

## God of Our Yankees: The Evolution of God in Robert Frost

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### Abstract

This paper presents evidence that a sharp contrast exists in the use of the term “God” in the work of Robert Frost: that difference corresponds to a divide between the poet’s considerable body of lyric poems and his late dramatic work. In its methodology this report applies a straightforward philological practice of identifying, analyzing, and comparing instances of use of the term. Comparison of “God” in the lyric poems and in two of Frost’s dramatic works, *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), suggests nothing less than an unexpected evolution in the poet’s understanding of God.

### Introduction

Coming to England to talk about Frost’s poetry qualifies as a gesture that is both imitative and historic considering that Robert Frost moved to England—bringing his wife and four young children—in hope of launching his career as a poet. As is easily confirmed by published documents and his several biographers, Frost had not been able to find a publisher in America (Walsh 1988). Leaving New England in 1912, Frost hoped that England, with its long tradition of lyric poetry, might hold more promise for an unknown American poet seeking appreciative readers. As readers now know well, Frost’s fortunes did turn in England where he met with immediate success first in finding a publisher and then in being well received.

Frost’s praise, both then and now, would come sometimes but only sometimes from famous poets; far more numerous is his wide audience of general readers attracted first of all by his subject matter, partly because it seems so approachable and down to earth. When Frost comes to mind—and he does when people think of American poets of the twentieth century—country themes tend to be most easily associated with his name. But alongside those homely concerns, Frost includes a consistent preoccupation with matters that are easily classified as philosophical or even metaphysical (Stanlis 2007). During Frost’s lifetime, a span approaching ninety years, his critics cited the fact that people who liked Robert Frost did not know anything about poetry, intimating that such success detracted from the poet’s art or his legitimacy. In that context, the remarks that follow will point out how Frost presented “God” in his work, an analysis that demonstrates both the continuity of his concern with serious inquiry as well as the probing quality of the poet’s protracted interest in philosophical questions.

Given the explicit character of this investigation, Frost’s language yields the data or raw material. An obvious approach required an initial search and record of exactly where and how Frost uses the word “God.” Because Frost’s literary production spans an unusually long career, the method suggests that there will be many instances of use of the word. From that straightforward exercise, a pattern emerges, which is quite simply that Frost does not often use the name of God or even the word “god,” lower case, in his lyric poems. In his ten volumes of poetry Frost rarely uses the word “God” or even “god” more than a few times per book.

In fact, Frost’s use of the word “God” (or “god”) changes in its overtones across his poetic production. Yet instances occur enough to allow both for comparison and for the identification of general patterns that suggest categories of meaning. For example, this inventory shows that in early works Frost makes it his business to “locate” God, so to speak, referring to him as “afar” in the poem “Revelation,” or the equally unoriginal location “God above” in the lyric “A Prayer in Spring.” In fact, the personified God shows up in one of the

earliest poems Frost ever wrote “My Butterfly,” where the poet does not quite sound like himself. Yet he addresses the butterfly (and not God) with the words, “God let thee flutter.” In another early poem Frost acknowledges that God can actually **do** things, so to speak.

In a pattern that becomes a formula, “God” plus “verb,” we find “God makes,” “God limns,” “God speaks,” and “God has taken” all occurring in just one poem, “Trial by Existence” in the collection *A Boy’s Will*. Published in April 1913 in England, that book was Frost’s first collection published anywhere; it would later be his second volume published in the United States in April 1915. But even with language that can almost be called formulaic, Frost never uses “God” in a context that sounds like a conventional prayer. (Butterflies, for example, do not appear in prayers thought of as traditional.)

After that first volume Frost continued writing blank verse that sounded like effortless and ordinary speech. (A deliberate effort is required here to avoid saying that Frost “developed” that particular ability, because competent and successful blank verse shows up in such a polished form so early in his overall production). Early on, Frost mastered plain talk in poetry so well that he even worked out how to include mild swearing in his poems. That accomplishment explains what is found in Frost’s third book, *Mountain Interval*, published late in 1916 after he had moved his family back from Old England to New England. In that book Frost has characters say “God” as an exclamation to express disbelief, and then repeat it. The poem this time is “In the Home Stretch,” another one of his farmhouse dialogues on the subject of what is now called “downsizing.” Readers today may find it difficult, as do I, to understand why that particular poem has not become more famous as one of Frost’s great dramatic exchanges. Likewise, in that same volume in the intense drama called “Snow,” one character says of another, “He didn’t drag God into it,” a use of the term that might be called irreverent at worst.

A decade or so later, a more battle scarred poet becomes more philosophical about God. In *New Hampshire* (1923) the poem “Good-by and Keep Cold” concludes:

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)  
Its heart sinks lower under the sod.  
But something has to be left to God.

That pair of rhyming words—“sod” and “God” —is unique in Frost, but he makes another “God” rhyme in his next volume, *West-Running Brook* (1928). There it occurs in the short and trenchant poem “Bereft,” which can be read as a reminder of religious notions that Frost acquired or socially inherited as a boy. I refer to the Swedenborgian beliefs of his mother who told her young son that he, like her, had the gift of “second sight” and “second hearing,” to explain to him what he was describing when he reported hearing voices, something that his mother did not dismiss (Parini 1999). It is in a moment of despair, in “Bereft” that Frost gives God the last words in this particularly dark utterance:

Word I was in the house alone  
Somehow must have gotten abroad,  
Word I was in my life alone,  
Word I had no one left but God.

An overview of Frost’s use of the word God in these collections of his lyric poetry gives us an index that can be seen to shadow a larger and comprehensive arc that describes a long

literary career. In this case it is more fitting than trite to say “arc” because at the far end of that arc, the end of the rainbow, there’s a mother lode, so to speak, of occurrences of “God.” It is rather late in Frost’s writing career that one finds the two masques, *A Masque of Reason* in 1945 and then in 1947, and *A Masque of Mercy*. In those two dramas Frost uses the word God more times far more frequently than anywhere else in his entire body of work. The total number of occurrences of “God” in Frost is ninety-seven, of which fourteen are in the *Masque of Reason* and twenty-seven are in the *Masque of Mercy*. The other uses are scattered over ten books of poems. That is, over forty percent of the occurrences are in two plays, as opposed to ten books of poems.

Frost’s estimable reputation as a lyric poet has allowed those dramas to be eclipsed. In fact, they tend to be ordinarily not even mentioned by those eager to praise the poet. Peter J. Stanlis writes a thorough discussion of the masques where he reports seeing in *A Masque of Mercy* a religious orthodoxy that is both subtle and obvious. The limitation of man’s knowledge of God’s ultimate purpose requires implicit faith in God (Stanlis 1974).

Somewhat paradoxically, Frost was at his best as a dramatist in some of his lyric poems—but not in these *masques*. The drama of “Home Burial” comes to mind, as does “The Death of the Hired Man” or “A Servant to Servants,” where a dialogue in his artfully artless blank verse shows a dark side of rural isolation. While I do not argue that either of Frost’s two masques can be considered riveting drama, I suggest that we keep in mind the definition and norms of that odd genre. A *masque*, after all, has its roots in Renaissance forms—in Italian origins which may make it particularly theatrical. The idea, as is generally known, was to have enough plot to hold together the other elements of poetic drama: music, dancing, elaborate costumes and lots of spectacle. (Think of an opera without all that singing.)

Frost’s two masques offer the possibility of all the traditional qualities required by the genre. For mythological material he uses the Bible, and for poetic language he weighed in with his effortless and natural-sounding blank verse. It may remind some readers of “My Last Duchess” in the way that the language sounds like talking but is scrupulously metrical—even if Frost does not copy Browning’s rhyme. Yet Frost made a new synthesis combining Old Testament elements with a detachment that conforms to attitudes rather characteristic of modernism.

At a time when Frost had experienced a great deal of suffering (the death of his wife Elinor, of his daughter Marjorie, and the suicide of his son Carol) the poet explored the question of suffering and how a just God could permit it. Although the masques in which Frost does the exploring have been called an “inessential” part of his work (Bagby 1993, 178), the question the masques pose cannot be so easily dismissed. Frost started working in the summer of 1943 on a short play he would call “Forty-third Chapter of Job, A Masque of Reason”. He meant to go on to write a complementary play to be called, “The Whole Bible, A Masque of Mercy.” In October he went to New York City to meet with a producer about possibly mounting the two plays in tandem (Parini 1999). Frost did not get an enthusiastic reaction. But not everyone judges the masques so severely: they have also been called “rich in wit and utterly graceful in the tact with which they treat of the most difficult problems” (Lynen 1960, 136).

More recent scholarship has seen affinities between *A Masque of Reason* and dialogues of (Gage 1982). I do not concur with that view, however, because in any Platonic dialogue there is Socrates, who has all the answers; in Frost, no one has. Professor Gage’s article also asserts that *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy* need to be read as complementary

texts, with which I wholeheartedly concur. But let me add that the complementary relationship may be helped not so much by reference to Plato as to the text Frost used overtly: the Old Testament. In relation to that text, the two plays of Frost may be read as mutually complementary. Reason requires mercy just as, in a view Frost needed to maintain, the Old Testament requires the New Testament. In Frost's universe, God may be crusty (by which I mean externally surly at times) because God knows that mercy has to exist even if God seems severe. The prayer that one discovers in *A Masque of Mercy* makes sense if and only if God does not find our best to be acceptable—at least not sometimes. To some extent, then, subject matter does help to explain why the word “God” occurs so often in *A Masque of Mercy*. Unavoidably, we could say, God is mentioned frequently in the both masques because God is what they're about. More precisely, *A Masque of Mercy* explores the ancient riddle of how God can be just and also be merciful.

When we consider Frost's mastery of poetic form, we have to consider why he chose this genre for such an exploration; formulating the question in that way elucidates the essence of the masque as a genre. Frost's highly trained poetic intuition let him recognize an opportunity. Unlike his lyric production, Frost's flawed dramas let the poet discard his well-established persona, which can even be regarded as his most successful creation. Masques let a poet may put on, so to speak, a variety of *personae*. Here the original sense of “persona” has special relevance: a mask with a theatrical purpose, namely to amplify sound. (*Per sona*, “through the sound,” since the actor's voice goes through it.) In a masque a poet can speak through God by “playing God” in the most concrete way possible.

The *personae* of *A Masque of Mercy* have names like Keeper, and his wife, Jesse Bel, their friend Paul and the eccentric stranger called, redundantly, Jonah Dove. These *personae* are not memorable as characters and can be easily criticized. But it's a masque. Both plot and language support the idea that the most important character in the play is God, since he is talked about so much—even if he never appears in this play. In *A Masque of Reason*, he does. Here is what Frost's Jonah who says of God:

I love and fear Him. Yes, but I fear for Him.  
 I don't see how it can be to His interest  
 This modern tendency I find in Him  
 To take the punishment out of all failure  
 To be strong, careful, thrifty, diligent,  
 Anything we once thought we had to be  
 (Frost 1995, 401).

Paul, the exegete in the play, explains what it is that people need to pray for:

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.  
 And that they may be is the only prayer  
 Worth praying. May my sacrifice

Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight  
(Frost 1995, 417).

While the questions Frost explores in the two masques can be situated with respect to the events of the poet's adult life, the answers he proposes have roots that go to his early religious experience and to beliefs that he came to hold more and more firmly as he grew older. Frost's God resembles the Old Testament God early in this late play. As a witty and dramatic suggestion of this fact, God in *A Masque of Reason* appears as always having been old (Job's wife recognizes him in heaven, she explains, because he looks exactly like the portraits of him by William Blake), which came to be how generations of Americans regarded Robert Frost, as always having been old. And while Frost's God appeared crusty, in the case of the poet himself, that quality appears in Frost's *persona*, I think, as a cover for a man who suffered a great deal inwardly at least in part because he expected prayers to be answered. Here's how Frost showed God on stage.

When Job meets his God in the afterlife in *A Masque of Reason*, they talk in a way that sounds like patient and doctor—if one can imagine a physician so lacking in bedside manner. God says:

I should have spoken sooner had I found  
The word I wanted. You would have supposed  
One who in the beginning was the Word  
Would be in a position to command it.  
I have to wait for words like anyone. . .  
But it was of the essence of the trial  
You shouldn't understand it at the time.  
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.  
And it came out all right

(Frost 1995, 374)

Here it helps to place these masques and their religious concerns in the setting of a later moment in Frost's experience. Good factual base supports a reading of these dramas as works with a serious religious focus. For further investigation the recently published *Notebooks* are full of promise. From documents long available to researchers and now published, one can be sure of how long-lasting Frost's concerns could be. A fragment written in the 1890s from the very first page of the notebooks published in 2006 compares closely with words in Notebook 32 from the period 1940-1950 (Faggen 2006, 557).

To personalize Frost's religious experience, one can refer to the importance of Frost's friendship with Rabbi Victor Reichert of Cincinnati (Stanlis 1974). This relationship matches closely the time when Frost was at work on his two *Masques*. When he talked about religion with his friend Rabbi Reichert, Frost made a comment that could not have been said by anyone else: First Frost asked the rabbi, "...What do you think are the chances of life after death?" The rabbi—and they joked about this, of course—replied with a question: "What do you think"? After that, as the rabbi reports, "Frost became deeply silent and then he said to me, 'With so many ladders going up everywhere, there must be something for them to lean against.' "

Victor Reichert added these words when he wrote about the exchange: "There is not the slightest doubt in my mind about the deep, deep religious nature of Robert Frost." The rabbi then goes on to explain the need to approach the religious complexities of Frost through one of

his great heroes, Ralph Waldo Emerson. We know of Frost's reverence for his mother and for her religious beliefs, and we know that she came to Swedenborg by way of Emerson's essays (Stanlis 1974).

### **Suggestions for Related Explorations**

This study has suggested avenues that invite further investigation. By comparing appearances of God in Frost's lyric poetry and in his drama, I have shown that Frost mentions God rather infrequently in his lyrics but confronts God directly and often in his masques because, by his own lights, Frost had to.

The God that Robert Frost settles on in his final masque is perhaps surprisingly an Old Testament God who had second thoughts. The relationship that Robert Frost learned from his mother, the mystical belief in second sight and in hearing voices led him, it seems, to the burning bush of the Old Testament and then to Job. But in Robert Frost's updated dramatized sacred story, God has mercy, which is the only way to explain his justice.

It is my hope that at least some readers will encourage researchers to explore the links between the Swedenborgian belief in "correspondences" and the ironic stance found in all of Frost's work. In a program of comparative literature, new work might be done to link Swedenborgianism in Frost, with ideas expressed in Baudelaire and most especially in his poem "Correspondances" in *Les Fleurs du mal*. Further, it might be worthwhile to compare Frost even shows affinities with the theory of art articulated by Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There, James Joyce sets forth a theory that art develops in three stages moving from lyric (all emotional and personal) to the narrative (more emphasis on events) to the dramatic. And in that final stage, the most nearly sublime, the artist stands in relation to God to his creation where, according to Joyce, "God is paring his fingernails." That same modernist God whom Joyce could see, had also revealed himself, is seems to a Yankee farmer.

### **Conclusion**

Robert Frost's *oeuvre* offers several personalities of God, versions which vary according to rhetorical determinants associated with genre. In lyric poems, the great preponderance of the poet's work, God may be invoked, questioned, doubted or asked for favors but always presented as a serious figure of great *gravitas*. The deity of Frost's two masques, *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*, written rather late in Frost's career, offers a figure at once more ancient and potentially playful at times, quite unlike the stern and remote recognizably Victorian deity of the lyrics. This paper notes the synthesis in Frost's masques of several traditions: the Italianate and English Renaissance theatrical origins of the masque as a genre, but also the significance of biblical diction, particularly from the Old Testament. Biographical data support the evolution of the poet's religious awareness: Frost's childhood initiation into Swedenborgian mysticism eventually adapted to the mature poet's growing intellectual interest in the origins of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The arguments listed here include the possibility of indirect affinities with Emerson. Because of Frost's mastery of form in synthesizing so many influences, the masques hold the possibility of further explorations into affinities between Frost and other Modernist writers.

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