

## The Legacy of Darwin in the Land of Robert Frost

Nancy Nahra, Professor of Humanities, Champlain College

### Introduction

The discussion of Religion and Science easily and conventionally situates itself in the context of religious considerations or in that of science, in either case lending itself to a discussion of tests of various kinds tending toward attempts at proof or arguments setting out to disprove the necessity or validity of such proofs as are proposed. Rather than relying on either of these approaches, this essay proposes a means of opening up the discussion by repositioning its center and relying, in fact, on what must accurately be described as an eccentric view, that is to say, a view from outside the center. The third place used here has, in its own tradition, been associated at times with science and at times with religion, which suggests its suitability for use now in the hope that it does not *a priori* necessarily privilege of either of those sides. The third place referred to is poetry, a terrain available for the present discussion, keeping in mind that in the past Lucretius relied on poetry to popularize the scientific ideas of Epicurus.

### Discussion

Today's inquiry will depend not on Lucretius as its poet guide but on Robert Frost, an American poet who appears in handbooks of literature as belonging to the Modern Period, a defined time, as such handbooks now claim as having both begun and having ended, a definition that, as implied by those same handbooks, puts readers of today—no longer designated broadly as “modern readers”—in a discomfiting condition stylishly referred to as *aporia* by structuralist critics back when their vocabulary was coming of age.<sup>1</sup> In the spirit of scientific clarity and to show the legitimacy of methodological choices, let it be noted from the outset, that the choice of Robert Frost for this purpose can by no means be called innocent—far from it. The public and private writing of that poet over his long lifetime (1874-1963) provide abundant evidence of his engagement in debates surrounding Darwin, and the poet's sustained effort in an artistic as well as an epistemological setting, to come to terms with the questions raised by Mr. Darwin's work.

The choice of Frost for this discussion can be explained by three reasons:

- Firstly, by a pertinent historical reason or “accident,” as philosophers would have it: Born in 1874, Frost was a near contemporary of Darwin, coming of age in a time that must be called Victorian with respect to its scientific views.

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<sup>1</sup> Baldick, Chris, *The Modern Movement: 1910-1940*, Vol. 10 in *The Oxford English Literary History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) provides a comprehensive explanation of the period usually identified as “Modern,” a time that includes the years during which Robert Frost explored for himself the literary terrain of poetry in England. See also Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, (London: Routledge, 1975) for a discussion of the relative lack of direction or *aporia* often associated with modern poetry.

- Secondly, for a textual reason: Frost’s writing confirms early and repeatedly that he believed in the proximity rather than the separation of science and the humanities, a view he demonstrated in his explication of what the poet publicly and privately called “metaphorical thinking,” a technique of intellectual associations that characterized all thinking, according to Frost, even science, as he then went on to delineate his point even more explicitly, with the possible exception, he allowed, of pure mathematics.<sup>2</sup>
- Thirdly by a less apparent but equally legitimate and compelling ethical or philosophical reason: Frost’s own intellectual character, temperamental as well as intellectual, disinclined him to take sides in general, whether in politics, religion, or nearly any polarized topic. Repeatedly Frost insists on making a point of his own reluctance to line up with partisans of any kind in any frame of reference.<sup>3</sup>

Recent scholarship shows that a critical evaluation may categorize Frost as a dualist, using terminology and a way of thinking stylish in the 1930s when Frost already enjoyed an established literary reputation. That categorization—or, in fact, any—fails to contain the poet who refuses the finality of even that definition with its implicit limitations.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, readers and critics who know Frost well would not have expected him to line up on either side, but to have fun in dancing in between.

The three types of reasons enumerated here, while useful and pertinent, cannot be called fresh or in any way up-to-date, given that they could have been presented quite legitimately ten years ago, even if not much before that time. Questions related in any way to Frost<sup>5</sup> studies must, however, acknowledge the significance and relevance of the publication in 2010 of the poet’s highly eclectic and demonstrably cumulative *Notebooks*<sup>6</sup>, along with the recently added magnificent volume of his *Prose*<sup>7</sup> both addition to what had been available in the carefully prepared complete works.<sup>8</sup> For early and clear evidence of the poet’s interest in the scientist, one can consider, for example, Frost’s sometimes elliptical but very pregnant comments on Darwin appearing in Frost’s notebooks as early as 1919 and as late as the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

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2 Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue,” in Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 717-728.

3 Peter Stanlis, Robert Frost, (Wilmington, Delaware, ISI Books, 2007), 1-12, 27-57.

4 John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerated,” in I’ll Take My Stand, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), 1-27.

5 Robert Frost, *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, edited by Robert Faggen, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006),

6 Robert Frost, *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, edited by Mark Richardson, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

7 Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry,” in Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 717-728.

8 Robert Faggen, *Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin*, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997), 1-57

9 Robert Frost, *Notebooks*, particularly, p. 317.

Early and clear evidence of the poet's interest in the scientist may be found in Frost's sometimes elliptical but very pregnant notes on Darwin appearing in Frost's notebooks as early as 1919 and as late as the 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at Frost's relation to science, and such a relation exists, there is much to say because Frost intuited as early as early as the 1920s when he began teaching at Amherst College, that the sciences stood to receive more attention and more resources than other studies. But he was not talking about theology.<sup>11</sup> Frost worried that the sciences would thrive at the expense of the humanities; that was in the 1920s, evidence of a particular anxiety that did not go away. That imagined loss of status and resources for the humanities stayed with Frost for decades, appearing noticeably again in the late 1950s when the poet witnessed first the success of the Soviet Union's Sputnik and then, more significantly, in his estimation, the likely consequences for education of the American reaction to that event.

By way of demonstrating Frost's disinclination to take sides, however, let us keep in mind that Frost's response to his own fear was not to proselytize for humanistic studies; rather, true to his character, Frost worked to understand more clearly the power that science showed in attracting so many enthusiasts. As a man in his eighties, Frost once again, or still, embraced science in his own manner, as he had done from an early age.

By way of locating Charles Darwin in Frost's world, good evidence happily makes possible the identification of when and where the poet first learned about Darwin, which can be traced thanks to Frost's scientific interest in flowers, or more precisely his early interest in botany. Living in Northern New England, Robert Frost spent a great deal of time outdoors, paying particular attention to plants and flowers once the snow melted. Being both inquisitive and highly intelligent, young Frost wanted as much detail as possible about the flora he could observe. His friend Carl Burrell introduced Frost to Darwin by means of a book the friend owned, *Manual of the Botany of the Northern United States*, an extremely significant book for the story of Darwin in America.<sup>12</sup>

The manual's author, Asa Gray, a naturalist who taught at Harvard, the university most directly implicated in Darwin's reception in North America, can be shown to have impressively

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the lively interest in science shown by Frost while at Amherst, see Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 617. Frost spent time in discussion with the Danish physicist Neils Bohr when the Nobel laureate visited Amherst College, where the poet was teaching.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Frost, *Notebooks*. On this topic see Notebook 28 in particular.

<sup>12</sup> Asa Gray, *A Manual of the Botany of the Northern United States*, (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Company, 1848). That was the book through which Frost first heard about Charles Darwin's new ideas. Frost's friend Carl Burrell, like any serious botanist in America at the time owned a copy of Asa Gray's *Manual*, a book of 710 pages. The geographical range of that book extended from New England to Wisconsin, and southward to Pennsylvania and Ohio. It contained, according to its elaborate subtitle, descriptions of 2213 named species and varieties of flowering plants, ferns and fern-allies. In the second edition (1856) the geographic range extended to Virginia and Kentucky, then northward to include all states east of the Mississippi.

early knowledge of evolution: Charles Darwin read Gray's *Manual*, finding it so remarkable that he, Darwin, initiated a written correspondence with Gray. Eventually, Darwin sent his own manuscript, *Origin of the Species*, to Professor Gray to read, asking for Gray's comments, prior to the volume's publication. In keeping with the theme of a conference on Science and Religion, let me now point out that Prof. Gray saw no conflict whatsoever between what he read of Darwin and what he believed about the story of creation in the Genesis account. So convinced was Gray of the compatibility of the two sources that he published a series of articles in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, a journal of which Gray was himself editor.<sup>13</sup>

In fairness it should be noted that the notion of compatibility between Genesis and Darwin cannot be considered to be original with Gray. Herbert Spencer, had earlier published a series of articles on related questions.<sup>14</sup> The view shared by Harvard's faculty in the early years of Darwin's reception in America clung to the idea that Darwin's position could be maintained by men who counted themselves as believers.<sup>15</sup> Asa Gray in particular said he saw no conflict between the traditional story of creation, as he said in print and in public, but he did see a potential conflict between Darwin's idea of selection and what he called "the fortuitous."<sup>16</sup>

At this point some note, even a brief one, must acknowledge Darwin's great prestige as a thinker as shown by the widespread imitation and adaptation of his idea of the study of origins as a means of understanding any subject worthy of inquiry, going at times far beyond topics that were not in his day counted as material for "scientific" study. So powerful did researchers find Darwin's approach that an analysis of origins became the legitimate and respectable way of analyzing nearly *any* human activity. By way of example of Victorian scientific writing—when the language of science was still language, before it had gone mathematical—today's reader may turn to Herbert Spencer's "Origin of Music."<sup>17</sup> That article offers elegant reasoning beautifully expressed, quite unbothered by an absence of evidence. While Pythagoras may be given credit for having written about music in a mathematically scientific way, Victorians most readily counted music as an art, somewhat unrelated to science. In that same spirit, also showing

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<sup>13</sup> *American Journal of Science and Arts*. March 1860; October 1860

<sup>14</sup> Asa Gray, "Darwin and His Reviewers," *Atlantic Monthly*, 6 (October) 1860 : 406-425; Asa Gray, *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism*, edited by Asa Gray. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888.)

<sup>15</sup> As Mark Richardson, editor of Frost's *Collected Prose* sagely observes, "...Frost did not have to read Spencer's article ["The Origin of Music"] to be influenced by it," (*Collected Prose*, 303). An early and enthusiastic apologist for Darwin, Spencer had significant influence on the Harvard faculty at a time not long before studied there as a special students, 1894-1897.

<sup>16</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 25-43.

<sup>17</sup> "Origin and Function of Music" *Fraser's Magazine*, October 1857, 396-408.

Darwin's influence, the American poet Sidney Lanier wrote his own analytical book on poetry, *The Science of English Verse*.<sup>18</sup>

In Frost's poetry, direct and early references to Darwin and his work suggest influence expected to reach non-specialist American readers, Frost's audience, counted on by the poet to recognize any reference he made. In Frost's poetry Darwin's influence is sometimes obvious, sometimes too imposing to see. Words such as "evolutionist" shows up in an early poem, "Wild Grapes" from the collection called *New Hampshire*, published in 1923.<sup>19</sup> Then, to suggest that conflict surrounds Darwin, Frost once mentions in his poem "New Hampshire" the eponymous poem of its volume, "a man called John L. Darwin." The apparent slip indicates no carelessness of the poem concerning names; here Frost joked with language, fusing two names to imply an affinity between Charles Darwin and John L. Sullivan, the heavyweight champion boxer whose name Frost's readers would have known in 1923. Darwin, then, appears to be winning in some way.

Not so playfully in most instances, Darwin's influence permeates Frost's important and original theory in the area of poetics, his concept of sound and sense, considering as it does the relation of prosody to meaning in spoken language.<sup>20</sup> But in this particular case, Darwin's influence may be called mediated, since Frost's ideas echo the words of Herbert Spencer, author of a scientific, for its time, essay on the origin of music.<sup>21</sup>

Many indications of Frost's interest, his serious interest in science can be found throughout his newly published *Notebooks* and his more systematically written prose works, notwithstanding the many references to religion can be found in both types of sources. Late in his life Frost became energetically interested in religion, giving focus to such topics as the

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<sup>18</sup> Sidney Lanier, *The Science of English Verse*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897). This work comes to mind as exemplifying the application of a scientific approach and the use of scientific discourse in a humanistic undertaking.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Frost, *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (New York: Henry Holt, 1923.) In "Wild Grapes," in that volume Frost uses the word "evolutionist," in line 53. In the poem "New Hampshire" in the same volume, Frost pretends to make an error with the name "John L. Darwin," line 299.

<sup>20</sup> That theory, so central to Frost's poetic practice, appears clearly articulated early in his work, as documented by a letter. Frost's self-awareness in his development has been noted early in his 1913 letter to John Bartlett, a friend since Frost's days at Pinkerton Academy, where the poet taught while living on the farm in Derry, New Hampshire. See *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, edited by Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 79-81. In that letter Frost confides to his friend as he explains: "I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sounds of sense....The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words." For a discussion of that letter see, for example, Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: A Life: The Early Years, 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 417-419. The indirect influence of Darwin may in this case in particular be considered too big to see, so pervasive as to escape notice.

<sup>21</sup> See Spencer's article, "The Origin and Function of Music," *Fraser's Magazine*, October 1857, particularly the discussion of emotion as it is expressed in the human voice that begins on p. 397. The discussion includes this sentence: "When the voices in an adjacent room become unusually audible, we infer anger, or surprise, or joy." That passage will remind readers of what Frost called "the sound of sense," an important concept in the evolution of his poetics.

relation of mercy to justice as explored in his two dramas called *masques*.<sup>22</sup> That exploration coincided with Frost's growing interest in Judaism, along with his growing friendship with a rabbi. Consequently, Frost counted it a great honor to be invited to preach in a synagogue by his friend Rabbi Victor Reichert in Cincinnati.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a fitting comment may be found in the judgment of Darwin made at the time of his death, remarks made known as far away as Frost's New England and beyond, so great was the scientist's fame by that time. Here is an announcement from the *New York Times*, the American publication considered to be "of record" for American legal purposes. These words appeared on the front page of that paper, conveying not only the fact of the death but also the judgment of Darwin's contemporaries, particularly the religious leaders of the day. The announcement is shown here in its entirety as printed in the *New York Times* on April 25, 1882:

(London April 24) The Late Charles Darwin

The funeral of the late Charles Darwin will be held on Wednesday, at noon. The body will be buried in the Abbey, in close proximity to Sir Isaac Newton. Canon Liddon, preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral yesterday, referred to the theories of Mr. Darwin as not necessarily hostile to the fundamental truths of religion. He said Mr. Darwin's greatness was particularly conspicuous in the patience and care with which he registered minute facts. Canon Prothero, preaching at Westminster Abbey, said Mr. Darwin had stated with the utmost modesty, that of which he himself was convinced, although he was aware that his opinions would not be universally acceptable. He possessed charity, which was the true essence of the spirit of Christianity."

That news item shows a view that allowed for an acceptance of two accounts of human origins, one poetic and one scientific. Robert Frost, in his poetry and other writing, evaded questions of choosing one of these accounts over the other, seeing each as valid in its own terms. The acceptance of the existence of a plurality of truths underwrites the richness of his own vision with its resolute refusal to side with any position that excludes the possibility of further investigation. That act of placing value on the possibility of the as yet unknown findings of eventual future inquiry elucidates to some extent the poet's refusal to confirm absolutely the finality of any system, particularly one that does not acknowledge the need for continued exploration of mysteries of every kind, including the still unknown. The unfinished aspect of the quest, in Frost's vision, proves its legitimacy.

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<sup>22</sup> Both dramas, *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*," may be found in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 372-388 and 390-417 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Frost, at the invitation of his friend Rabbi Victor Reichert, preached at Reichert's synagogue, Rockdale Avenue Temple in Cincinnati, as documented in Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

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