"New terms of worth":

The Inclusive Economics of Robert Frost's Poetry

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Robert Frost needed money, and he also needed to keep himself psychologically functional. His intense and lifelong struggle with those dual needs led him to contemplate the ways they coincided, but also the ways they conflicted. Early on, he worked alongside his mother so she could retain the job on which the family depended; soon he needed money to get married; and later he repeatedly accepted academic posts he didn't much want because they paid well (Parini, 37; 31, 41, 52; 175, 205). He exhausted himself "barding around" to speaking engagements for the fees and honors, and possibly because travel and performance distracted him from dwelling on his worries: his own deep depressions and his needy, troubled, beloved children (Parini, 215, 275-6). His poetry reflects an extended meditation on how people actually sustain themselves.

Economic historian Donald M. McCloskey writes, "Neoclassical economists are fond of preaching that to take one road in a yellow wood is to sacrifice the other" (122), suggesting that Frost captures the dynamics of economic choice in one of his most famous poems, "The Road Not Taken" (CPPP, 103).[1] Economics is "the study of *humankind* in the ordinary business of life," but neoclassical economics became "the study of *choice* in the ordinary business of life" (McCloskey, 122, my italics). Neoclassical economics depends on aggregation (a belief that lots of small things add up to equal one representative big thing), mathematical modeling, and the further positivist

[1] It's not clear that Frost ever thought there was a choice, and an obviously correct choice was surely not chosen rationally.

assumption that economic "laws" (like "natural laws") can be discovered. It is assumed that agents sort through their choices rationally and quantitatively, which grossly oversimplifies what those agents really want.[2] As McCloskey writes, "In the neoclassical fiction it is profit not love that makes the world go round" (134).[3]

Economists, both in and out of the main stream, have long been calling for a paradigm shift, or just a significant amendment to the way economics tends to get done. At the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen (who introduced the term "neoclassical economics") "broadened economics," and he "made many economists stop and think about their bloodless, skeletal models of economic behavior" (Lawson, 947; Canterbery, 164). In the 1930s, Bertrand Russell "proposed a policy of leisure growth rather than commodity growth, and viewed the unemployment question in terms of the distribution of leisure" (Daly, 21). Somewhat later, John Kenneth Galbraith identified a problem with commodity growth: consumer desire "must be manufactured along with the product" (Daly, 24; referring to Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, 1958). In the 1960s, Joan

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[2] This is a simplification, too. In 1973, alternative economist Herman E. Daly describes neoclassical economics as revising classical economics in this way: "The big change . . . was to conceive of net value as the result of psychic want satisfaction rather than the product of labor" (4). But soon "psychic want satisfaction" seems to have led to the assumption that "aggregate wants are infinite" (5) and "The present day Keynesian-neoclassical synthesis" means that "The *summan bonum* to be maximized is no longer psychic want satisfaction, which is unmeasurable, but annual aggregate real output, GNP—Gross National Product—a value *index* of the quantity *flow* of annual production" (4, my underlining).

[3] Tony Lawson recently discussed the multiple and contradictory uses of the term "neoclassical economics." While he wants to jettison the use of the term, he comes to the conclusion that it best describes "those who are aware (at some level) that social reality is of a causal-processual nature . . . , who prioritise the goal of being realistic, and yet who fail themselves fully to recognise or to accept the limited scope for any overly-taxonomic approach including, in particular, one that makes significant use of methods of mathematical deductive modeling" (979).

Robinson attacked neoclassical economics from many sides, but one prominent scuffle was over whether or not it is possible to "define and measure aggregate capital" (Harcourt 1972, 7).[4] In 1971, Wassily Leontief called for amendments to common economic practice in an article whose title captures his key criticisms: "Theoretical Assumptions and Nonobserved Facts."[5]

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[4] In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Robinson writes that "it is of no use framing definitions more precise than the subject-matter to which they apply" (xxxiv) and cites K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which should remind us of the power of language, even poetry:

> The view that the precision of science and of scientific language depends upon the precision of its terms is certainly very plausible, but it is none the less a mere prejudice. Rather, the precision of a language depends just upon the fact that it takes care not to burden its terms with the task of being precise. A term like "sand-dune" or "wind" is certainly very vague. (How many inches high must a little sand-hill be in order to be called a sand-dune? How quickly must the air move in order to be called a wind?) However, for many of the geologist's purposes, these terms are quite sufficiently precise; and for other purposes, when a higher degree of differentiation is needed, he can always say "dunes between 4 and 30 feet high" or "wind of a velocity of between 20 and 40 miles an hour." And the position in the more exact sciences in analogous. In physical measurements, for instance, we always take care to consider the range within which there may be an error; and precision does not consist in trying to reduce this range to nothing, or in pretending that there is no such range, but rather in its explicit recognition.

[5] Soon to win the 1973 Nobel prize in economics, Leontief described the way that the "pronouncements" of economists are "received" like "that which was given to physicists and space experts a few years [before] when the round trip to the moon seemed to our only truly national goal" (1). But he describes "an uneasy feeling about the present state of our discipline" even in "those who are themselves contributing successfully to the present boom. They play the game with professional skill but have serious doubts about its rules" (1). He describes "The uneasiness . . . caused . . . by the palpable *inadequacy* of the scientific means with which they try to solve" important problems (1). Put another way, "The weak and all too slowly growing empirical foundations clearly cannot support the proliferating superstructure of pure, or should I say, speculative economic theory" (1).

Some other ways of looking at economic questions are Marxian, Austrian, institutional (and their "neo-" versions); there are also Post-Keynesian economics, feminist economics, social economics, household economics, environmental economics, evolutionary economics, steady-state economics, and so on. But "the status of non-neoclassical economists in the economics departments in English-speaking universities is similar to that of flat-earthers in geography departments; it is safer to voice such opinions after one has tenure, if at all (Weintraub).[6] The authors of the 2010 collection, *The Human Economy*, are almost exclusively stationed at universities outside of England and the USA.[7] Outside the halls of academia, neoclassical economics has a new antidote in

[6] Ubiquitous in high school and college classrooms throughout the USA, the neoclassical ideas put forward in textbooks such as Harvard University Professor Greg Mankiw's *Principles of Economics* have long held sway over the American interpretation of economics.

[7] They offer multiple alternative perspectives, generally advocating "a new 'new institutional economics' to be formed out of anthropology, sociology, political economy, economic philosophy, and world history" (Hart et al, 7). Many of these alternative approaches to economics suggest that mainstream economics builds its models prematurely, and they desire a "real economics" that involves the collection of more data and observations.

This argument has been a long one. The heated debate between Carl Menger and Gustav von Schuller, in the late 19th century, was between abstractions and models (or deduction) on the one side and history and data (or induction) on the other. Wesley Mitchell's published lectures at Columbia in the 20s and 30s depict the debate and take a middle ground: "Both extreme views are patently absurd" (116).

On a different note, I noticed that the 1994 *Encyclopedia Americana* crows that "the modern economist likes to arrange his thoughts in the form of a model" and defends math and models this way:

> Can mathematics do anything that cannot be done verbally? Clearly not, for mathematics is taught verbally, with each new word defined as it is introduced. But just because bulldozers can do nothing that could not be done by teaspoons, it does not follow that one should always use teaspoons. Like a bulldozer, mathematics is a very powerful and often a very economical tool. (612)

Kalle Lasn's colorful, anti-consumerist anthology *Meme Wars: The Creative Destruction of Neoclassical Economics*.

Mainstream economics textbooks do not recall Frost at all, which may explain why so little has been written on Frost as an economist.[8] But Lasn's does. When my family was assigned Robert Frost's Homer Noble Farm in Ripton, VT, for our summer at the Bread Loaf School of English, my experiences in Frost's woods let me envision and

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But we have many examples of the problem of using a bulldozer when a teaspoon is called for, and the "real" economists' call for paying attention to the world before making a model nicely parallels the need for an archeologist to use a teaspoon rather than a bulldozer to collect information at a dig site.

[8] In "'Synonymous with Kept': Frost and Economics," Guy Rotella recasts earlier critical discussions of Frost—that of Richard Poirier, Katherine Kearns, and Mark Richardson--in terms of "Frost's intricate attitudes towards things economic" (241). He explores "matters of vocation, competing valences of ownership and self-possession, the relative claims of charity and independence, the worth and value of work, and the relation between labor and gender." These issues, as well as the move from the gold standard in the early 20th century, ideas about the New Deal, and an important discussion of the ways that Frost is always rebalancing the complex relationships among varied and differing values, may seem to cover all the economic bases. But in spite of Rotella's important reminders of the historical moment in which Frost lives, works, and writes, there's more to be said. Rotella parenthetically comments that "Frost sold eleven short pieces on the economics—and extra-economic pleasures—of keeping chickens" (249). Frost's emphasis on the "extra-economic" seems worth exploring further, even or especially in a piece exploring economics. The hegemony of neoclassical economics makes it easy for us to forget that "extra-economic pleasures" are important factors in decisions about work and trade.

In "The Economic Impulse in Robert Frost," Dan Diephouse accepts the distinction between the economic and the aesthetic (478), but I'm arguing that Frost understood the aesthetic—which includes not just art and literature, but pleasure in whatever offers it to us: natural beauty, the outdoors, our bodily activity, conversation, etc.—to be inherent in our economic decisions. Diephouse writes of "a metaphorical negotiation between practical economics and aesthetics, between fact and imagination, between vocational impulse and avocational impulse, between work and play in the algebra of 'Two Tramps'" (478-9), but I think Frost is not just making these widely accepted binarisms "metaphorically" negotiate with each other; he is making them one. Nonetheless, Diephouse's article, which deals mainly with "Two Tramps in Mudtime," is probably the one with the argument most parallel to this one.

understand his poems in ways that I could not have at home in Los Angeles. Reading Frost in his Vermont home and its environs drew attention to the pleasures of work, the values of peace and natural capital, and the worth of old companions and outdoor work. My empirical experience of Frost's long-time summer habitat--the flora and fauna, the open but rolling and teeming space—gave me intangible sight into and rewards from Frost's poetry—a refutation of neoclassical abstraction in itself.

What I found is that Frost is an early proponent of bio-economics and (especially) psycho-economics. He reminds his readers of the value of natural capital and even ecosystem services, exploring the variability of "constant capital" (in other words, how fixed capital is not all that fixed), recording the complex values of a natural endowment (the natural state) even if it's never processed into capital, and discussing investment capital in terms of nature and creativity. These less numerical but also much less abstract ideas of capital make him an early proponent of what is now known as "ecological economics."

Even more clearly, Frost puts human nature back into economics and environmental influence back into human nature. He sees both the personal and the seemingly infinite as economic. Frost questions a division of labor that separates some of us from leisure and nature, undermining the human psyche, and leaving some people with just too much work.[9] Frost's characters do not behave according to the simplistic

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[9] One argument against green economics, and particularly "Triple Bottom Line Accounting," which counts people, planet, and profit, is that it is inefficient. The division of labor is supposed to enable greater production. Frost's poems question this specialized division of labor.

algorithms of the "Rational Utility Maximizer,"[10] largely because their fragile psyches depend upon nature for health and happiness. They know something that most of us—except Richard Louv, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, and E.O. Wilson—have forgotten: there's a relationship between "biophilia and emotional health" (Louv, 49).[11]

Readers tend to notice rural scenery and emotional valences in Frost's poems, as in landscape paintings, but the poems and the paintings also often contain laborers: herders, fishers, harvesters, loggers. Jay Parini describes Frost as "one of the few poets in the language to make good poems out of real work," and writes "Few poets in the history of English verse have written so well about work, or the pleasure of doing physical chores" (78, 288). Frost's representation of work (usually in a natural setting, or reduced because removed from nature) is vivid and physically evocative—and it offers important economic lessons.

In short, Frost's poetry bears witness against neoclassical economic theory and instead—within the strict economies of formal poetry--offers less abbreviated ways to understand economic choices. In over three-dozen poems, he depicts how nature, mood, love, and community matter in economic decisions. Frost portrays these elements—what

[10] Clive Hamilton in *Requiem for a Species* writes "Sitting at the center of economics right now is a pathetic parody of a human being called the 'Rational Utility Maximizer' who runs around making perfectly predictable choices within perfectly functioning markets. This creature is never depressed, never sickened by pollution, never emotional, never a dreamy wanderer, never in love . . . but of course real human beings are not like that . . . Neoclassical economics has achieved its coherence as a science by amputating most of human nature" (218).
[11] Richard Louv is the author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* and is involved in the Children and Nature Network and the National Forum on Children and Nature. The Kaplans wrote *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective*. E.O. Wilson is well-known (and sometimes heavily castigated) for his theory of human "biophilia" (and has a 1986 book of that title).

we may group under the broad economic term "externalities" -- as badly underrated factors in the measure of private value.[12] Sometimes Frost assigns value to natural processes and resources, but often he's offering a poetic or, in Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic's phrase, "narrative expression of value" not just to natural capital but to labor (3).

If we look at Frost's poetic forms and take Frost's poems more literally—as farmers farming, rather than standing in for the poet—then Frost's poetry not only insists on being eco-poetry, but it also deals with an important contemporary problem of eco-poetics, one recently raised in *ISLE* by Angela Hume in "Imagining Ecopoetics": "How might ecopoetry register or respond to the problem of capital?" (758). Capital is a heavyweight on the side of the status quo. How can environmentalists, poets, or ecologists nudge this entrenched idea and then impel it towards more and different meanings and connotations? Can the idea of capital be co-opted, undermined, de-legitimized, or redefined? In this context, Frost's poetry stands out as surprisingly prescient, fully participating in this branch of eco-poetics. In redrawing the boundaries of economics to include externalities, Frost – although generally understood as a politically conservative poet and an unabashed American patriot -- offers an alternative view of capital.

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[12] Mankiw defines "externalities" as "the uncompensated impact of one person's actions on the well-being of a bystander" and distinguishes positive and negative ones, which tend to be somewhat vague but often common-sense side effects (*Essentials*, 196). The hegemony of neoclassical economics, however, divides us from ourselves, so that we become our own bystanders, making decisions about our material wealth that negatively impact our own psychological or biological health. I've borrowed the term but expanded it to mean the often uncounted, often because they are non-numerical, factors in our economic situations. This may seem perverse, but the more common term, "extra-economic," already undermines the argument that these are economic considerations.

I: Terrifying Limits: Spring Pools, Natural Resources, and Our Short Lives

"Spring Pools" is not just about "the source of inspiration, and what one does when it has dried up" (Parini, 86); the poem is at least *also* about capital, energy, and natural resources. As Glenn Adelson and John Elder write, "the ephemeral nature of spring pools also offers an opportunity to reflect about larger patterns and connections in a world of change" (3). The pools may be our reflective but mortal consciousness, which will "soon be gone," but the pools are also puddles of water that are changed and erased as they enable growth. Consciousness is transformed into a poem, something we optimistically consider immortal, even if it might be (as Frost describes the trees) "dark." Water, however, is transformed into the "summer woods," which is almost as temporary as the pools, and which itself comes "From snow that melted only yesterday" (CPPP, 224).

Schoolchildren are offered a lovely diagram of the water cycle to buffer the scary news that there is only so much fresh water on the planet, but sometimes water is nonrenewable.[13] You can't step in the same river twice, and you can never been sure of the next snowfall, or the water table's rising to make spring pools (Adelson and Elder, 9-10). Chemistry Nobel Laureate Frederick Soddy believed that, "Like any machine [,] the economy must draw energy from outside itself" and nothing can "create energy out of nothing or recycle it forever" (Zencey, 298). According to mathematician Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, "a more apt analogy . . . is to model the economy as a living system.

Like all life, it draws from its environment valuable (or 'low entropy') matter and energy" (Zencey, 298). But "Man's continuous tapping of natural resources is not an activity that makes no history" and Georgescu-Roegen emphasizes "the irrevocability of the entropic degradation" (which means tapping and using up "environmental low energy") (42). In other words, natural capital does not exactly or always cycle around—at least in our lifetimes. It is neither infinitely nor immediately renewable.

Frost's spring pools "reflect/The total sky almost without defect" until the trees' growth creates a barrier of leaves to prevent this perfect reflection. "Flowery waters" and "watery flowers" would suggest that the trade is about equal—if it were one for the other instead of sweeping them both away for "dark foliage," a "darken[ing of] nature." In our own experience, we often find ourselves trading valued resources for something we don't value as much: we use it momentarily and throw away, or we didn't want in the first place. We might "think twice before" we "use [our] powers/To blot out and drink up and sweep away" our natural capital.

Not just "Spring Pools," but more than three dozen of Frost's poems bear witness against economic models that find it convenient to ignore the complexities of human motivation, resource use, and environmental damage or value. Frost wrote that "Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements" ("The Constant Symbol, *CPPP*, 787). Academic fields have the same problem with messy borders, but neoclassical economics too neatly severs economics from the entangling considerations of real people and their real work.

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[13] *The New York Times* reported of the High Plains Aquifier: "when the groundwater runs out, it is gone for good. Refilling the aquifer would require hundreds, if not thousands, of

Frost may appear to yearn for the past—or at least the pastoral--but it's difficult to know whether this view of economics and nature is nostalgia or prescience. Lionel Trilling's famous speech at Frost's 85th birthday party complained that Frost's poems let readers believe in and idealize a certain uncomplicated version of America—which Trilling saw as a kind of moral and aesthetic green-washing. Like a company trying to sell its products as more socially and environmentally sound than is accurate—often by telling a story of the small-farm origins of the milk, the wild sourcing of the blueberries[14]—Trilling sees Frost's poems as too easy for his readers to digest. Some of Frost's poems do seem too pat, not gritty enough, and anti-urban (and where are all the biting insects he too surely encountered in his fields and woods?). But that is often more a problem of careless reading than of sentimental writing.

Trilling did not celebrate "the Frost who reassures us by his affirmation of old virtues, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling" (155), but rather the Frost who is "terrifying" with his "representation of the terrible actualities of life" (156). And the rural life, situated at the source of many resources, may be better positioned to see what's lost or spent or wasted on complexity and speed. Trilling aligns complexity with the urban and modern, but Frost highlights the complexity of the natural world.[15] In "New Hampshire," for example, the "gang-boss" cheers "the roar and chaos" of the logs' "zigzag journey" down the river, and the forest is in such "flux" that it scares "a prude afraid of nature" who believes that "The only decent tree had been to mill/And educated

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years of rains" (Wines).

[14] Pollan calls this genre "supermarket pastoral" (137).

into boards" (CPPP, 160-1). It's this recognition of both complexity and potential joy in relation to the economic choices of his characters that offers a foretaste of 21st-century environmentalist and Occupy resistance to neoliberal economic policies.

Frost may have willingly shouldered the stereotype of a crusty old Yankee, and some of his poems (and some simple readings of most of his poems) seem "to denigrate the work of the critical intellect" (Trilling, 155). But a Yankee can be sly, too. As Frost is depicted both as a sweet clumber spaniel and as a glaring hawk, [16] his poems can look reassuringly old-fashioned and dangerously forbidding, truthful, and fresh. In very different terms, Frost settles comfortably into being a predictable middle-brow pop icon and also surprises us with sudden culture-jamming: he's what Lasn might call "a provocateur, a meme warrior, an occupier" (25).

Frost is not an ideologue, but he recommends occupying each present moment in its plenitude. He believed (as Karl Maurer puts it) that "Far-sighted ideologues of every type . . . impoverish the human soul by making it coarse, stupid and inattentive; and this always ends in sheer meanness of spirit" (14). In "A Lone Striker," the individual "knew a path that wanted walking;/ He knew a spring that wanted drinking;/A thought that wanted further thinking" (CPPP, 250). This attention to presence makes Frost a resister of ideology, which strangely enough puts him in the Occupy Wall Street camp—a camp in the tradition of the early Puritans in America, who fiercely opposed the corruption of the human spirit by the worship of idols, of which money is surely one, and especially in the

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[15] Louv makes the important point that nature is much more complicated than urbanity. Sidewalks are orderly; woods walks are not. One is told what to look at by the design of an ad, but nature lets us make our own choices (Louv, 97 etc.).

tradition of antinomian Puritanism, which tended to spawn individualist resisters to whichever new cadre claimed exclusive authority, as finance does now. The Occupy movement is sitting in, working, and playing to start conversations about economics. Complex, multiple, personal experience is their authority. Rather than offering another whole and closed ideology, they hope to add more, open up, and take into account factors as intangible as "innocence, spontaneity, and playfulness" (Lasn, 251). To use Frost's words from "The Lone Striker," this isn't "just a way of talking"; for them "it boded action, deed" (CPPP, 250).

II: The Pleasures of Work: Frost and Psycho-economics

Frost defines work as something that affords one sanity, distraction, interest, and resilience. Frost always earned more money teaching than farming but, in his view, "the rewards were so intangible"—teaching didn't give him the kind of time and peace and manual work that let him write poetry (Parini, 186). He wrote best when he had farm work calling him away: "The whole point of farming was shirking duties" (qtd. in Parini, 167). Parini writes that, "Frost was never good with money, especially at budgeting; he tended to dislike details of this kind, and he often did not know how much money was in his account" (92), but he was skilled at noting his non-mathematical debits and credits, expenses and sudden windfalls.

Frost repeatedly describes work as valuable beyond what it materially produces. He dismisses efficiency and the division of labor. The process of production, the

[16] Kathleen Morrison refers to "the steely-cold look that he could bring to his eyes" (123). But see, too, the photos of a friendlier Frost on pp. 11, 12, and 28 of that same book.

pleasures of the setting, and the collegiality of work—these matter. In “A Prayer in Spring,” the narrator wants to enjoy the fields *now*, not just during harvest: “Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;/And give us not to think so far away/As the uncertain harvest” (CPPP, 21). In “The Pasture,” the speaker’s “going out to clean the pasture spring” but will probably “wait to watch the water clear” and asks for company: “You come too” (CPPP, 3). In “Going for Water,” the task is mixed with pleasure and beauty: “the autumn eve was fair,” and the brook made a lovely sound:

> A note as from a single place,
> A slender tinkling fall that made
> Now drops that floated on the pool
> Like pearls, and now a silver blade. (CPPP, 27)

“Mending Wall” is “just another kind of outdoor game” with a neighbor, “One on a side” (CPPP, 39). In “Build Soil,” Frost writes, “Thought product and food product are to me/Nothing compared to the producing of them” (CPPP, 296). If one doesn’t work too hard, or worry too much about the outcome, then one can attend to and enjoy the full experience of being mildly busy in a lovely setting, with or without human companionship.

The very act of work is a game. The couple in “In the Home Stretch” see the ever-encroaching woods as “’Waiting to steal a step on us whenever/We drop our eyes or turn to other things,/As in the game “Ten-step” the children play’” (CPPP, 111). This fight can be seen as a tragic (since always losing) battle, but here it’s a game—it’s what humans *do* as satisfying work, after all. “A Girl’s Garden” shows us a child playing with “an idle bit/Of walled-off ground,” creating “An ideal one-girl farm” that “she had to

work . . . all by hand" (CPPP, 128). Note the way he associates "idle" with "ideal" by sound; these are parallel concepts for Frost, as long as "idle" involves some observant fiddling around. The girl not only grows "A little bit of everything, /A great deal of none," but she has an experience that makes a "tale" she likes to tell (CPPP, 129). Her experience creates valued stories about play, love, devotion, learning, pride, success, and efficacy. Sometimes Frost's representation of that big scary theme "Man vs. Nature" is more like tag or tennis than force concentration or attrition warfare

Work offers other psychological benefits, too. The cooking fire in "In the Home Stretch" is also "company" and reassuring beauty: it "danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling/As much at home as if they'd always danced there" (CPPP, 112, 114). "Putting in the Seed" is not just work, but a sexualized "springtime passion" (CPPP, 120). The father in "Home Burial" turns to the work of digging his son's grave, and comparisons to work undone--"'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/Will rot the best birch fence a man can build'" (CPPP, 58)—to deal with his child's death. As my father was dying, my mother painted the study; as he was dying, he urged me to go home and take care of my children. One way or another, work distracts us from despair.

Even hard work can be fun. "The Gum-Gatherer" has "a pleasant life": "To loose the resin and take it down/And bring it to market when you please" (CPPP, 135). The preacher in "Snow" seems to enjoy risking his life getting home from a job and making everyone else worry just for "his fun" (CPPP, 149). And in "New Hampshire," "the wiry gang-boss liked the log-jam": "dancing, skipping, with his life" and shouting "'Wasn't she an *i*-deal/Son-of-a-bitch? You bet she was an *i*-deal'" (CPPP, 160). That's his work, and it's a blast.

Inefficiencies in work can make it worthwhile—because of the break or because of the extra attentiveness it applies to the job. In “A Time to Talk,” the narrator stops in the middle of his solitary hoeing to “go up to the stone wall/For a friendly visit” (CPPP, 120). In “The Ax-Helve,” “Baptiste knew how to make a short job long/For love of it, and yet not waste time either” (CPPP, 175). In the tradition of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, working together, with pleasure if less efficiently, seems to be Frost’s ideal. Eve reasoned that they should work separately, “For, while so near each other thus all day/ . . . what wonder if . . . /Looks intervene and smiles, or . . ./Casual discourse draw on,” which prevents them from earning their supper (Book 9, lines 220-224). But Adam reminds her:

> . . . not so strictly hath our Lord imposed
> Labour as to debar us when we need
> Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,
> Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
> Of looks and smiles; for smiles from reason flow
> To brute denied, and are of love the food—
> Love, not the lowest end of human life.
> For not to irksome toil, but to delight,
> He made us, and delight to reason joined. (Book 9, lines 235-243)

What if our fall were really our tendency to work without break, without pleasure?

Work in a factory is just work, but work outside—which is work, and self-directed attention, and pleasure—lets one express one’s own unique being. In “The Self-Seeker,” one man’s walks through the woods, collecting and identifying wild orchids, forms his soul or self: “With you the feet have nearly been the soul,” his friend Willis says (CPPP, 93). At the mill, “Everything goes the same” after he’s injured and gone (CPPP, 94); it’s his walks that make him unique. This man’s personally motivated and

inspired work was his flower hunting, his “flora of the valley” (a potential book?), and “the friends it might bring” him (CPPP, 95). The poem’s title, then, is not so mysteriously “The Self-Seeker” rather than “The Orchid-Seeker”; he’s not self-seeking in a greedy way, but rather he finds himself in his botanizing walks, fulfilling his nature, which for a human being is with nature and with each other. The injured man won’t let the company reimburse him (more than their initial offer of $500) for his inability to continue walking through the woods searching for flowers. To Willis he says, “But that—you didn’t think/That was worth money to me?” (CPPP, 95). His private despair at the end of the poem, however, underlines the pricelessness of the walks, the flowers, the book, and the potential meetings (CPPP, 1000).

Work may entail pleasure, *and* pleasure may get in the way of work. Is the added pleasure worth more than the lost time, the lost production (by not mowing down some of the field to save “a tuft of flowers,” say)? If one can enjoy the work itself, one can perhaps better handle disappointment in the outcome of it—and we are back at “A Prayer in Spring”: “Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;/And give us not to think so far away/As the uncertain harvest” (CPPP, 21): process can make up for product.

Frost’s famous lines from “Two Tramps in Mud Time” point towards the complex and ineffable relationship between a man and his work: “My object in living is to unite/My avocation and my vocation” (CPPP, 252). This may be a too pat an aphorism, but earlier parts of the poem illuminate the complexities that Frost sums up in this final stanza. The narrator says of his chopping:

> The blows that a life of self-control
> Spares to strike for the common good
> That day, giving a loose to my soul,

I spent on the unimportant wood. (CPPP, 251)

Notorious for his temper, Frost depicts his speaker as burying some of his anger in his work -- a benefit of inestimable value to the people around him.

One might also say that the work has drawn the wood chopper out on a perfect day, one that teeters between late winter and late spring—which is another benefit of work--, but it would also be right to see this tenterhooks as one of emotion as well as weather. Frost writes,

Be glad of water but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth. (CPPP, 252)

This cold frost and this angry Frost may both appear with a slight change in cloud or wind, and this may explain the speaker's sudden shift from sympathy to hard stubbornness toward the tramp who wants his therapeutic work. The speaker chops for "love" and "play," not for "gain" or "need," but he also chops for psychological stability (CPPP, 252).

Frost repeatedly uses the chopping of wood to represent the value of work for its own sake, which indirectly suggests the negative side effects of outsourcing chores (in other words, of the division of labor as opposed to its mystical unity). In "Two Tramps in Mud Time," the speaker agrees that need trumps love, but the main idea seems to be that these two different goals should not "exist in twain" but be combined in one endeavor (CPPP, 252). The speaker valorizes the work done when "love and need are one,/And the work is play" (CPPP, 252). We see a similar love of ax-work in "The

Wood-Pile": "It was a cord of maple, cut and split/And piled—and measured, four by four by eight," carefully built and then ignored (CPPP, 101). But someone must have gotten some good out of it, "Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks" (CPPP, 101); and now its slow decay chafes the poem into being, as it brings the poet into communion with the long-departed ax-man. We've already seen how Baptiste does a thorough job making an ax-helve because he loves the work; he makes a new one for his neighbor, unasked, because he cares about the work and the product. Baptiste's work affords him pride and pleasure; he is fully involved in attending to the detail of the wood: "the lines," "the grain," its "curves" and "waves" (CPPP, 175, 176). Priscilla Patton describes something similar in "After Apple-Picking": "commitment, perception, and imagination have enriched the ordinary" (51). Hiring a chopper, buying an ax—neither offers this value.

Stargazing is compared to wood-chopping in "The Star-Splitter," in which Brad McLaughlin argues,

> 'The best thing that we're put here for's to see;
> The strongest thing that's given us to see with's
> A telescope. Someone in every town
> Seems to me owes it to the town to keep one.
> In Littleton it may as well be me.' (CPPP, 166-7)

To borrow phrasing from "The Lone Striker," Brad thinks that there are stars that need seeing. Brad believes we were put on earth to observe what we can, to take the time and use the best tools we have for that task. The poem dignifies star-watching to the level of the productive work of splitting wood: Frost's narrator says that it "ought to do some

good if splitting stars/'Sa thing to be compared with splitting wood" (CPPP, 168). Both become a kind of meditative attention that is valuable to the splitter.[17]

In "Pan with Us" Frost also contrasts Pan and nature with "new terms of worth" related to unrelenting human work (CPPP, 32). Pan appears finds his pipes less powerful than he once did: "He tossed his pipes, too hard to teach/A new-world song, far out of reach" (CPPP, 32). The explanation: "the world had found new terms of worth. . . ./Play? Play?—What should he play?" (CPPP, 32). Work and play can be one, but this new world's "new terms of worth" seem to value play-less work above all.[18] Pan recommends the value of more, or—as his name suggests—all.

Our most fundamental needs may be food and shelter, but Frost's depiction of work suggests that with the right attitude, setting, expectations, and attention, work itself can offer us *companionship* and *participation*, *understanding* or expertise, *identity* and the chance for personal *creativity*, and even *leisure* and *freedom*.[19] In economist Manfred Max-Neef's terminology, Frost depicts work as a "synergistic satisfier" of all nine most important human needs: subsistence and protection (the basics) as well as the seven just noted in italics.[20] Frost's 1937 lecture titled "Poverty and Poetry" underscores these

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[17] Richard Poirier's *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* explores the relationship between physical labor, an actual contending with earthly facts, and the imagination or poetry. He argues that in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, Frost emphasizes the need to be truly present, participatory, even resistant, so that the facts becomes "transform[d] into poetry" (284). Even if one is not writing poetry, however, one can be moved and transformed by meditative attention to one's work.

[18] The way Frost and his wife Elinor raised their children suggest that they approved a free and playful exploration of the world (Parini, 146).

[19] These nine categories of our needs are Manfred Max-Neef's, summarized at the Deep Ecology Index website.

[20] "Satisfiers also have different characteristics: they can be violators or destroyers, pseudosatisfiers, inhibiting satisfiers, singular satisfiers, or synergic satisfiers. Max-Neef

ideas of work. After reading "Two Tramps in Mud Time," he said: "That last part is what I wanted to read to you. It has nothing to do with the times. It is a very general thing: getting your need and your love together in everything" (CPPP, 767).

III: Household Economics and "The Housekeeper"

Students are often warned that micro-economics cannot be simply scaled up to explain macro-economics, the implication being that macro-economic forces are just so much more complex than their individual agents. But that's an oversimplification of the micro-level. Just as a shoreline gets much longer as one starts to measure every in and out of the cliff-line, and nearly infinite by the edging of every shoreline grain of sand, so looking closely at the economic situation of a single household reveals greater and greater complexity. Since each of us is just an individual, the details do not have to scale up to be meaningful or instructive.

The title of "The Investment" already suggests economics, and the poem is about choices made under duress. While a man works in a potato field, "counting winter dinners, one a hill," the "old, old house" has been "renewed with paint/And in it a piano loudly playing" (CPPP, 242). Whatever else more practical they might have bought with

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shows that certain satisfiers, promoted as satisfying a particular need, in fact inhibit or destroy the possibility of satisfying other needs: e.g, the arms race, while ostensibly satisfying the need for protection, in fact then destroys subsistence, participation, affection and freedom; formal democracy, which is supposed to meet the need for participation often disempowers and alienates; commercial television, while used to satisfy the need for recreation, interferes with understanding, creativity and identity - the examples are everywhere.

"Synergic satisfiers, on the other hand, not only satisfy one particular need, but also lead to satisfaction in other areas: some examples are breast-feeding; self-managed

the money, the couple chooses to "get some color and music out of life" (CPPP, 242). This contrasts with the place "Over back where they speak of life as staying/(You couldn't call it living, for it ain't)" (CPPP, 242). In spite of this pervasive culture, "the cold," and his need to "count dinners," the digger pauses "With half an ear to the piano's vigor" (CPPP, 242). Like the homeless man that economist Steven D. Levitt notices outside his car window, this man with few "assets" has splurged on an old-fashioned version of "nice headphones" (Dubner). Maybe it's strange that these two men have musical assets seemingly beyond their means, but music is a synergistic satisfier of seven of the nine fundamental human needs listed at the end of the last section. Our general awareness of Maslow's pyramidal hierarchy of needs sometimes means that we undervalue or ignore the needs at the top of the pyramid. These men are poor, but they don't just stay; they try to live.

"The Housekeeper" reveals the complexities of household economics, with its seemingly infinite number of bottom lines: not just the usual single one, or even the three proposed by environmentalist accounting. Gender and power are usually overlooked or oversimplified by neoclassical economists, which assumes "men and women are free and equal individuals negotiating rationally what's best for the household;" and "rationally" is understood to mean that "we want to maximize utility, maximize growth, maximize income, and maximize production" (Beneria, 150, 152). But consider the value of the housekeeper's presence (whether or not she and John are lovers), the difference between a home and a property that can be sold for money, and the value of any possession

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production; popular education; democratic community organisations; preventative medicine; meditation; educational games" (Deep Ecology Index website.)

beyond its numerical cost. These issues take into account human emotions: pride, love and care, an appreciation of life and beauty, and pleasure in accomplishments. Because these other things are not especially rational, it may seem like old-fashioned sentimentality to name them, but it is surely a costly folly to pretend that they do not exist for us.

The old woman (the housekeeper's mother) sewing at the beginning of "The Housekeeper" says, "'My fingers are about all I've the use of/So's to take any comfort. I can sew:/ I help out with this beadwork what I can'" (CPPP, 82). We can assume she gets paid for decorating the dancing pumps, but she describes her sewing as something to take consolation in. She is stuck in the house, immobile, and when she says, "'Lord, if I were to dream of everyone/Whose shoes I primped to dance in!" we can also see the way that the shoes are a link to the world outside the house, to joy and beauty and youth (CPPP, 82). She manages not to let this become envy, but instead a symbol of distant community like the "tuft of flowers" is to the mower. She works for money, for "comfort," for a sense of accomplishment or use, to feel alive, to be involved in the lives of others, and to participate in and perhaps relive the fun of parties and courtship.

John shares these ideas about work—it's a pleasure, a satisfaction—but the old woman says of him: "I never saw a man let family troubles/Make so much difference in his man's affairs" (CPPP, 83). This is both an attack on his masculinity (discussed by Rotella) and a statement of the way that feelings are important factors in labor and trade. John happily mixes his work and pleasure, perhaps letting pleasure take the upper hand, but going along fine in his way. "He's fond of nice things—too fond, some would say," which doesn't take the modern (limited) meaning of majoring in business or engineering

so he can buy a Lexus (CPPP, 85). He produces "Nice things" by gently caring for them: he brings the hens into the living room before a show, washes them, and combs their plumage (CPPP, 86). Their "pretty things are all outdoors" and, like the man with the piano and newly painted house, "Our hens and cows and pigs are always better/Than folks like us have any business with" (CPPP, 85). That's the important thing. Keeping the hens and bragging about what he's been offered for them are his satisfaction**:**

> John likes to tell the offers he has had,
> Twenty for this cock, twenty-five for that.
> He never takes the money. If they're worth
> That much to sell, they're worth as much to keep. (CPPP, 86)

Value can cut both ways. He puts greater value on the money in his head, in the stories of these offers (remember the value of the stories in "A Girl's Garden"), and in the respect he gains (for himself or from others) by having such lovely animals.

Estelle, the housekeeper, seems to have been quite happy in this arrangement, too, but something else ineffable and uncountable turned her against it. She liked caring for the chickens: "Estelle don't complain: she's like him there./She wants our hens to be the best there are" and "She seems to have the housework, and besides/Half of the outdoor work, though as for that,/He'd say she does it more because she likes it" (CPPP, 85). Estelle found a safe home for herself and her mother: "We came here for a home for me, you know" (CPPP, 85). She has friends, her mother is happy enough, and "John's no threatener/Like some menfolk" (CPPP, 84). The narrator cannot "get to the root" of the "real trouble" that causes Estelle to leave John and marry someone else (CPPP, 87). But in the vague math of feelings, John's too great love for the chickens at the expense of

being a more successful farmer and Estelle's need to be married seem to have outweighed all that. Frost's poem lets the old lady criticize John's extra-economic values at the same time that the poem criticizes the way conventions and conventional economics sap the joy out of both work and love.

John wanted a housekeeper, but the implication is that Estelle is also his lover and that she should have become his wife. John failed to make their arrangement contractual, make it the normal serious business. If John had married Estelle, perhaps their extra-economic relationships—those complicated valuations that happen inside the family unit, that cannot quite be counted and compared—could have continued, safe from outside appraisals. Marriage has long and often been an economic move, but from within, a marriage holds and protects all sorts of other trade-offs and gifts and pleasures. Without the marriage that protects this antithetical economic system, though, it seems that Estelle can only go against the norms for fifteen years, no longer. She leaves this unofficial economic and anti-economic arrangement, with all its non-monetary, immaterial values, and marries someone else.

But something valuable will become valueless. The home they comprise will "smash," the farm they live on can't be sold because "It's too run down" (CPPP, 83). The two women "will leave an empty house" and the property "isn't worth the mortgage" (CPPP, 83, 85). Suddenly this comfortable, productive home—made up of two women, a man, and many spoiled chickens-- becomes worthless. The glossy real estate sections of the Sunday newspaper may lead us to forget it, but didn't we already know that a home is worth much more than a house or a piece of land?

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Frost also refuses to measure a home with money. The hired man could go to his rich brother, but he comes to the couple he used to work for, talking up new plans for work he'll do (work they know he won't do). They take him in, give him tea, make him comfortable, listen to him pretend he's going to earn his keep, and thus help him sustain his idea of himself to the moment of his death. Home is either "the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in" or "Something you somehow haven't to deserve" (CPPP, 43). What's that worth?

IV: *Bioeconomics and "Build Soil"*

In "Mowing," Frost did *not* write "The *profit* is the sweetest *fact* that labor knows"; he valued the *fact* for the *dream* with which it invests labor (CPPP, 26). It's not Nature (abstract, capitalized) that is so valuable to Frost. It's natural detail: this spider web, that tuft of flowers, a sound in the trees, a specific experience in the woods. He may have written about farmers, too, but the best farmers could fully appreciate the setting in which they worked. A clear example of this is the short poem "Dust of Snow":

> The way a crow
> Shook down on me
> The dust of snow
> From a hemlock tree
>
> Has given my heart
> A change of mood
> And saved some part
> Of a day I had rued. (CPPP, 205)

In one sentence, which probably takes no longer to read than the branchful of snow takes to fall, the speaker's feeling is completely altered. Another life-changing moment is described in "Two Look at Two": an accidental twilight meeting between two couples (human and deer) makes all the difference: "the earth in one unlooked-for favor/Had made them certain earth returned their love" (CPPP, 212). Adelson and Elder write, "One way [Frost] accomplished so much amid severe personal turbulence was by a daily practice of fixing his eye on the changing face of nature (5).

Work and play in nature make life viable psychologically--offering the priceless, almost mystical, service of creating us—and the more utilitarian gifts of nature are always wrapped and beribboned, or perhaps infused, with these other life-giving gifts. In "Blueberries," every single character sees the blueberries as both an economic resource and *something more*. Patterson "won't make the fact that they're rightfully his/An excuse for keeping us other folk out" (CPPP, 63). The berries enable his neighborliness. The speaker sees beauty: "The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves,/Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves" (CPPP, 65). Even the Lorens, who depend on wild berries, don't let the berry gathering keep them from less utilitarian pursuits: "I met them one day and each had a flower/Stuck into his berries as fresh as a shower'" (CPPP, 64). The berries are more than just food, and gathering the berries involves gathering more than just berries.

Beyond berries, Frost represents the great value of natural endowments even if they are not transformed into utilized capital. In "Christmas Trees," the narrator's pines do more for him than the money he could get for selling them: "thirty dollars seemed so small beside/The extent of pasture I should strip" (CPPP, 105). He recognizes the value

of the trees-- he does not want to "leave the slope behind the house all bare,/Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon"--but also that this is different from the value others would place on them. He says,

> . . . I'd hate to hold my trees except
> As others hold theirs or refuse for them,
> Beyond the time of profitable growth,
> The trial by market everything must come to. (CPPP, 104)

But keeping his trees is not just an aesthetic consideration. In the language of ecological economist Robert Costanza, the trees offer an "ecosystem service." Contradicting Secretary of Agriculture (1971-1976) Earl Butz's recommendation that farms be planted from "fencerow to fencerow," alternative farmer (and English major) Joel Salatin describes the work accomplished by a lovely stand of trees on the edge of a field: "'Feel how cool it is in here," and "Those deciduous trees work like an air conditioner. That reduces the stress on the animals in the summer'" (qtd. in Pollan, 52, 223). Although not deciduous, Frost's pines still offer shade, "hold moisture and prevent erosion" (Pollan, 223). Salatin continues, "There's not a spreadsheet in the world that can measure the value of maintaining forest on the northern slopes of a farm" (qtd. in Pollan, 223). And as a summer resident of Frost's last farm, I can say that people arrive from all over the area to walk up through the pines on the property. They are a cathedral of light and shade: "the young fir balsams like a place/Where houses all are churches and have spires" (CPPP, 104).

It's not just trees that are worth more than they can be sold for. In "A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey's Ears and Some Books," Davis owns "a solid mica mountain/ . . . that would someday make his fortune," but his day's outing on the mountain offers

observations and conversations that have nothing to do with that fortune in minerals (CPPP, 196). In "Unharvested," the "apple fall" has left an appreciated "scent of ripeness," and "one circle of solid red," so "May something go always unharvested!"; that abjuration of efficiency almost undoes the Fall from the Garden of Eden, since "smelling their sweetness would be no theft" (CPPP, 277). "After Apple-Picking" ponders the same kind of surplus as something to dream on when the quest for efficiency is exhausted. In "There Are Roughly Zones," the peach tree—no doubt ostensibly planted to supply peaches, sustenance with pleasure—is also something else: a hope, a risk, an attempt at freedom: "It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the peach./What comes over a man, is it soul or mind—/That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?" (CPPP, 278). The mountain is an adventure into the unknown; the peach tree is a dream to find some wiggle-room in nature's rules of phenology. Here the greatest success would be a rule overridden, an exception to the fact that "There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed" (CPPP, 278). Freedom subsists in the "roughly" determinate part of laws, including economic laws. The standing pine trees, the fallen apples, and the potential peaches are all worth more (and other) than the price one might have gotten for them.

"Build Soil" is about economics from start to end. A farmer named Meliboeus, "struck" by "Hard times," had to "give [his] interval farm up/For interest" and "bought a mountain farm/For nothing down" (CPPP, 289).[21] He's moved from growing potatoes to selling wool from his sheep, although potatoes had sold "At thirty cents a bushel" and

[21] An interval farm is one in a valley (Parini, 278).

now "wool's down to seven cents a pound" (CPPP, 289). But he's got a plan that means skipping the market: he'll "dress up in sheep's clothing and eat sheep" (CPPP, 289). In other words, "what you raise or grow, why feed it out,/Eat it or plow it under where it stands/To build the soil" (CPPP, 295).[22] He'll wear wool and eat mutton, and he'll use what's left over to improve the land he's got, and thus in future production.

Often read as a parable about how to be a poet, "Build Soil" also seems like it was written for J.I. Rodale's *Organic Farming and Gardening*. The farmer asks, "Why should I/Have to sell you my apples and buy yours?" (CPPP, 293). The poet says that the market is "destiny" but that there's much on the market that should be "kept back": "To sell the hay off, let alone the soil,/Is an unpardonable sin in farming" (CPPP, 294-95). That may be, but it happens all the time. Farmer sell the capital upon which their production depends: land, a stand of trees that offers uncountable value to the farm, "hay" that could feed the livestock, the portion of crop that should have been saved for seed, or even "soil" (294).[23] In essence, Frost is arguing for the non-intensive local economy, the return to the land, the "good life" of Helen Nearing and radical economist Scott Nearing who together influentially wrote that "Whole food can be grown only upon whole soil" and then gave detailed instructions on composting and mulching (88, 87-95).[24]

[22] Frost does not always depict the market is not bad in itself; one's perspective and how one participates in it determine its effect. The market, like the encroachment of nature in "In the Home Stretch," can be invigorating. It keeps us on our toes, gives us something to do, to play with. The farmer prefers to think that trade, "like any bandying/Of words or toys, it ministers to health. It very likely quickens and refines us" (CPPP, 293).

[23] On the very day I wrote this sentence, I left out soil, doubting if a farmer would sell their soil. Then driving from Ripton to Burlington on the 116, I saw a sign on someone's property that read: "TOPSOIL For Sale."

[24] Scott Nearing's sudden firing from the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Business in 1915 was famously known as an egregious breach of academic freedom.

In addition, then, to highlighting the psychological values of the experience of work and nature, Frost explores the ways that economics must learn from and encompass biological externalities, too. To build soil is a farming practice, the exact value of which is difficult to calculate, and it's work that pays off only indirectly and in the long run. To build soil is also a way of changing the value of what one owns and uses for production, one's capital -- and it breaks the rule that capital depreciates. In this way, then, Frost further redefines capital: the capital entails the corpus, as the head entails the body, and the calculation must entail tangible, instinctive, and emotive experience.

V: Our Hold on a Somewhat Broken Planet: Frost's Ecological Economics

Frost depicts nature both as a loving mother who treats us better than we deserve, and as completely independent and unreadable by most people. "Our Hold on the Planet," suggests we are lucky that our foolish wishes are ignored:[25]

> We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.
> It didn't lose its temper at our demand
> And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand
> And give us more than our spokesman bargained for;
> And just because we owned to a wish for rain,
> Send us a flood and bid us be damned and drown.
> It gently threw us a glittering shower down.
> And when we had taken that into the roots of grain,
> It threw us another and then another still
> Till the spongy soil again was natal wet.

And is also related to the fight to introduce alternative economic theories into the academic setting.

[25] See Robert N. Watson, 83-116, on nature and foolish wishes.

We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
Take nature altogether since time began,
Including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favor of man,
Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased. (CPPP, 317)

Over time, that "fraction of one percent" in our favor is all it takes for evolutionary success. But the balance is certainly tenuous: to use ecological economist Buzz Holling's pictorial metaphors, our climate is like a ball resting unsteadily on the top of a curve; it does not have to be moved far to lose its equilibrium (Hulme, 188-9, referring to Buzz Holling, 1986). This poem may seem to offer a rare happy ending in a story about human wishes and nature's boon, but "our hold on the planet" is increasing only because we didn't succeed in holding it. That very population growth, the mark of nature's being in our favor, unsettles the weather that sustained it. We lose, and we lose ourselves, when we hold the earth too tightly, forgetting those externalities and preferring to understand the earth as only to be used for our convenience.

Just as presciently, Frost's "The Broken Drought" captures a problem that James Hansen and Bill McKibben have faced in trying to warn the world to limit global warming: a little good weather undermines their whole message. A speaker warns of drought, while it starts to rain outside. The rain "rather hurt his theory of the drought" but

. . . in his heart he was unshaken sure
The drought was one no spit of rain could cure.

It was the drought of deserts. Earth would soon
Be uninhabitable as the moon. (CPPP, 363)

The prophet's being "unshaken" by contrary evidence would seem to undermine his credibility, but the rain is "stingy" and there's something impressive, too, in the prophet's steadfastness. The poem's final couplet does not critique the prophet, nor reassure that all is well because nature always returns to her old patterns. Instead, after "Earth would soon/Be uninhabitable as the moon" the couplet asks two questions: "What for that matter had it ever been?" and "Who advised man to come and live therein?" (CPPP, 363). In other words, nature doesn't owe us a thing.

In "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," we see an early introduction of the argument between "strong" and "weak" sustainability, as well as some biological and natural facts that "break [the] logic" of rational economics. Strong ecological economists believe that natural resources are irreplaceable, while weak ecological economists seem to believe that human technology can replace the resources that nature provides. Robert Solow, for example, notoriously stated (although he has since taken it back), "The world can, in effect, get along without natural resources" (qtd. in Lasn, 196). Frost's literate farmer thinks that a strange light in the night sky is "'one big blob/Of electricity in bulk the way/The sun sets the example in the day'" (CPPP, 337). The visitor argues that the interrupting night, which keeps us from work, has great value; it's "the precious dark," that can "ease attention" and "break our logic" (CPPP, 337). But the farmer says that

A good cheap anti-dark is now the need.
Give us a good cheap twenty-four-hour day,
No part of which we'd have to waste, I say,
And who knows where we can't get. (CPPP, 337)

The repetition of “cheap” casts some doubt on the value of lighting up the night sky—which itself has many unforeseen costs[26]---and it also might remind 21st-century readers of the hidden costs of cheap food, cheap clothes, and cheap oil. That the speaker is “a literate farmer”—someone who might read too much, trusting his magazines instead of his lived experience—also might be a way that Frost undermines his ideas. But the value of rest, the pause, the chat at the fence—Frost’s consistent positive depiction of these moments within work—are a condemnation of this farmer’s enthusiasm for change, too. It should also be a warning to the rest of us that the electrical engineers are not the only ones who should be deciding if and when we ever need a break. We are biology, too, and “bionomics” (Lasn, 191-2) must take into account our human needs. Psychology and biology are just as hard to untangle from one another as economics and nature.

Frost depicts another way in which scientific efficiencies have demeaned the pleasures, specific intelligences, and nature-loving values of farming. In “Bursting Rapture,” the farmer’s methods have been changed and updated: “any gain/Was made by getting science on the brain” (CPPP, 362). Farming was once “a simple way to earn” but now it’s a “stern” “discipline,” full of “strain.” Frost’s “physician” says it will all be ended “in one burst” of “a certain bomb.” This may be the “burst” of nuclear apocalypse, but “Bursting Rapture” also seems to refer to the way pragmatic scientific farming practices have “burst” the sensually fulfilling “rapture” of the “simple” farmer’s daily

[26] Verlyn Klinkenborg describes the way light pollution messes with our circadian rhythms, and the migration, reproduction, and feeding of many animals. Like “damming a river” the “benefits” of lighting up the night “come with consequences.” “So fundamental are these rhythms to our being that altering them is like altering gravity,” he

work. Similarly, mathematical economics has encouraged many of us to work against our best interests: our psychological interests, our biological interests, and our survival interests—all of which are economic interests.

VI: Concluding by Listening to "A Servant to Servants"

The form and content of "A Servant to Servants" reflect the complexity of economic decisions; render infirm the ideas of fixed and natural capital; and highlight the role of intangibles such as gender/power differentials, entrepreneurship, talent, physical pleasure, and imagination. The poet's words are concrete and active, vivid and moving, and show that one can discuss economics in the plain voice Frost valued so highly as the true medium of wisdom.

John Robert Doyle reads "A Servant to Servants" as being about "the *mental* condition of one person," and as depicting the "web of interrelationships" that reveal various characters' perspectives on the woman's mental health (Doyle, 115, 117). But he puts this psychological issue in economic terms:

> Undoubtedly the shore they have is *worth* something, but *the returns* will come too late. Perhaps as nothing else in the poem, the beauty of the lake and its *economic value* emphasize the tragic situation: the body and mind and spirit are too tired to grasp the beauty so easily accessible, and *economic returns* the lake will probably some day make will come too late to restore body, mind, and spirit. (117, my italics)

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continues. And he goes so far as to say, "Living in the glare of our own making, we have cut ourselves off from our evolutionary and cultural patrimony."

The woman is certainly unhappy, but her situation is not unusual. People often put off pleasure, saying that they will rest and get their rewards after the hard work is done. But the hard work may never end, or it ends too late for them to benefit from it. “Len says one steady pull more ought to do it./He says the best way out is always through,” but the woman only sees death or the State Asylum as her end (CPPP, 66).

We can blame all sorts of things for the unhappiness of this “Servant to Servants”—the “houseful of hungry men,” her family history, her husband’s personality, her own mental instability—but we could also look at her economic situation as a wife (CPPP, 65). *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* says that Len is an “unfeeling husband who neglects her for his many business enterprises” (681), but I see no proof of his callousness in the poem. Len seems to have proposed marriage when she hoped he would, and he “looks on the bright side of everything” (CPPP, 66). He, too, works hard. He seems cheerfully optimistic about the speaker’s potential to feel better; Doyle says that “the one thing wrong with Len is that he does not see well in the shadows (118). The woman is burnt out, can’t recover with this workload, and the lake’s beauty isn’t enough anymore--although she doesn’t know how it would affect her if she had the energy and took a moment to enjoy it.

Is Len callous or just an American man struggling to make one of his entrepreneurial projects work out, and a married man who expects his wife to be highly invested in their joint success? Perhaps it’s a standard plot to sacrifice one’s partner on the way to success, but Len is not Clyde Griffith, drowning Roberta in the lake (as in Dreiser’s *The American Tragedy*). Instead, like Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men*, Frost shows that not everyone can succeed and “liv off the fatta the lan” (56, 57, 69, 105), even this beautiful land. Frost’s

critique is not so much about the weaknesses of individual people; in one way or another, we are all weak, and there are deep and stubborn complexities in a rural economy (and other ones, too). Frost includes inconvenient externalities in this economic story: feelings, mind changing, and exhaustion. The economics of the situation is not separate from these other issues.

Len struggles, too, but he gets to decide the plan. They sold their other land, presumably to move up in the world. After all, "thrift or satiation is the ultimate enemy" of the growth model because "if people are happy with what they have in a natural environment . . . GDP goes down" (Fleet describing Kenneth Boulding's ideas, 311-312). Dissatisfaction was probably a prime motivation for buying this land by the lake, but they are not historically connected to it, and it has no doubt become a drag on their income and led to debt, thus creating or aggravating their money trouble. As Herman Daly says,

> There is a balance between the old John Wayne American view of you-can-do-anything-if-you-set-your-mind-to it, nothing is impossible, all dreams can be fulfilled if you just do it . . . [and the reality that] there are certain things that are impossible. (qtd. by Fleet, 311)

"Len undertakes too much," hopefully building vacation cottages by the lake one year, and "This year/It's highways" (CPPP, 67). Len's "work's a man's work, of course, from sun to sun,/But he works when he works as hard as I do" (CPPP, 67). The woman suggests that "sun to sun" is quite a bit shorter than the time she works, which is probably accurate if she's feeding the men once they sit down at the end of their workday, "Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk/While I fry their bacon" (CPPP, 67). Len

makes decisions and gets some rest, but the speaker is endlessly "cooking meals," "washing dishes after them," "doing/Things over and over that just won't stay done" (CPPP, 66).

Her mother, too, had too much demanded of her, caring for her caged, insane brother-in-law: "That was what marrying father meant to her" (CPPP, 68). Through an exploration of these women's work, Len's entrepreneurial attempts at success (in town ways), and Len and his wife's different attitudes towards their natural resources, Frost highlights the influence that intangibles such as gender roles, morale, self-determination, communication, cleverness, and imagination exert in economics.

Perhaps the woman has a "haunting fear that she has inherited the streak of madness in her family" (Garnett), but the family story may also tell us that she is cursed like Canaan to be a servant to servants. Noah cursed Canaan because Canaan's father Ham saw Noah naked (Genesis, 9:20-29). In Frost's narrative, the woman's mother certainly saw her brother-in-law naked: "he paraded/With his clothes on his arm—all of his clothes" (CPPP, 68). Noah's curse has been used to explain and justify the Canaanites' losing their land to Abraham's descendants, medieval serfdom, and African slavery. The title of the poem, then, suggests something about the woman's position: her unending work for others and her gradual psychological dispossession of the land and the lake where she lives.

Frost depicts the moment of rest as what makes labor possible, personal, and even meaningful. The speaker knows, and feels, that "work ain't all" (CPPP, 67). At one time, she could be rejuvenated by pausing and noticing the setting in which she works:

It took my mind off doughnuts and soda biscuit

To step outdoors and take the water dazzle
A sunny morning, or take the rising wind
About my face and body and through my wrapper,
When a storm threatened from the Dragon's Den
And a cold chill shivered across the lake. (CPPP, 66)

It's not just the view that helps her: her whole body is present, refreshed in the breeze that seems to whip through her clothes and touch her. The intimacy of place and self is invigorating. Her setting seems to exist inside her, and she in it. And thus her imaginings of the man "out on the ground," separated from the rain by only his tent, almost as flimsy and flappy as her "wrapper," show her yearning as a natural being, where inside and outside are so barely divided (CPPP, 69, 66).

But the poem is also all about insides, even literal cages—a traditional conceit for a woman's limited scope (as Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman have memorably evoked it). She could once step outdoors to enjoy the lake, but now stands inside at the window and "repeat[s] out loud/the advantages" of the lake, but it's only "voice-like," unconvincing, telling her she "ought to feel" but not making her feel that way (CPPP, 65-66). And she has been in smaller cages: "The State Asylum," and also "a sort of cage/Or room within a room" built for her uncle, and one she habitually played in as a child:

It got so I would say—you know, half fooling—
"It's time I took my turn upstairs in jail"—
Just as you will till it becomes a habit. (CPPP, 67, 68, 69)

Maybe she's completely overworked, just as most of us sometimes feel, but she (and we) also put ourselves in jail—we work indoors without pause--out of habit. We can see that

she is restricting herself, keeping herself from the moments that would make her happy. And we are probably sympathetic, knowing we do the same to ourselves. Why didn't I take that walk through the pines on more mornings this summer?

In a later poem, also with a title that hearkens back to the Bible, Frost describes a woman with a very different relationship to work. "The Silken Tent" also has "a vaguely biblical feel, as in the 'Song of Songs,' where the bride is beautiful 'as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon'" (Parini, 321). This woman

> . . . is as in a field a silken tent
> At midday when a sunny summer breeze
> Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
> So that in guys it gently sways at ease. (CPPP, 302)

Out in a breeze like the one that the servant to servants recalls so vividly, this woman seems free and yet loosely attached "By countless silken ties of love and thought," to which she has responsibilities and commitments (CPPP, 302). Unlike the servant to servants, this woman is comfortably linked to "everything on earth" (CPPP, 302). Instead of feeling trapped by cooking for a bunch of men, this second woman is "at ease" within the "guys." Her relationship to what are probably chosen commitments is comfortable, "And only by one's going slightly taut/In the capriciousness of summer air/Is [she] of the slightest bondage made aware" (CPPP, 302). Both the breeze and the guy-ropes exert a force, but in the play among them, there are incalculable flows of externalities in which she can dance – not fully free, but with pleasure and love that express and fulfill her humanity.

These depictions of ways women can occupy their own lives, the different ways people and the world can surround them and feel to them, is perhaps why William Dean Howells said that Frost saw well into "the heart of womanhood" (qtd. in Parini, 172). But these poems also depict ways any worker—male or female—can be related to his or her work. Frost's women often seem unable to fully appreciate nature, but perhaps Frost saw the way that women's work (indoors, sometimes alone, and sometimes indoors *and* outdoors and so then just too much) makes it more difficult to find joy in or in-between work.[27] If the ropes are too tight, or the winds blow too fiercely, the sheer tension can (like poverty) make it feel as if there is no play in life.

The value of capital doesn't stay fixed any more than a birch fence or a stone wall. Fatigue and a feeling of dispossession change the value of things; these feelings are economic variables as well as physical facts. When the servant to servants says "We've a good piece of shore/That ought to be worth something, and may yet," the enjambment suggests her inability to see beyond classical economic efficiencies: it's likely that she primarily means that the land could bring good money if it were leased or sold or if their holiday-cabin business were to thrive (CPPP, 66). But the lake *is* lovely: pollution or by-pass roads have not altered its value. The sometimes-empty holiday cottages suggest the fluctuations of monetary capital value, but the lake has mainly lost value because the speaker's mind has changed. Relentless work and just-as-relentless abstract but seemingly precise numerical valuations can make us stop noticing our own ineffable but

[27] These women include not only the discouraged woman in "In the Home Stretch," the miserable woman in "A Servant to Servants," and Estelle, who retreats into conventional marriage in "The Housekeeper," but also the mother in "Home Burial" and perhaps the

vivid feelings, make us stop paying attention to our actual experience. Lasn highlights, “Life under capitalism is a spiritual battle to keep feeling something, to stay in the emotional game, to hang onto your emotional heartland as a fully functional human being (247).

Similarly, perspective mediates the value of the land in “In the Home Stretch.” The woman stands at the window and sees “weeds” and “latter years” stretching out before her (CPPP, 108, 109). Her husband says, “’Come from that window where you see too much,/And take a livelier view of things from here” (CPPP, 110). The movers gawk and joke at the idea of living on and working their own farms, and their attitude “almost shook” the couple who are getting “What we have always wanted” (CPPP, 111). But the couple insist that they are “in paradise,” and they list the beauties of the farm: “the old peach trees on the knoll,” “starlight in the grass,” “apple, cherry, peach,/Pine, alder, pasture, mowing, well, and brook” (CPPP, 113, 114). There’s no knowing if this attitude will last—the woman has already imagined it changing—but, for the moment, the farm is a valuable capital investment. The farm, itself, can be improved with work, but it can also be significantly devalued by the owners’ attitudes.

The way the servant to servants jumps from topic to topic may be a comment on how tangled one gets if one never pauses from work, or it may be intended to suggest her mental instability, but I think it’s also a way for Frost to tell an inclusive and complex economic story, one that shows us the various lives, perspectives, opportunities, gender expectations, family histories, accidents, talents, ambitions, dreams, and pleasures that

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attitude of “The Hill Wife” (although in “The Impulse” its unclear whether she escapes from or escapes to nature).

impinge on any economic situation. Because she trails off, jumps from topic to topic, holds herself back in some ways and is confessional in others, we can see the big picture. Jonathan Skinner's description of ecopoetics describes this formal technique:

> In ecopoetics, one often sees a deep dissatisfaction with
> given social and cultural structures. Ecopoetics is restless. Emphasis on
> the irreducible presence of the body can make ecopoetics a site for
> work that is radically different from that of the modernist poem. It's a
> kind of boundary work, about networks and crossing. . . .
>
> (qtd. in Hume, 760)

This dissatisfied woman's voice, jumping all over the place, asking questions and seeming to answer them before the other speaker is quite done, is certainly restless: she never gets a chance to rest, and she's jumpy. Instead of an abstraction--a theory of work, the American dream, socialism, or other economic theories—her experience, feelings, and bodily self are the locus of the poem.

If it's limited and constrained, then our work cannot hold and express all of us. The lake is "a fair, pretty sheet of water," "so long and narrow,/ Like a deep piece of some old running river/Cut short off at both ends" (CPPP, 65-66). This is a lovely description of a landscape, but it may also suggest the speaker's situation: a flowing river that tries to fit into a narrow setting and seems flat and gets cut off at both ends. We are each of us usually more than the job we fit our lives within; only very few of us get to use all our talents, follow all our druthers. Economic considerations tend to force us into one shape or another. We can see our college students working this out for themselves; but Frost and other poets may suggest to them what they're missing by chasing money, what their bargain may cost.

The woman is speaking to a camper by the lake, who is a botanist and maybe an aesthete. He came to Willoughby because he read about it "in a book about ferns" (CPPP, 66). If this doesn't seem whimsical or flighty enough already, she adds, "Listen to that!/ You let things more like feathers regulate your going and coming" (CPPP, 66). He lets himself be ruled by the seemingly weakest force. But by keeping his eye on the intricacies of nature, living in it instead of sheltering from it and blindly plowing through it, the naturalist seems to have the happiness and freedom that the speaker craves. Botany was one of Frost's avocations (Parini, 56), and perhaps this poem is his working out the balance of farm duties and wandering, a rationale for his need to keep sane and his need to work. Len is the optimistic entrepreneur, the woman is the unhappy utilitarian—one who is finding life to be empty, deadening, and crazy--and the male camper is Other than both of these. He offers a third way, but not the neoliberal compromise. Something else.

Weirdly enough, being "kept" from it is the only way to enjoy one's work. In "A Servant to Servants," the speaker appreciates the visitor because "Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work,/But the thing of it is, I need to *be* kept" (CPPP, 69). The "kept" is the pause that *really* refreshes (not just hyping us on caffeine and sugar, as in the old Coca Cola ads); it allows us to think and observe, appreciate and plan. In "From Plane to Plane," Pike likes to "hoe out to the river" and then "take [his] walk of recreation back" (CPPP, 368). Dick says the same about reading: "at every line end/Pick up our eyes and carry them back idle/Across the page to where we started from" (CPPP, 368). Good work takes a pause; it may appear pointless, but it may be where we find meaning.

In “Build Soil,” keeping something back means investing further in oneself rather than selling one’s goods in order to buy something else. But if we take the meaning of “kept” from “A Servant to Servants,” then we see that “kept” also means slowing down, seeing the lake, enjoying a conversation, being in a place and noticing it. All these *are* also investments. Pike only hoes one direction, but he claims he’d “got more work done in a day/Or at least in a lifetime, by that method” (CPPP, 368). Being kept from work gives us something we value, and it lets us continue working, too: we don’t burn out, or (by skipping the fallow phase) exhaust our medium. Letting one’s self be kept from working for a moment is aggressively self-centered, individualistic, and self-determined. Dick says, “’I wouldn’t hoe both ways for anybody!’” and thus asserts his individual will in the midst of his work on someone else’s farm (CPPP, 368).

Doing the math, then, is not the only way to formulate sound economic decisions. Frost demonstrates that other factors have to be calculated in, even if they cannot be turned into numbers. No bottom line can adequately express the value of the sanity, health, pleasure, and rest that can be gleaned from nature, nor the value of working and living in a community with shared values and goals. That’s obvious, but overlooked. Economists have long resisted systems of accounting that appraise the added value of not using a resource—not just in potential future earnings but in current benefits, which are directly caused but only vaguely felt.[28] Before, or instead of, drying up those spring

[28] Herman E. Daly complained in 1973 that economists generally “count the real costs” of environmental output “as benefits”—and labeled this “hyper-growthmania” (in Daly, 151). He writes, “As more and more of the finite physical world is converted into wealth, less and less is left over as nonwealth—i.e. the nonwealth physical world becomes scarce, and in becoming scarce it gets a price and thereby becomes wealth. This creates an

pools for sustenance, we can gaze into them, see deeply, feel connections, and glimpse ourselves. Frost's poems assure us that it's important to keep noticing what we value, to work with meditative attention, to take the time for work in which we've invested more than time, even to take time out within our work, and to include multiple uncountable products of our work in our calculations. Frost holds out against the too-simple math of neoclassical economics. His poems help us recognize all that can be kept so that neither our world nor our spirits will be completely spent.

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illusion of becoming better off, when in actuality we are becoming worse off" (in Daly, 151-2).

Various organizations have attempted to quantify what has so far been unquantified. In 2012, the United Nations published its first "World Happiness Report," but the environment was only dealt with very indirectly. The "Gross National Happiness Index," published in Bhutan in that same year, devotes more attention to environmental issues. The New Economics Foundation has begun the Happy Planet Index; the national score is calculated by multiplying the "experienced well being" of a people by their life expectancy and dividing by the ecological footprint of the society. The Natural Capital Declaration coming out of Rio+20 is a step towards this kind of accounting, although the rubric seems to describe the externalities that I've discussed in this essay only generally, as "other essential services" for "sustaining human wellbeing."

The economists tend to be left behind by the biologists in imagining the complex benefits of nature, and some biologists are willing to go beyond ecosystem services and potential but so-far-unidentified resources. In "What is Nature Worth?", E.O. Wilson argues that there are moral as well as economic reasons to care for the environment. The "sense of loss" he describes is not just about the animals' rights, though, it's about us humans: he says we should care about the loss of a woodpecker, for example, because "For reasons difficult to understand and express, it became part of our culture, part of the rich mental world of Alexander Wilson and all those afterward who cared about it" (22). In this way Wilson, like Frost, moves beyond math, back to narrative.

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