems we discussed earlier.

The first line of the poem, "Back out of all this now too much for us" (520), suggests the backward journey away from the world seen already in "Ghost House" and "The Generations of Men." "There is a house that is no more a house/ Upon a farm that is no more a farm" (520) again pictures the ruined dwelling in "Ghost House," "The Generations of Men," and "The Birthplace." The "Great monolithic knees" of the mountain in "Directive" are reminiscent of the line in "The Birthplace": "The mountain pushed us off her knees" (339). "A few old pecker-fretted apple trees" (520) seems to be a condensation of the lines in "Ghost House":

The orchard tree has grown one copse/  
Of new wood and old where the woodpecker  
chops (6).

And the list could go on. There is the mountain, the unused road, the brook with a spring as its source, and the cellar grown over with flowers. The idea of a spiritual quest is suggested not only in the first line of "Directive," but also by the poet-narrator-guide's reference to a "serial order" which has connotations of the medieval Knight's quest for the Grail. This is re-enforced at the end of the poem where the guide tells of a drinking goblet like the Grail.

When the narrator-guide says near the beginning of the poem that he "only has at heart your getting lost," he sounds playful and teasing; however, when he later says, "if you're lost enough to find yourself" (521), it is apparent he isn't just teasing. In fact, he sounds very much like Paul telling Jonah to engage in contemplation and self-abnegation in the cellar, or like Christ saying, "Whoever shall lose his life for my sake will find it." Next the narrator-guide tells his hearer to make himself at home. The first thing he sees upon doing this is

. . . the children's house of make believe,  
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,  
The playthings in the playhouse of the  
children. (521)

As in "The Birthplace," the children were real children, having an innocence that was in the real "house that is no more a house" (521). It is significant that the goblet with which one drinks of the waters of life ("Here are your waters and your watering place./ Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" [521]) was stolen from the children's playhouse. Christ said that "Except you become as a little child, you can not enter the kingdom of

heaven" (Matt. 18:3). And Robert Frost said in a conversation with Hyde Cox:

The waters and the watering place are the source. It is there that you would have to turn in time of confusion to be made whole again: whole again as perhaps you haven't been since leaving childhood behind. Aging, you have become involved in the cobwebs and considerations of the world. (qtd. in Morrison 79)

What are these waters from which one can, by taking the goblet, "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (521)? George Nitchie says that "Directive," is "concerned with getting back to primal sources of life and energy, and in this sense its

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*Though our works may  
not be found acceptable,  
God's mercy will prevail.*

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simplicity is also that achieved by sacrament and ritual, which by symbolization renders graspable and orderly phenomena that are otherwise mysterious, unattainable, and incoherent" (19). Drinking the water is a sacramental act that enables one to grasp the mystery of mercy to the undeserving. If one can find the goblet with which to drink, he will be able to understand the mystery of mercy, for, as St. Mark says, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God."

Again with "Directive" as with *A Masque of Mercy* the question of whether Frost is offering a specifically Christian doctrine of salvation begs to be answered. Nitchie with his "primal sources of life and energy" sees the source as something vague and general. Margaret Blum suggests that it is "the living God" of pre-institutional religion—the "fundamental Truth" back beyond the "two last cultures" of Judaism and Christianity (qtd. in Hall 109). Others, Reuben Brower and Dorothy Judd Hall, suggest that those who can be saved are those who can understand poetry and have some poetry in themselves. They point out that Frost took Christ's statement that those who did not understand the parables would not be saved and applied it to poetry as well as parables—those who do not understand poetry cannot be saved. In other words, "understanding metaphor—finding the vital figure that make's one's life meaningful in or out of traditional faith—is the key to salvation" (Hall 110).



In the light of this, what can one say about Frost's Christianity? Perhaps the two ideas, the idea of salvation through poetry and the idea of unmerited Christian mercy, can be combined at least to this extent: The effort at perfection, the impossible quest for perfection, meant for Frost that he write the best poetry that he could. In a conversation with Elizabeth Sergeant about his salvation he gestured toward his *Complete Poems* and said, "There I rest my case" (Hall 123). Yet even as he said this he must have had the fear Paul speaks of at the conclusion of *A Masque of Mercy*:

We have to stay afraid deep in our souls  
Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,  
And not our worst nor second best, our best,  
Our very best, our lives laid down like  
Jonah's,

Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not  
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight. (641-641)

If Frost rested his case on his poetry, he also knew with Keeper and Paul that his best might not be enough and that finally he would be saved by God's sheer mercy to the undeserving.

Frost saw the human goal as the perfection and innocence that Christ describes in the Sermon on the Mount. He suggests that the attainment of that goal is impossible, an "irresistible impossibility," and that mercy finally must take over. To state with certainty exactly what it is that Frost believes concerning salvation would probably be presumptuous. But to describe Frost as a cracker barrel philosopher dispensing bucolic wisdom is to miss the depth of thought in his poetry. Frost's bobbing and weaving, his affirming and rejecting of a Christian perspective, leave us wanting more. We reach out to grasp the warm hand of a friend only to discover a few moments later an empty glove. Perhaps the real value of diligently reading Frost's poetry (aside from the pleasure of the journey) for anyone who thinks hard and long about the nature of God, man, and the universe, is an increased appreciation for the paradoxes and mysteries of existence. Even if our lives are grounded in religious certainty, we are surrounded by mysteries. Indeed, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies." And our poets, like Robert Frost, sometimes help us to see what our philosophers miss.

1. To consider *A Masque of Mercy* as a final statement requires that *A Masque of Reason*, the verse drama that precedes it, be considered not as an equally final statement, but as the presentation of unresolved paradox that finds its resolution in *A Masque of Mercy*. W.R. Irwin argues convincingly for this interpretation, taking Frost's definition of a poem in "The Figure a Poem Makes" to show how *A Masque of Mercy* has a beginning that seems "anterior to the poem" (302-311). Also relevant here is Frost's remark to Reginald Cook concerning the significance of *A Masque of Reason*: "All my poetry is footnote to it" (10). Cook's article was written before the publication of *A Masque of Mercy*, but the two are obviously companion pieces, making Frost's remark equally applicable to the latter."
2. Frost clearly believed that poetry and parable, because of their metaphoric nature, have much in common. Thus he can take Christ's comment on parables in St. Mark and apply it literally to his poetry.

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