Rehabilitating Robert Frost: 
The Unity of his Literary, Cultural, and Political Thought

WILLIAM H. Pritchard's book, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), is an important milestone in scholarship and criticism of Robert Frost—as a man and a poet—and provides a good occasion for a retrospective assessment of Frost's life and his enduring literary, cultural, and political significance to America. In a highly selective way, excluding much in Frost's life and poetry, Pritchard's book is at once both and neither biographical and critical. It deals most judiciously with some of the more important events in Frost's life, with his aesthetic and creative theories about language in imaginative literature and poetry, and with a few of Frost's concerns with liberal education and his conservative convictions in politics. Pritchard's primary concern is with Frost's achievement in poetry, which he considers apart from the poet's concern with cultural and political subjects. In this essay I shall review Frost's character as a man and achievement as a poet, in light of Pritchard's study, but unlike any previous writer on Frost I shall also explore the close connection between his character and art and his cultural and political thought.

Frost's Character and Poetry

Although Pritchard is well aware of certain weaknesses in Frost's character and temperament, common to all mankind, the biographical sections of his study include a sharp critique of the very negative portrait of Frost presented by Lawrance Thompson in his three-volume authorized biography of the poet. In a superbly sensitive and sensible introduction, Pritchard makes it clear that despite Thompson's exhaustive array of factual details about Frost, as a biographer and critic he lacked the necessary literary imagination, the psychological subtlety, and the basic sense of fairness and balance to do justice to Frost as a man, a thinker, or even as a poet. Pritchard notes Thompson's "systematic impulse to classify his subject's vices," with no balancing sense of Frost's virtues. Also, Thompson's habit of attributing despicable motives to Frost is clearly exposed as based upon some dubious speculations. Time and time again Pritchard shows that a perfectly innocent motive, or none that can be ascertained, lay behind many of Frost's comments or actions. For example, when Frost omitted two adolescent poems, "Despair" and "Flower Guidance," from his first book of poems, Thompson interpreted this as a sign of Frost's "puritanical guilt" toward his mother and wife. But as Pritchard notes, they are simply poor poems. On the supposed negative effect on Frost of his mother's presumed excessive and possessive love, Pritchard replies to Thompson's Freudian speculations with a withering rhetorical question: "Who can say with surety how much mother love is too much

Peter J. Stanlis is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Rockford College. In 1982 he was named by President Ronald Reagan to a six-year term on the National Council for the Humanities. A leading interpreter of the political philosophy of Edmund Burke, Dr. Stanlis has also written extensively on Robert Frost, including Robert Frost: The Individual and Society (Rockford College Press).
for a poet to bear?” In this, as in so many other personal matters regarding Frost, Thompson presumed to say with negative dogmatic surety what often cannot be known.

Thompson applied the same type of negative speculations on Frost’s critical comments on contemporary poets, asserting that they were merely expressions of his envy and malice toward competitors for fame, or vengeful retaliations for imagined injuries. By way of rebuttal, Pritchard summarizes Frost’s mixed comments on the free verse technique and pseudo-realistic portraits in Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology (1915), and concludes:

Emerging from this elaborately drawn apology for why he doesn’t (or does) like Masters, is an absolutely telling and final criticism of the whole Spoon River enterprise. Masters’s book is ‘against’ respectability; it delights in bringing bankers and other successful citizens to grief and to the grave where they lie side by side with the town drunk, the abandoned woman, the prostitute, and other types. But since the poem goes on for a long time, drumming in its idea, that idea ceases to be true—too ‘romantic’ because of its crude notion of what constitutes realism. In other words, it ‘chews tobacco,’ which is fine for a baseball player but not so fine for a poet whose hardboiled Illinois realism was merely the reverse of his earlier, poetic efforts.

Frost applied the same kind of satirical literary criticism to Carl Sandburg’s proletarian affectations, guitar playing, and free verse. As Pritchard concludes: “These formulations about Masters and Sandburg . . . penetrate to the heart of another poet’s performance. . . . Frost’s . . . expressive distaste for the poetry of Masters and Sandburg . . . had their base in intelligent feeling and cannot be reduced to cynically self-furthering or desperately self-protective acts.” Contrary to Thompson, had a literary critic rather than Frost made his remarks, they would have been considered on their merits or demerits.

Like Hemingway and many other good writers Frost came to know that he needed a good press. At age forty, when his first book was published, he was not yet recognized as a poet, and he knew that he could not afford to wait passively for the public to discover him, but that he needed to “reach out.” As Frost said, it was not enough to believe in the future; we must “believe the future in.” To reach the public Frost made use of both friends and enemies, friends such as John Bartlett and Louis Untermeyer, and also of editors for whom he had no respect. Yet every attempt by Frost to be recognized was interpreted by Thompson as self-promoting, egotistical manipulation, an unscrupulous design on the reading public.

Thompson not only failed to understand Frost’s character and critical reflections, but his own wooden, literal-minded, humorless and rigid temperament made him incapable of appreciating Frost’s audacious literary imagination. Frost’s high-spirited gnomic wit, his constant, joyful, and irrepressible sense of verbal “play for mortal stakes,” his anecdotal, dry and often serious humor and mischievous irony, his love of gossip, his fanciful-whimsical spoofing and teasing, his puns and verbal gymnastics, his sudden turns of phrases and muted eloquence, his beguiling meditative shifts in voice tones, his gesturing and posing in swift reversals of dramatic situations between the whole range of comedy and tragedy, so filled with the wildness of hyperbolic images or the pathos of understatement—all of these lyrical, narrative, or dramatic qualities which fired and filled his literary imagination, and provided the creative instincts and intuitions in his conversation and poetry, were largely lost upon Thompson. In the spirit of “sheer morning gladness at the brim,” Frost loved to create fancies and fictional fantasies as vehicles for conveying truths. As almost anyone knew who had ever heard Frost as a conversationalist on a one-to-one basis, and as Thompson should have known, perhaps no modern poet reveled in the felicities of language more completely than Frost.
But Thompson’s greatest weakness in presenting Frost’s literary life was his inability to perceive the metaphorical nature of Frost’s conception of the arts and poetry. Frost’s aesthetic theory eluded him. Far beyond the ordinary intellectual processes of logic and discursive reasoning, which aimed at establishing knowledge and rational understanding, Frost believed that poetry, which was the only way mankind had of saying one thing in terms of another, aimed at insight and wisdom. Poetry was to Frost a special form of human revelation. It was distinct from the divine or prophetic revelations of religion, the rational understanding of philosophy and science, and the prudential wisdom of history. Poetry illuminated the physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social universe for man by drawing the unknown and mysterious into the orbit of the known and familiar. Through images, symbols, and metaphors, through Frost’s favorite figure of speech, the synecdoche, in which a part is put for the whole or a whole for a part, Frost believed that poetry enabled readers to leap from sight to insight, from sense to essence, from the physical to the metaphysical dimensions of reality. The whole vast range of the metaphorical uses of language enabled the poet to appeal to the total nature of man—images to the senses, conceptual symbols to the reason, rhythm and the phonetics of language to the feelings and emotions, and all coming to bear upon the fancy and imagination, to strip life to its most dramatic and intense form. Poetry was for Frost an attempt to take life by the throat, to plunge deeper into the meaning of life. To Frost a successful poem was the sweetest dream that man may know of truth, because the figure a poem makes gives shape to the fluctuating impressions and confusions of the senses, and captures in permanent form a meaningful insight that transcends the chaos of sense impressions in mutable time. Frost believed that the greatest attempt of poetry was to say spirit in terms of matter, and thus to penetrate close to the heart of the dark mystery that surrounds the origins, nature, and destiny of man. Unlike Thompson, Pritchard understands Frost’s conception of the arts and poetry, and therefore his book is a much-needed corrective, a giant step into a more just image of Frost as man, thinker and poet.

One of Pritchard’s major premises is that Frost’s life and work combined constitutes a supreme fiction in which facts and fancies need to be carefully distinguished and weighed. While well aware that many of Frost’s poems could be correlated with events in the poet’s life, Pritchard wisely refuses to open these biographical “doors,” so attractive to literal-minded critics who think that poetry is a branch of journalism or disguised autobiography. In refusing to confuse the facts in Frost’s life with the fictions in his poems, he concentrates upon the poems as works of fictional art. His concern is mainly with the metaphorical dimensions of the forms, images, themes, and dramatic situations in the poems. Thus, when a speaker in a poem expresses a sense of guilt to a listener in the poem, the core consideration is within the dramatic context of the poem, and not in some external matter, such as the personal life of Frost and his wife when the poem was written. This distinction between art as fiction and life as fact maintains the necessary distinction between Frost the poet and Frost the man. This is not to say that Frost’s poems do not reveal something of his personal spirit, but only that no simple explanation of his life and poetry, which tries to place him into a definitive category which combines biographical facts with his aesthetic theory and practice as a poet, can possibly succeed. As an intuitionalist Frost never pre-planned a poem, in the sense of thinking it out in advance and then writing it. Nor did he pre-plan many of the most important decisions of his life, such as how he came to publish A Boy’s Will in 1913. Pritchard’s summary of the essential facts and fancies in Frost’s trip to Britain in 1912-15, such as his meeting with Frank Flint, Ezra Pound, Edward Thomas, Yeats, and other poets, corresponds with all the factual details in Thompson’s biography. Yet when their accounts are compared, Pritchard has
of the political Left and the modernist literary elite.

It is certainly true, as Richard Poirier has noted, that for about four decades Frost was "the necessary enemy" of both "the political left and the modernist literary elite," but to Frost the "alliance" of these "two forces in American cultural life" was neither "unexpected" nor "perplexing." Certainly Frost's most aggressive enemy at Harvard during the 1930s, F.O. Matthiessen, found no difficulty in being a strong Communist ideologist and also an ardent admirer of literary modernity, as evidenced in The Achievement of T.S. Eliot (1935). Frost perceived that the common denominator which linked the political Left with the modernist literary elite was their claim to being "intellectuals," which ultimately rested upon their faith in modern science, and in the application of the methods of physical science to every branch of humanistic knowledge, including politics and the arts. The split between innovative forms and techniques in modern literature on the one hand, and matter or themes on the other hand, enabled modern revolutionary "intellectuals" of various philosophical convictions to meet on common grounds as original contributors to modern culture.

In both art and politics, in theory and practice, Frost stood in stark opposition to the self-styled "intellectuals" of his era. His poetry certainly did not include the anthropological myths, archetypal symbols, and esoteric allusions to foreign languages and cultures of the kind found in Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and it was without the proletarian social consciousness of W.H. Auden. The self-styled "intellectual" elite, invariably Marxists, socialists, Freudians, or academic liberals, proud of their sophisticated critical approach to literature, identified greatness in poetry with cultural complexity and obscurity, such as in Eliot's The Waste Land, and Pound's Cantos, and in Joyce's fiction in Ulysses. Intellectual critics loved to explicate the esoteric allusions and personal symbolism which so often baffled the common reader. Often such critics had little or no use for Frost's poetry, in which colloquial and idiomatic language, simple diction, and familiar images drawn from common experience and nature, required no research or footnotes to identify sources and allusions. Frost's apparent clarity and simplicity seemed to preclude any need to probe deeper, beyond the surface statements or images, so that even perceptive readers were put quickly at their ease, and off guard, and dismissed Frost with a careless first reading. The false conclusion drawn from these facts was that Frost was a simple, non-intellectual poet, decidedly inferior to Eliot and Pound, who were difficult and intellectually challenging major poets.

Yet it is no paradox that the full measure of interpretation in many of Frost's apparently simple poems is intellectually more challenging, and more difficult to realize, than the more immediately baffling esoteric, symbolic, stream-of-consciousness poems of Eliot and Pound. As early as 1923, Elinor Frost, in a letter to Lincoln MacLeagh, noted how much was missed by many critics of Frost's poetry: "You should realize how much there is in the poetry that those who have written about it either don't see at all, or touch on very lightly."* In a review of Frost's A Further Range, in Saturday Review of Literature (May 30, 1936), William Rose Benet wrote: "Frost's way of writing sometimes looks so easy: it is only when you examine it closely and note the careful use of every word . . . that despair sets in." And in 1959, at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner, Lionel Trilling, a liberal committed to the modernist literary elite, confessed that only after many years of misreading Frost as a supposedly rural and highly moralistic poet, he had at last penetrated to the tragic dimension of his view of the universe, and discovered that Frost was "a terrifying poet." Frost was well aware that the so-called "intellectual" literary critics dismissed his poetry cavalierly, and his own most common critical term applied to the poetry of Eliot and Pound was that it was "pseudo-intellectual."

During the summers of 1939-1944, in his
cabin on the Homer Noble Farm near Bread Loaf, Vermont, on several occasions Frost discussed with me the role of science in relation to literature and modern culture. Frost made it crystal clear that he greatly respected scientists and all they had contributed to expand man's knowledge of the laws and operations of the universe and physical nature. He marvelled at the exactness with which pure science could discover the laws of nature and measure atoms, molecules, and material elements in general, and he appreciated the skill with which applied science and engineering, combined with inventions, made modern life more efficient and safe. Scientists were to Frost among the "heroes" of modern civilization, and their "revelations" proved the ability of man's mind to penetrate matter.

Frost also noted that ever since the seventeenth century scientists in the Western world had greatly expanded the role and domain of the physical sciences to include not only matter but human affairs and human nature itself. The methods of physical science were applied to man in society, in what has come to be called "social science" and "political science." Even the inner emotional nature of man in psychology, and man's creative nature in the arts, were thought to be legitimate subjects for scientific study. Since there are still mysteries even about matter itself, Frost contended that the methods of the physical sciences could not be applied with equal validity to human affairs and human nature, because man was more than a biological animal. The terms "social science" and "political science" are misnomers, and create false hopes and delusions of what government can do for people, because society and politics cannot be understood with anything like the exactness with which atoms, molecules, and matter in general can be understood. A clear qualitative difference between matter and human nature was most evident in the extent to which moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and social values are human in origin. Frost contended that such experimenters as Pavlov and Watson did not understand the limits of human reason and the scientific method, and violated Aristotle's true principle that it was folly to look for scientific exactness in things which by their very nature cannot be treated scientifically. The end result of behavioral science would be to dehumanize humanity by reducing it to a physical mechanism. Frost contended that whenever the scientific method was misapplied to man the results will always fall far short of exact, absolute, or even predictable knowledge, and may also have unforeseen evil consequences. In general, the misapplication of science by modern man was part of his delusion that he could become God, and use his reason to reshape the world toward Utopian ends. Some scientists thought they could move toward Utopia through a mastery over nature, and revolutionary politicians thought they could do the same by controlling historical events. Frost believed that all such pseudo-intellectual scientism was doomed to failure. In 1940 he concluded one conversation on this subject by stating that the twentieth century will be remembered in history for having finally determined the true role of science in human affairs. He predicted that the role of science as applied to man will be far less than its advocates have supposed.

The intellectual skepticism Frost directed against the excessive and misdirected claims of social science and human reason was not limited to science, but included every form of human effort to probe the mystery at the core of the universe and man's life on earth. The revelations of religion, philosophy, and the arts were also limited, and subject to abuse by finite and fallible human reason and the weaknesses of human nature. Frost doubted that human reason could ever know anything absolutely, and he was skeptical that man could translate the speculative logic in any rational or ideological system into the practical affairs of life. Intellectual skepticism toward human reason as an abstract absolute lay at the core of Frost's conservatism in religion, philosophy, science, education, art, and politics. Ironically, many of Frost's literary and
political enemies, who dismissed him with contempt as "anti-intellectual," were themselves merely unquestioning rationalists, with an unbounded faith in their own power of reason, and in science or an ideology, and whose rational capability and fund of knowledge was often far below that of Frost. In rejecting rational ideology and social science, Frost put his faith in the historical continuity of Western civilization, in the tested traditions of the Judeo-Christian religion, in classical liberal education, in the philosophical thought of such thinkers as Aristotle, Kant, and William James, in the revelations of science, and in the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers of the American republic. These and other similar traditions reflected the practical experience and positive achievements of Western man throughout history, and provided reasonable norms by which to guide him in preserving and making changes in society.\(^{11}\)

False "Freedom" in Art and Society

Frost was convinced that faith in science was the basis of the claim by the modernist literary elite that their revolutionary innovations constituted originality in literature. In 1935, in his introduction to E.A. Robinson's *King Jasper*, he wrote: "This, our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served. Science put it into our heads that there must be new ways to be new."\(^{12}\) In the pursuit of originality in poetry modern poets shattered traditional stanza forms, eliminated a regular meter and rhyme in favor of free verse, violated conventional transitions in logic and chronology through the loose association of ideas, impressions, feelings, and allusions, in a stream-of-consciousness technique of flashbacks based upon the psychological leaps of the unconscious mind, and thus made the relativity of time, space, and events the basis of literary values and reality. All these innovative techniques, and many other attempts to be original, mentioned by Frost in his essay, could claim the authority and sanction of science for their supposed originality.

But like Samuel Johnson, Frost was convinced that much that men claim to be original merely expresses ignorance of their ancestors, and he rejected many of these supposedly new literary innovations. He believed that spurious and pretentious pseudo-intellectuality resulted from many such techniques, by which obscurity passed for profundity. He suspected that often, as Job said in *A Masque of Reason*, "obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing." In contrast to many modern poets, Frost noted that "Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new."\(^{13}\) He believed it took more genius and ability, not less, to be original in the traditional forms and techniques of poetry, because modern poets could not merely repeat the past.

Frost was aware that behind the drastic innovations of the modernist literary elite, based on science, there was often a revolutionary metaphysics that included both literature and politics. The revolutionary techniques of creative artists often paralleled the experimental methods, and even the violence of revolutionists in social and political theory and practice. Frost rejected Archibald MacLeish's claim that "the originality of today in art is the revolution of tomorrow in politics," because of the implied cause-and-effect connection between art and politics, and because he believed there was no necessary correlation between form and technique in art and anything in particular politics. He contended that although "every new poem ... is a revolution of the spirit, ... it leads to nothing on the lower plane of politics."\(^{14}\) Yet it was perhaps no accident that the most extreme writers of "free verse" were almost invariably also political radicals or revolutionaries. This parallel had no necessary cause-and-effect relationship, but was simply a matter of intellectual consistency. As an idea the full significance of Frost's famous remark, "I'd as soon play tennis with the net down as write free verse,"\(^{15}\) cannot be understood if it is limited to poetry, because it includes his metaphysics and
politics. His remark rejects not merely formless structure in poetry, and the loss of meter and rhyme, but the anarchy in any false claim to freedom, such as in violent revolution against the established order of a just society.

In the subtitle of A Further Range (1936), Frost asserted that his poetry could extend "range beyond range even into the realm of politics and religion." Some poems were arranged to be taken doubly, and others singly. How a reader understands Frost’s cultural and political significance depends in part on how one perceives the close and profound relationships between his poetry, his aesthetic theory, his metaphysics and religion, and his politics. In one sense Frost’s poetry was a personal archetype which defined in concrete aesthetic terms and forms his particular understanding of an element in the whole reality of Western civilization. His adherence to traditional forms and techniques in poetry has its counterpart in the order and orthodoxy of his "Old Testament Christianity," and his strict-constructionalist reverence for the constitutional system of the American republic. These conservative commitments in art, religion, and politics in no way prevented him from being highly original and independent in all these subjects.

Frost was fully aware that the modernist literary elite was most scientific and rational in the new theories and practice of literary criticism derived mainly from the work in linguistic and psychological theory of I.A. Richards. He was skeptical of Richards’s assumption that language and psychology (mainly Freudian) were exact or experimental sciences, and that therefore critical theory could provide a scientific and rational basis for practical criticism of poetry and all imaginative literature. It didn’t matter that Richards distinguished sharply between how language was used by scientists in its literal sense and how it was used figuratively by poets. Richards’s whole object was to make language, however used, as scientific as possible. His analytical methods were adopted and refined by the “New Criticism” developed by John Crowe Ransom and others, and provided a scientific approach to poetry, for its better understanding and appreciation. Frost objected that such literary critics “treat all poetry as if it were something else than poetry, as if it were syntax, language, science.” In contrast, Frost believed that poetry could be poetic about science, but that science could not be scientific about poetry without violating its nature and spirit. A strict regard for the text of a poem, as insisted upon by the “New Critics,” was indeed necessary, Frost believed, but not in order to substitute rational analysis for biography and literary history. In place of such analytical criticism Frost argued that the form, technique, content, and unity of a poem could best be perceived and appreciated through the “vocal imagination,” by the skillful oral reading of a poem.

In March-April of 1936 Frost gave the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University. His six lectures were entitled: “The Old Way to be New,” “Vocal Imagination—the Merger of Form and Content,” “Does Wisdom Signify?,” “Poetry as Prowess (Feats of Words),” “Before the Beginning of a Poem,” and “After the End of a Poem.” These lectures, delivered informally without notes, summarized Frost’s long-held beliefs about poetry and life, and the overflow audiences responded with great enthusiasm. But as Frost observed with irony, in contrast to the public the Harvard literary elite was cool in its response: “I may be wrong in my suspicion that I haven’t pleased Harvard as much as I have the encompassing barbarians. My whole impression may have come from the Pound-Eliot-Richards gang in Eliot House here.” The subtle and sometimes open enmity between Frost and the modernist literary elite was to continue for the rest of his life, but submerged under the far more violent, explicit, and public attacks on Frost by the American political Left.

In Robert Frost: The Individual and Society (Rockford College Press, 1973), I described in great detail Frost’s social and political philosophy, his powerful defense of
the American republic, his strong criticism of Marxism, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” and international pacifism. Certainly Frost’s cultural and political significance can well be understood in terms of the sharp contrast between his case for American constitutional representative government, with its divided and balanced powers within the state structure and between parties, and its due process and defense of individual freedom as an end in itself, as opposed to ideological, doctrinaire Marxism, with its proletarian-based dictatorship masquerading as democracy, its absolute one-party rule, its totally controlled society and centrally planned economy in industry and agriculture, and its sacrifice of individual freedom for Utopian social ends. Frost’s criticism of New Deal liberalism, though less harsh on philosophical grounds than his criticism of Marxism, was in one sense more severe on political grounds, because it was closer to home, and a more immediate threat to the traditional American constitutional system. All of Frost’s strong differences between Marxists and New Deal liberals came to a head in 1936, when he published A Further Range. His political conservatism, which had been subtly muted in his earlier poetry, was here made starkly evident by his harsh response to the sensibility and social consciousness in New Deal programs aimed at solving the problems of the great Depression.

As Thompson observed, Frost anticipated that A Further Range would be severely criticized by the entire body of Marxist and liberal literary critics, led by such Harvard “intellectuals” as F.O. Matthiessen:

He had... reasons for worrying about the enmity between himself and Matthiessen, whose communistic sympathies were plainly reflected in his writings. It was clear that the most dangerous criticism of A Further Range would come from such closely organized liberals as Matthiessen and his crowd.18

In effect, A Further Range provoked a declaration of war against Frost by the entire American political Left, a war that had been anticipated years earlier. In 1930, in reviewing Frost’s Collected Poems in The New Republic, Granville Hicks, a well-known Harvard professor and Marxist literary critic, had condemned Frost’s poetry because he had found in it “nothing of industrialism,” “nothing of the disruptive effect that scientific hypotheses have on modern thought,” and “nothing of Freudianism,” and therefore Hicks concluded that Frost could not unify “the industrial, scientific, Freudian world” of American culture. These omissions and Frost’s failure to write in support of the proletarian class struggle, condemned him to mediocrity as a poet. Hicks’s strictures against Frost were shared by Malcolm Cowley and Edmund Wilson.

Before A Further Range appeared, Newton Arvin, a professor of English at Smith College, had published “A Letter on Proletarian Literature” in Partisan Review, in which he had rejected with scorn Frost’s insistence that poetry should deal with the great tragic “grieves” common to humanity, and not with the political “grievances” of classes and parties. In answer to Frost, Arvin had praised the revolutionary poet who was intellectually and emotionally in sympathy with Marxism and identified with the workers’ class struggle against capitalism. Arvin’s review of A Further Range, in Partisan Review (March 1936), was called “A Minor Strain.” He pronounced Frost’s conservative philosophy “as profitless as a dried-up well,” and “expressive much more of the minor than the major strain in Yankee life and culture.” Another critic of the political Left, Horace Gregory, in the New Republic (June 24, 1936), could approve of only two of Frost’s fifty-one poems—“The Master Speed” and “Provide, Provide”—and categorized Frost as a minor poet, “the last survivor of the ‘Georgian movement,’ ” who refused “to carry an unwelcome load of social responsibility.” According to Gregory, Frost’s “further ranges into politics” revealed that “his wisdom may be compared to that of Calvin Coolidge.”

The Intercollegiate Review—Fall 1985 39
Richard P. Blackmur, in *The Nation* (June 24, 1936), also denied that Frost was a true poet, because his poetry was an escape from the economic and social problems of modern life, so that his "further range into matters of politics and the social dilemma" was "fragmentary" and "intolerable." But the most extreme criticism of Frost was by Rolfe Humphries, another Marxist, whose essay, "A Further Shrinking," appeared in *New Masses* (11 August, 1936). Thus did Humphries condemn Frost: "When you call him a reactionary __________, or a counter-revolutionary __________, you have, in essence, said it all." Humphries concluded that Frost's "excursion into the field of the political didactic" revealed "a further shrinking" of his stature as a poet.

From the harsh criticism of Frost's poetry by the American political Left several important points need to be noted. Since the left-wing journals in which these criticisms appeared were the opinion makers in many academic institutions, they were decisive in helping to form a strong bias against Frost among those who regarded themselves as progressive "intellectuals." Yet among American common readers Frost was approved. *A Further Range* was selected by the Book-of-the-Month-Club, and received the Pulitzer Prize. The response to his book confirmed Frost's own conviction that in matters of culture and politics, even in the heart of the Great Depression, only about ten percent of the American public were Russophiles; another ten percent were Anglophiles; but the main body of Americans remained firmly fixed in its traditional life.

**The Sanctity of the Individual**

Also, from the harsh criticism of the political Left it is evident that Frost's conception of culture and politics, and their relationship to each other, was the complete antithesis of everything believed by his Marxist and liberal critics. He believed that the moral principles and values of society derived ultimately from religion and the arts, which provide the highest expressions of the human spirit. They denied or were grossly indifferent to the spiritual dimension of human nature, holding religion to be "the opiate of the people," or mere superstition. Therefore, their conception of culture, based upon their materialism, rejected religion and reduced all art to political propaganda. As Thompson noted, Frost rejected the Marxist and liberal theory of art as mere propaganda: "The true poet should not devote himself to representing or weeping over the unchanging social and industrial evils." As Frost himself put it: "It is not the business of the poet to cry for reform." Frost deliberately flew in the face of the Marxist anti-liberal insistence that literature was primarily an instrument to improve society: "I wouldn't give a cent to see the world, the United States, or even New York, made better." The unanswered question always remained: better according to which philosophy of life? Frost believed that politics and economics, which are concerned mainly with man's social and biological nature, are largely a function of culture, not the reverse, as Marxism claimed. To Marxists art as a part of culture was merely an instrumental means by which political power brought about social changes in harmony with Marxist ends. In contrast, Frost believed that all great things—in art, in love, in education, in war, in everything—were done for their own sake, and not merely as a means to something else.

Ultimately, this meant that for Frost society exists in order to develop and bring to its highest perfection the potential good traits of each individual, while for Marxism each individual exists in order to serve the state in bringing about a new and scientifically perfect society. Frost's conception of culture and politics resulted in a free society, in which the power of the state was severely limited, and the individual enjoyed the maximum of freedom in his civil and personal life, including the right to own private property. The Marxist conception of culture and politics was based upon a materialist ideology, a single-party totalitarian political system, in which the state was absolute in
controlling each individual through a planned economy, which allowed no right in private property. In July 1940, at Bread Loaf, Frost remarked on "Stalin’s willingness to ‘liquidate’ (dread word) millions of Russian farmers in order to establish their collective farms,” and noted the logic behind these mass murders. In order to arrive at Utopia, the ideology of Marxism had to eliminate all human selfishness, such as was fostered by the private ownership of property. Therefore, those who refused to give up their property to the state were condemned as selfish and had to be eliminated.

The conception of culture and politics held by Frost’s critics made them condemn the content and themes in his poems, but they said next to nothing about his form, technique, and artistic skill, elements which Frost regarded as "the living part of a poem." Their criterion for judging a poem favorably was not just any thematic content, but only one that conformed with revolutionary Marxist ideology, or with the social reforms of the welfare state favored by liberalism. In either case, they demanded adherence to their political party line. Frost not only did not write Marxist or liberal propaganda, but what was worse, he satirized the very premises of their revolutionary ideology and politics of reform, by being skeptical that any Utopian society was possible, or that even the welfare state was desirable. Their faith in science and human reason led them to believe there were no insoluble social problems, that poverty, ignorance, disease, crime, and war could be eliminated. Therefore, they lacked the tragic sense which from the very beginning had characterized Frost’s poetry. Even their view of the setting in A Further Range as “provincial” New England was in terms of content rather than of technique, and revealed their ignorance of the synecdoche, Frost’s use of a particular setting to symbolize the universal.

Even in content alone, the differences between Frost’s conception of culture and politics and that of his revolutionary and liberal critics was immense. Frost took his intellectual and moral norms for judging culture and politics from a thorough knowledge and understanding of the whole religious and cultural tradition of Western civilization, from the ancient Hebraic and Hellenic religion and culture to his own time. In religion he considered himself “an Old Testament Christian.” In politics he perceived the American republic as the culmination of political democracy through various experiments in self-rule since the ancient Greeks: “Ours is a very ancient political growth, beginning at one end of the Mediterranean Sea and coming westward—tried in Athens, tried in Italy, tried in England, tried in France, coming westward all the way to us.” Frost knew well the political philosophy of Aristotle, Edmund Burke, the Founding Fathers of the American republic, and other writers, and his unwavering faith in the constitutional system and free enterprise capitalism of the United States, even during the crisis of the Great Depression, was not the result of ignorance and mindless patriotism, as his Marxist critics thought but was based upon a deep intellectual understanding of its political and economic origins and achievements. Indeed, in a letter on March 15, 1936, commenting on "To a Thinker," Frost made it clear that his poem, like many others in A Further Range, was aimed at the heads of our easy despairers of the republic and of parliamentary forms of government. I encounter too many such and my indignation mounts till it overflows in rhyme.” In 1958, twenty-two years later, Frost compared “the writers at home who have despaired of the republic” with the treason of Ezra Pound, who “never admitted that he went over to the enemy . . . .” Frost was highly critical of the indifference shown by many American liberals to the radical changes proposed during the New Deal in the constitutional structure of the republic. On May 6, 1937, he wrote to Untermeyer: “. . .You know how liberals are. You know how they were about the Russian Revolution and the German Revolution. You can pack the Supreme Court for all of them. Nothing is crucial.” To Frost modern political liberals were too often
pseudo-sophisticated academics, self-styled "intellectuals," or as Frost saw them, "New Testament sapheads" in politics, with a sentimental conception of the moral nature of man, and with no definite or strong conviction about anything beyond a vague and optimistic humanitarianism.

Frost believed that "the best minds are the best at premises," not at dialectical, logical analysis. But the mind of man needed a rich tradition of knowledge to develop its power. In this light the minds of Frost's revolutionary and liberal critics appeared to him truly adolescent, because they were so addicted to their rational speculative ideology that they rejected the knowledge and wisdom available in the 3,000 year-old intellectual, cultural, and political inheritance of Western civilization. Several of the critics of *A Further Range* could have sat for his satirical portrait of the archetypal American ideological revolutionary in his poem, "A Case for Jefferson":

Harrison loves my country too,  
But wants it all made over new.  
He's Freudian Viennese by night.  
By day he's Marxian Muscovite.  
It isn't because he's Russian Jew.  
He's Puritan Yankee through and through.  
He dotes on Saturday pork and beans.  
But his mind is hardly out of his teens:  
With him the love of country means  
Blowing it all to smithereens  
And having it all made over new.

To Frost, the real "anti-intellectuals" were the self-sufficient rationalists, brimming with undoubting confidence that revolutionary ideology would solve the social and economic problems of humanity. It is highly ironical that critics such as Rolfe Humphries, who knew nothing of Frost's in-depth knowledge of the political traditions of Western philosophy, should identify him with the pedestrian mind of Calvin Coolidge. Thus the Marxist and liberal critics of Frost made the identical crude error regarding his cultural and political philosophy that Ezra Pound, Lionel Trilling, and other literary critics made regarding his poetry.

Frost held that not traditional religion and culture, but revolutionary Marxism and reforming liberalism were the true opiates of the people. Marxists and secular liberals rejected or were often agnostic about God, but they deified the party or the state; they rejected the traditional religious concept of heaven, but they believed in an eventual heaven on earth. They rejected religion and much in Western culture as superstition, but were themselves superstitiously addicted by the idea of progress through science and revolutionary ideology. What Frost called "the sweep to collectivism in our time," which characterized the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, could destroy the principle of limited political power even in America, through the growth of the federal bureaucracy under the New Deal. Frost attributed the political wisdom of dividing and balancing political power against itself to the religious orthodoxy of the Founding Fathers. They knew that only God had or should have absolute power, and their religion taught them that the moral and intellectual weaknesses of man required putting bounds to political power. When modern politicians play God they invariably promise far more than they can achieve as men, and the gap between their promises and their achievements is filled by the abstract slogans and dialectics of ideological propaganda. The language of revolutionists and reformers is characterized by the jargon of rationalized deceit. In a letter to Bernard De Voto in 1936 Frost wrote: "The great politicians are having their fun with us. They've picked up just enough of the New Republic and Nation jargon to seem original to the simple." In 1939, in "The Figure a Poem Makes," Frost said: "More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts." It is significant that Frost denied the claim of originality both to the modernist literary elite and to the political Left.
Justice, Mercy, and the Tragic Vision

The complex relationships between Frost’s poetry as art and his conceptions of culture and politics as expressed in his poetry and elsewhere, cannot be understood by limiting his political themes to politics. His far-ranging criticism of the various political nostrums of the New Deal, his contempt for Roosevelt’s “Brain Trust” as the modern model of “the guild of social planners,” his attacks on New Deal egalitarianism, its collectivism, its self-righteous sensibility and self-serving social consciousness, and its violations of justice between men in favor of mercy to the poor, are all easily misunderstood if perceived only in partisan political terms. For example, when he objected that New Deal egalitarianism aimed at creating “a homogenized society,” in which the cream of human nature would not be allowed to rise to the top, was he merely being a political elitist? When he responded to Vice-President Wallace’s slogan “the century of the common man” as a call for compulsory togetherness, and pictured Americans as “all pigging together” in an undifferentiated mass society, and denied that “trucking to the mob speeds the world’s wheels,” was his insistence that America needed to develop the best talents of its people in every field and profession a sign of his anti-democratic politics and no more? Were there no larger cultural and philosophical implications, beyond politics, when he replied to Carl Sandburg’s “The People, Yes,” with “The People, Yes; and the People, No.”?

Frost once confessed that he found it “harder to bear the benevolence than the despotism” of New Deal politicians. His statement indicates that he disliked social sensibility in welfare even more than abuses of political power. On this significant point, in his poem “A Considerable Speck” (1942), Frost clearly went beyond the partisan politics of the New Deal in describing the self-righteous spirit in the sensibility of a social consciousness that included the whole modern world:

I have none of the tenderer-than-thou collectivistic regimenting love With which the modern world is being swept.

The danger posed to America by the New Deal was relatively mild when compared to the far greater danger posed by totalitarianism to the whole culture and civilization of the modern world. The core of the danger lay in a humanitarian type of compulsory benevolence, in socialism under centralized political power, which could weaken or destroy all individual freedom. In childhood Frost had rejected Henry George’s socialism, because “like all socialism it is bad arithmetic, in which two comes before one.” Did this merely indicate that Frost preferred a politics based upon freedom to pursue individual self-interest to a politics of compulsory social benevolence? Since Frost believed that socialists “tried to grasp with too much social fact/Too large a situation,” the more extreme form of socialism necessarily involved human self-deception and blind arrogance. In “Build Soil” Frost noted that “socialism is/An element in any government” and in “An Equalizer” he indicated that more and more the chief function of modern government in domestic matters was the redistribution of wealth, to diminish the extremes of wealth and poverty:

And when we get too far apart in wealth, 'Twas his idea that for the public health, So that the poor won't have the steal by stealth, We now and then should take an equalizer.

But the great question which went beyond politics and ideology, and included culture and the whole of civilization, was how much socialism a society could have before it destroyed the “passionate preference” of individuals in a free society? Frost was clearly against everything and everybody that made people rely more than was necessary upon somebody or something other than their
own resources, integrity, and courage, and this conviction included politics, but transcended it in his art, his philosophy and religion, and his conception of culture and civilization.

What Frost called "the justice-mercy contradiction" was a major concern in his religious and philosophical thought, as well as an important theme in several of his poems, and in his strictures on the New Deal. Frost approved of Milton's line in Paradise Lost, Book III, "But mercy first and last shall brightest shine," noting that it expressed the hoped-for mercy of God regarding salvation to all men as undeserving sinners. But Frost cautioned, Milton "was no mere New Testament saphead," he was no universalist-unitarian believer in universal salvation. From at least 1915, in "The Death of the Hired Man," Frost was convinced that the conflict between justice and mercy in human affairs is an eternal and universal moral problem of humanity, and not merely a contemporary political partisan concern. In his A Masque of Reason (1945), and A Masque of Mercy (1947), he dramatized this conflict in religion and politics, and in his last letter before his death in 1963 he was still concerned with justice and mercy.

With these facts in mind Frost's criticism of the New Deal as "nothing but an outbreak of mass mercy," is clearly more than mere partisan politics. In 1936, in the midst of attacks on A Further Range by the political Left, Frost wrote to Ferner Nuhn, a young New Deal acquaintance and friend of Henry Wallace, that "strict justice is basic" for a free society, and freedom implied that some people succeeded and others failed. The winners reaped the rewards of their talents and efforts, but what about the losers? Frost acknowledged that government "must do something for the losers. It must show them mercy. Justice first and mercy second. The trouble with some of your crowd is that it would have mercy first. The struggle to win is still the best tonic. . . . Mercy . . . is another word for socialism." Frost believed that what was commonly called "distributive justice," the attempt to spread the wealth of society to the masses, through graduated income taxes and other such devices, was really distributive mercy misnamed. Frost drew out for Ferner Nuhn the logical consequences of a system of socialistic mercy:

The question of the moment in politics will always be one of proportion between mercy and justice. You have to remember the people who accept mercy have to pay for it. Mercy means protection. And there is no protection without direction. A person completely protected would have to be completely directed. And he would be a slave. That's where socialism pure brings you out.

To Frost, the political counterpart of a "New Testament saphead" in religion was a "liberal saphead," whose sentimental conception of the nature of man as naturally good led him to play the role of God, in a desire to redeem all men from failure in their temporal lives.

In 1917 Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer: "There's one thing I shan't write in the past, present or future, and that is glad mad stuff or mad glad stuff." Did Frost keep to this early resolve never to write poetry as a vehicle for journalistic propaganda for political causes that promised social or economic salvation for mankind? Or were his poems on political subjects, in A Further Range and later books, merely conservative counter-revolutionary political tracts in poetic form, "vehicles of grievances against" the Utopian state? These questions go to the heart of the relationships between Frost's poetry and his conception of culture and politics, because for him to write "glad mad stuff" as a political conservative would be to violate his aesthetic principles no less than his conception of culture.

But properly understood Frost's satirical poems, though political in subject matter, are not centered on the particular political grievances of any class, group, or party. Frost did not descend to "the lower plane of politics" in his art. His poems on politics are not merely projections of his intellectual
autobiography. The techniques, tone, and pitch of his cadences transmutes the factual matter of politics into the fictional spirit of culture. In short, politics was for Frost simply another metaphor, and his poems on politics are concerned with the far larger issues of culture and philosophy—with such matters as the nature of man, with the necessity of freedom for self-fulfillment, with moral order, with justice and mercy beyond politics, with the great "griefs" that afflict humanity. These subjects are all bound up with the traditional values of family, church, and society which have characterized Western civilization for many centuries. To read Frost's poems on politics as strictly political is to be guilty of incredible literal-mindedness, and to miss the insights and revelations which can come only from a view of poetry as metaphor. Frost's left-wing political literary critics condemned him for not writing "glad mad stuff," and they were right in fact: he never wrote poetic journalism. Political subjects were for Frost instrumental occasions for practicing his skill with the synecdoche, to say politics in terms of larger philosophical and cultural themes.

The most common error in reading Frost's poems on politics is to interpret them within the partisan concern current when they were published. Thus, "Build Soil," invariably described as an attack on the New Deal, particularly its farm policies, ignores its subtitle, "A Political Pastoral." Clearly "political" is the adjective modifying the noun subject "pastoral," so that the art form and not politics as a subject is the main concern of the poem. Politics merely provides the concrete images or references for the larger non-political pastoral themes. "Build Soil" refines upon the pastoral tradition in poetry by venturing into politics, just as the sonnet was expanded beyond its concern with romantic love into other subjects. Frost himself, in his letter to Ferner Nuhn in 1936, elaborated on the cultural content in "Build Soil," and then pointedly warned: "All that is said in my Political Pastoral—if you will be careful not to read it in the light of this campaign. It was written before the New Deal was heard of." A careful reading of Frost's other poems on politics will also reveal they are not "glad mad stuff." "Departmental" is much more than a satire on government bureaucracy. "A Lone Striker" is not merely an attack on industrial regimentation. "Provide, Provide," usually taken only as a satire on New Deal paternalism, has far larger, non-political, metaphorical dimensions, which lift it to the plane of cultural themes and significances. "To a Thinker" is not merely a satire on Franklin D. Roosevelt, but a philosophical probing of the genius for self-deception (what Burke called "metaphysical insanity") of all men who are ambitious to play God. It is in the literary tradition of Dr. Faustus and Paradise Lost, a brief lyrical satire on the same theme which Marlow dramatized and Milton narrated. To appreciate Frost's literary, cultural, and political significance to America it is vital to realize that in all things cultural and political Frost was always essentially a poet. In this he differed greatly from the American political Left, if not always from the modernist literary elite.

2. William H. Pritchard, Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 32. All references to this study will be to Pritchard, Frost.
4. Pritchard, Frost, 118.
5. For example, see Pritchard, Frost, 92-93.
8. Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938, 246. In 1914 Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote to her friend Sarah N. Cleghorn, after reading Frost's poems in North of Boston: "What first delighted me was
their cool, heart-refreshing naturalness. Soon I saw the depths of meaning dawning beneath them. . . . I never before had seen a body of poetry at once so faithfully plain and so delicately, thoughtfully beautiful." Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938, 519.


11. On philosophy and religion Frost wrote in 1938: “Any decent philosophy and all philosophy has to [be] largely static. Else what would there be to distinguish it from science? It is the same with religion: it must be the same yesterday and forever. The only part of Genesis that has changed in three thousand years and become ridiculous is the science in it. The religion stands. My philosophy, non-Platonic but none-the-less a tenable one, I hold more or less unbroken from youth to age.” Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 482.


13. Selected Prose of Robert Frost, 60.


20. Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938, 425. In “To a Thinker” Frost wrote: “I own I never really warmed/To the reformer or reformed.” Frost believed that a good writer never wrote to advance an ideology, but out of his personal emotions and habits. In 1926 he wrote to B.F. Skinner, “All that makes a writer is the ability to write strongly and directly from some unaccountable and almost invincible personal prejudice.” Quoted by W.H. Pritchard, Frost, 171. By “prejudice” Frost meant exactly the same thing as Edmund Burke, the ingrained moral principles and habits of a lifetime.


22. See Peter J. Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Individual and Society, 55.

23. Pritchard rightly perceived that “the sense of transience in A Boy’s Will, that things grow older and pass from view, is exceptionally strong.” Frost, 16. This “quality of sadness” which runs through Frost’s first book provides the tone for his more profound tragic sense in his later poetry. It also undercuts the political optimism implicit in revolutionary ideology. For a detailed account of how Frost’s tragic sense opposed revolutionary ideology see Peter J. Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Individual and Society, 45-50.


32. Selected Letters of Robert Frost, 430.

33. See Peter J. Stanlis, Robert Frost: The Individual and Society, 56.


40. Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938, 459. See also, 460-61.