Articles

IS NATURE ENOUGH? ROBERT FROST REPLIES IN "THE MOST OF IT"

by Matthew Orr

Abstract. In his poem "The Most of It" Robert Frost explores whether nature alone is sufficient to satisfy human spiritual yearnings. At first pass, the poem reads like a dark statement about the absence of any higher intelligence in the natural world, and it has been interpreted this way by many, including the person who inspired Frost to write it, Wade Van Dore. However, on careful reading Frost's poem also contains a subtle celebration of nature's spiritual assets. By creating a work with two possible meanings, Frost indicates that the answer to whether "nature is enough" is in the eye of the beholder. Because much of the poem's hopeful message resides in its meter, Frost also seems to be saying that nature will be enough mainly for those who appreciate nuance and accept ambiguity. For those so predisposed, a spirituality based in the belief that "nature is enough" requires no unverifiable entity for personal fulfillment and may ameliorate environmental problems that increasingly jeopardize human well-being.

Keywords: environmentalism; naturalism; paganism; transcendence.

The theme of the 2002 IRAS Star Island Conference, "Is Nature Enough? The Thirst for Transcendence," was covered with a series of representative articles from the conference in the December 2003 issue of *Zygon*. This article addresses the same question through an analysis of "The Most of It," a poem by Robert Frost that provides a brief but compelling exploration of whether nature is "enough."

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"The Most of It" was inspired by Wade Van Dore, a poet who lived for a short time with Frost's family in 1928. After trips through the lake country northwest of Lake Superior, Van Dore, in his words, lamented that he "fail[ed] to find complete fulfillment in a great wilderness" (Parini 1999, 260). Van Dore elaborated this sentiment in a poem called "The Echo," where the closest thing to meaning in nature is in the echo of a human call. After Van Dore shared "The Echo" with Frost, Frost replied with "The Most of It," which begins:

> He thought he kept the universe alone;
> For all the voice in answer he could wake
> Was but the mocking echo of his own
> From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
> Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
> He would cry out on life that what it wants
> Is not its own love back in copy speech,
> But counter-love, original response.
> And nothing ever came of what he cried

This first half of the poem describes Van Dore's north woods journey. The protagonist goes in search of a superior "counter-love" surpassing material, earthly love. For him, life lacks (is in want of) the meaning that some higher love would provide. When he calls out to wake signs of such love, all he hears is "copy-speech"—the echo of an unoriginal human voice. Here Frost portrays the search for transcendence as a circular (and thus feckless) endeavor: wishing for some sign of a higher realm, all that the seeker gets is the "mocking" noise of the seeking act itself.

The rest of the poem does not go much better. A stag stumbles down from a cliff, swims across the lake, and disappears into the brush:

> Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
> In the cliff's talus on the other side,
> And then in the far-distant water splashed,
> But after a time allowed for it to swim,
> Instead of proving human when it neared
> And someone else additional to him,
> 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.

Van Dore interpreted the poem as a straightforward portrayal of his north woods spiritual experience (or lack thereof), saying: "The dark and primitive feeling of his poem suggests that he took my seeking as something that touched him personally" (Parini 1999, 260). Biographer Jay

Parini calls it "Certainly one of Frost's darker poems, especially with "and that was all" coming as the final utterance" (1999, 261).

Is Frost's poem irredeemably dark? Is it just an echo of "The Echo"? In a letter to John Bartlett, a former student and friend, Frost said: "In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, 'Oh yes I know what you mean.' It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize." Accordingly, Van Dore extracted a version of his own experience from Frost's poem. But is there more to the poem than that?

In the first edition of his first volume of poetry, Frost wrote small explanatory phrases beside each poem. Beside "My November Guest," Frost wrote, "He is in love with being misunderstood." "The Most of It" is easy to misunderstand because, for a reader so predisposed, it is a simple statement of nature's spiritual insufficiency. Someone who believes nature is enough, however, can read the poem completely differently.

The beat of the poem in lines 1–9 is numbingly regular and never once broken: He thoúght | he képt | the ú | ni vérse | a lóne. Unstressed syllable, stressed syllable, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed, back and forth, ten syllables per line, for nine lines and ninety syllables. The monotonous rhythm says "Nothing new here," a message punctuated by line nine: "And nothing ever came of what he cried." Thus, meter and words are consonant through the first nine lines.

Line 10 begins with "unless," which softens the claim that *nothing* ever came of what he cried. To reinforce the exception, the first break in the meter occurs immediately thereafter, at "embodiment." Frost could have maintained the deadening rhythm of earlier lines by, for instance, writing line 10 as "unless it was the animal that crashed." The strictly descriptive term "animal" would have reinforced the mundane nature of the meter. Instead, Frost chooses a word that both breaks the meter and goes beyond a strict scientific description. Embodiment of what? The answer emerges in the rest of the poem, but before getting to that let us look at another Frost poem describing a deer encounter, "Two Look at Two."

In this poem, two humans see two deer just before turning back on a rough trail at dusk. A doe first appears, and then a buck, on the other side of a decaying wall. After the doe's appearance, the hikers wonder "What more is there to ask?" Then comes the unexpected arrival of the buck. The poem ends:

> Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
> "This *must* be all." It was all. Still they stood,
> A great wave from it going over them,
> As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
> Had made them certain earth returned their love.

Contrast this encounter with Van Dore's failure "to find fulfillment" in nature. The hikers in "Two Look at Two" stand deeply moved by the discovery of the deer, with "a great wave from it going over them" as if "earth returned their love." This looks vaguely like the "counter-love" that eluded Van Dore. Moreover, they find this love by feeling love, not by seeking love. "Two Look at Two" begins:

> Love and forgetting might have carried them
> A little further up the mountainside
> With night so near, but not much further up.

They are on an appreciative, perhaps meditative, walk—not in search of anything—as "love and forgetting" carry them up the trail. At the trip's culmination, "two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from," a description that puts the deer and the humans on roughly equal footing. This equality between man and beast reaffirms that the hikers are not in search of some higher realm to validate their anxious egos. Instead, they derive simple satisfaction from being embedded in nature.

Though they are flesh and blood—and not miraculous, like an Old Testament revelation— the deer are not to be taken for granted. They are of this world, but they appear up a mountain, beyond limits of daylight and safety, and embody Frost's philosophy: "Greatest of all philosophical attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed" (quoted in Cox and Lathem 1966).

The exhilaration evident in "Two Look at Two" remains more cryptic in "The Most of It." Instead of dictating the outcome of the search for transcendence in nature, Frost allows the reader to take his or her own lesson from the poem. The twin messages begin to diverge upon the appearance of the "embodiment" in line 10. The meter of lines 11, 12, 13, 16, and 17 also defies the monotonous iambic pentameter of lines 1–9 and further characterizes this deer, like the deer in "Two Look At Two," as something out of the ordinary. Line 11's first syllable is stressed instead of its second. Line 12's third syllable is stressed instead of its fourth. Line 13 has eleven syllables, with an extra unstressed fourth syllable.

Line 16, "As a great buck it powerfully appeared," seals the poem's double meaning. Metrically, this line contains the same scheme as the eleventh line if "powerfully" is read with three syllables (pów er flé). Powerfully is the only word in the poem that can be pronounced two ways (with three or four syllables). The word also can be interpreted two ways. If it is the buck that is powerful, this is merely a physical description of a large animal. However, if it is the *appearance* of the buck that is powerful, this is more like a powerful vision or revelation. "Great," by definition, carries the same alternative interpretations as "powerfully": the buck is either "un-

usually or comparatively large in size or dimensions" or it is "important; highly significant or consequential" (Stein 1982, 577).

The metaphor describing the buck as it exits the water works two ways as well. It stands up "pouring like a waterfall." This metaphor contains two basic elements of the physical world, gravity and water—and, for some readers, perhaps, nothing more. For others the metaphor brings to mind a beautiful cascade. Frost's choice of the waterfall metaphor is very interesting, because people who have researched chimpanzees in the field have found themselves speculating whether our closest kin have a higher sensibility based in large part on chimpanzee responses to waterfalls. Bill Wallauer, a videographer for the chimpanzees at Gombe Reserve (famously studied by Jane Goodall), writes:

> Questions of awe, reflection, appreciation, and level of understanding, are constantly on my mind as I watch the Gombe chimpanzees react (or not) to their physical environment. . . . In my time at Gombe (about nine years since 1992) I have witnessed an average of two to three waterfall displays and rain dances per year. They have ranged from single individual solitary events to a single individual participant within a social group, to multiple participant events. . . . One of the most interesting and scrutinized events I have recorded on video was a waterfall display performed by the alpha at the time, Freud. Freud began his display with typical rhythmic and deliberate swaying and swinging on vines. For minutes he swung over and across the eight to 12-foot falls. At one point, Freud stood at the top of the falls dipping has hand into the stream and rolling rocks one at a time down the face of the waterfall. Finally, he displayed (slowly, on vines) down the falls and settled on a rock about 30 feet downstream. He relaxed, then turned to the falls and stared at it for many minutes. It was one of those times that I would give body parts to know what was going through a chimp's mind. Dr. Goodall and I have seen several events in which the participants seemed to ponder or consider the natural event to which they were reacting. . . . What does this all mean? We can't come to any real conclusions, but I honestly do believe that chimps have the capacity to contemplate and consider (even revere) both the animate and inanimate. (Wallauer 2002)

Might Frost have found a metaphor for reverence in a portion of his mind that has harbored such thoughts since before we were human?

The last phrase of the poem, "And that was all," also works both ways. It could be a plain statement of the limitations of nature or a plea to acknowledge reality, embrace it, find meaning and fulfillment in it—and stop chasing our own echoes. The fourth from the last line of "Two Look at Two" reads "'This *must* be all.' It was all," which is very similar to the "And that was all" that Parini considers a dark statement. The experience of the hikers in "Two Look at Two," however, is far closer to elation than dejection.

One final piece of evidence for the dual meaning of the poem is in its first line, where Frost easily could have composed a definitive statement that nature is spiritually empty by writing, for instance, "He kept an empty universe alone." Instead he wrote: "He thought he kept the universe alone." Thus, from the outset, meaning resides in the mind of the beholder.

Although Frost was not one to thrust meaning on anyone, connotations of meaning beyond hoofs and horns leap from "The Most of It" if one wishes to read it that way. In an act of creative genius, Frost has written a poem that is itself a metaphor for nature, where meaning depends on individual points of view. Like nature, "The Most of It" can be viewed as either darkly empty or mysteriously fulfilling, and thus it not only states but also demonstrates that the spiritual sufficiency of nature is a personal matter. Frost's main message, then, is that nature is enough for some and not enough for others. As "Two Look at Two" and other of his poems and statements (below) indicate, nature probably was enough for Frost himself. The next two sections explore why perspectives on nature's spiritual possibilities differ, and what, if anything, to do about it.

Why is Nature Enough for Some but Not Others?

An optimistic reading of "The Most Of It" harmonizes with other of Frost's poems and public statements. "Pan With Us," from Frost's first volume, starts, "Pan came out of the woods one day," and as the poem proceeds Pan holds his pipes, then tosses his pipes, but never gets around to playing them. The poem ends on a note of melancholy:

> Times were changed from what they were:
> Such pipes kept less of power to stir
> The fruited bough of the juniper
>   And the fragile bluets clustered there
>   Than the merest aimless breath of air.
>
> They were pipes of pagan mirth,
> And the world had found new terms of worth.
> He laid him down on the sunburned earth
>   And raveled a flower and looked away.
>   Play? Play?—What should he play?

Frost initially titled this poem "Pan Desponds," but the sympathetic treatment of Pan's plight leaves the poem sounding a little like "Frost Desponds." Although the poem is packed with natural imagery, in the end pagan mirth is out of favor. Frost does not explain the "new terms of worth" that replaced paganism, but he likely had in mind Christianity, the religion that historically replaced paganism and that relies on the supernatural for spiritual inspiration. Speaking about poet T. S. Eliot, Frost has said, "[Eliot] is a pessimistic Christian; I am an optimistic pagan" (Mertins 1965, 353); and, "I play euchre. [Eliot] plays Eucharist. We both play" (Sergeant 1960, 363).

Why the difference between Frost and Eliot? Why is nature enough for some but not others? This seems like a more constructive question than just whether nature is enough, because views on whether nature is enough

differ widely (Haught 2003; Stone 2003); no objective basis exists for determining which view is "correct"; and yet understanding why people hold different views could provide some useful information. I cannot say why nature is enough for some but not others, but I would like to propose a few ideas that derive from my own experience and which, theoretically, could be examined for their general relevance.

I was fortunate to grow up in a biologically interesting region, coastal Southern California, in a neighborhood with abundant unsupervised access to natural areas. During my formative years my family camped in remote areas of western mountains and took long canoe journeys in the same region northwest of Lake Superior that inspired Van Dore to compose "The Echo." My early interest in nature led to a bachelor's degree in biology and doctoral work in evolutionary ecology. Beginning my senior year in college, studies of the ecological and evolutionary basis for animal behavior demystified, for me, all important aspects of human behavior. Starting with graduate work, I spent a lot of time doing field research in the tropics and ecosystem restoration in North America. Studying and living in beautiful and diverse ecosystems further inspired my wonder, humility, and reverence for nature.

Overall, I attribute my personal feeling that nature is enough to three things: (1) time spent in nature; (2) scientific studies that deepened my appreciation for nature and provided a satisfactory understanding of questions that institutional religions answer less convincingly; (3) a call, fostered by this background, to align my worldview with what I view as a religious cause: protecting the natural environment from threats that occur today on a scale unprecedented in human history (Orr 2003).

My interpretation of "The Most of It" derives from these factors, particularly the first. Once, in Ontario, my wife and I paddled behind a large bull moose swimming with only its nostrils and antlers above water. It lumbered onto shore with water washing off it (like a waterfall) and disappeared into the woods. After this experience, and many like it, it is impossible for me to read "The Most of It" as a pessimistic poem or to look upon the natural world with disappointment or despair.

The sort of satisfaction that can be derived from nature is central to the question of whether nature is "enough." John Haught, who feels that nature is not enough, writes: "It is reasonable for us to ask whether naturalism, as a belief system, can satisfy our native religious craving for meaning, for something that can give coherence, joy, and satisfaction to our brief life spans. Can naturalism provide a sufficiently expansive climate for spiritual aspiration?" (2003, 77) Personally, encounters with wildlife transcend the often mundane and introverted world of my own self and species, and nature provides a fully sufficient source of spiritual aspiration (Orr 2003).

The belief that nature is enough is generally known as naturalism (Haught 2003). (Often added to this notion is the question of whether nature is all there is, but this distinction should matter little to those for whom nature is enough.) I suspect that personal contentment with naturalism often derives from experiences similar to my own, but, to my knowledge, no one has tried to test this empirically. Environmentalist Edward Abbey, who has lived long hours in natural settings, writes: "If man's imagination were not so weak, so easily tired, if his capacity for wonder not so limited, he would abandon forever such fantasies of the supernal. He would learn to perceive in water, leaves, and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and miraculous, more than enough to console him for the loss of the ancient dreams" (Abbey 1981, 177).

Rachel Carson, an ardent naturalist whose book *Silent Spring* launched the environmental movement, said: "I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth" (Lear 1997, 259). Here Carson speaks less to whether nature is sufficient than to whether nature is necessary for spiritual growth. The question of whether nature is needed for spiritual maturity deserves increased attention, perhaps more attention than the question of whether it is sufficient; supernatural considerations have come to dominate the Judeo-Christian tradition. But Bishop John Shelby Spong reminds us that nature was once an integral part of the religion: "Once we have clarified these words and scraped them clean of later doctrinal connotations, we can begin to see the interconnections among wind, breath, and spirit all over the Jewish and Christian story. The task of spirit was always to give life" (Spong 1998, 105). One of the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism (and the last one added) is "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lessons of worship," and "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us" (Emerson 1987, 71, 64).

MAKING NATURE ENOUGH

Naturalism should be viewed as a hopeful enterprise for two reasons. First, it is based on what we know exists and therefore does not require an unverifiable (or, worse, empirically falsified) entity for spiritual fulfillment. Second, it offers to ameliorate environmental problems that increasingly jeopardize human well-being (Orr 2003). For these reasons, statements like "naturalists can be regarded as realistic only if they acknowledge the fact that naturalism is not good news for much of humanity" (Haught 2003, 773) entirely miss the mark. There is no constructive justification

to disparage a religious approach that offers tangible access to spiritual contentment in an age when science has eliminated many old avenues to transcendence. Naturalism may not be for everyone, but persons with the predisposition and life experiences needed to embrace it should be encouraged to examine it as a promising foundation for religious inspiration. Moreover, naturalism offers a clear avenue toward solving many of the major environmental problems humanity currently confronts (Orr 2003) and thus presents very good news for all of humanity.

Scientific discoveries have thwarted traditional paths to transcendence for many people, and side effects of science are endangering the habitability of our planet. Therefore, the world could use more naturalism. Frost's central message in "The Most of It"—that nature is enough for some but not for others—should inspire naturalists to retain their beliefs despite predictable criticism, and, if so inclined, to promote naturalism as both a rationally viable and a life-enhancing faith.

Ultimately, we cannot know what Frost had in mind when he created "The Most of It," because the intelligence behind this poem is inaccessible to direct inquiry. The most anyone can take from it is what makes the most personal sense, just as the most anyone can take from nature is what makes the most personal sense. Perhaps there is so much disagreement on whether "nature is enough" because the author (if any) of our world—like Frost—is in love with being misunderstood.

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