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ABSTRACT

I have set out to make an original response to the enduring question critics have engaged with in the decades since Lionel Trilling called Frost terrifying. Clarifying in the first section some of the key terms of trauma theory, and describing its potential relevance to Frost, I seek in the second section to offer readings of five poems that show how changing focalizations create a sense of an implied author who has been traumatized. But the question is suggested: what was Frost traumatized by? So, in the third section I offer biographical, theoretical, and textual evidence that he was traumatized by a special kind of alienation as it it understood by Marxist theory—to wit, the death of a sense of species-being. Frost, I argue, is terrifying because he is so persuasively in denial, as a poet and a cultural figure, about the wounding effects on him of capitalist culture.

Part One

In his discussion of Frost's poetry for a collection of homages gathered in the mid-nineties, Joseph Brodsky begins by recollecting the words of Lionel Trilling at a celebration of the poet's 85th birthday. Frost, Trilling memorably said, is a "terrifying poet" (7). At the time, there was a shock of recognition—Frost had been defined in the popular mind mostly as an unthreatening part of Americana, and scant attention had been drawn to the darkness that we have come to recognize as an inextricable part of his vision. Brodsky explains the significance of Trilling's remark by drawing a contrast between European poets, who are tragic, and the American Frost, who meets nature and its threats as "equals" rather than as a consciousness steeped in history and associations (6). I want to reconsider in this essay the question provoked by Trilling's ambiguous praise, and perhaps to take a step from the familiar contrast between American and European consciousness that was a central theme for Brodsky. Why is Frost a terrifying poet? I have some ideas and I think a novel argument to present on this point.

The first idea, one on which the arguments to follow depend, is that Frost's writing is, as Jay Parini described it in *The Columbia History of American Poetry,* the "poetry of survival" (260). Parini's use of this phrase is insightful but only impressionistically developed. After engaging with Parini's close readings of poems written across Frost's career, one is left asking a few questions: what does it mean to speak of survival in relation to Frost? What has been survived? What are the consequences of this survival? How do we know this? There are possibly a good number of answers to these questions, and any type of literary biography—of which this essay offers a species—does well to honor the complexity with which work as varied as Frost's confronts the biographer's desire to offer synthesizing

interpretations. But I wish to begin with a clear if somewhat abstract statement: Frost is a terrifying poet in part because he has survived a profound encounter with death and he has been utterly transformed by the event. He is a survivor in the sense which applies to anyone who has confronted an uncertain struggle with mortality, one in which the outcome is unknown. This is a part of what makes him terrifying to me. In the third and final section of the essay I will discuss what I consider to be the other facet of this surviving that makes him such a haunting poet to me and many others. Briefly stated, my argument is that Frost has survived an experience of what Marx called the death of species-being in the early years of his life, and this kind of death led to a certain numbness in his imaginative world that is persistently evident in his poems. Frost was traumatized by capitalism, and he is a terrifying poet because he is in denial about that aspect of his psyche, representing—and I would speculate, also viewing—himself as a realist and a survivor when in fact he is quite a wounded soul, the product of unpropitious conditions that have only intensified in America since the decades of his career.

I wish to show how some of Frost's poems bear out this interpretation, but first I want briefly to discuss how a poet becomes legible as a survivor and why this might be a terrifying transformation. For this, the psychological concept of trauma as it has been adapted to literary and cultural studies by Cathy Carruth is indispensable. In a number of books, Carruth has demonstrated that trauma as a concept can both clarify and complicate our relation to cultural texts. Frost, I propose, has been traumatized by the survival of an experience of loss. What are the consequences of this? According to Carruth, there are a number of consequences of traumatic experience. The first is a sense of being both possessed by and numb to the traumatizing experience: "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of ... thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (4). So, in a sense, to be traumatized is to be condemned to repeat in thought the traumatizing event, along with experiencing a somewhat paradoxical emotional numbness to that event. But to be a survivor of trauma of this kind carries its own special challenges as well: "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (9; original emphasis). To have survived a trauma is to be left both with a numbed obsession with the traumatizing event, but also with a sense of bewilderment at what to make of oneself after a brush with death—this is the burden of still living with a kind of death in one's own past. For this reason, Carruth speaks of trauma as a departure from oneself: trauma is not "a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather [is] our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves" (11).

These are not, as Carruth emphasizes, simple phenomena to discuss. But I can summarize, I think, the relevant parts of the concept to Frost's poetics. Frost is a survivor of a traumatic loss, which has left him both numb to the experience of that loss and, in a sense, condemned to repeat it in his imaginative and emotional life. His trauma thus involves a departure from himself, as Carruth calls it, because the numbed imaginative repetition of this event does not diminish its power over him. In particular, as I will argue in the pages to come, Frost has ex-

perienced a traumatizing death, the death of what Karl Marx called the sense of "species-being" (Fromm 53). This brush with mortality has left him with a sense of himself as both haunted by death, as evidenced by his returning to it again and again in his poetry, and at the same time desensitized to the experience of it. I will say more about this particular concept, but in the section to come I wish to first demonstrate that Frost's poetry is both haunted by death and left feeling numb to it at the same time—to demonstrate, in short, that he has been traumatized by the loss of "species being" and left with a burdensome obsession over it as a survivor of this trauma.

Part Two

Let me give some substance to these claims by looking at how a few of Frost's poems demonstrate a kind of survival as numbness to imagined death. The first piece I turn attention to is "The Exposed Nest." It begins with a parent's address to his child, recalling a day in the early life of his child when they came across "a nest full of young birds on the ground" that the "cutter-bar had just gone champing over / (Miraculously without tasting flesh)" (13-15). The conceit of the cutter-bar as having the capacity for taste and thus an appetite does significant work here: death is, if not anthropomorphized, then at least treated as a living being, one with the need to consume and destroy. But even death is imagined as having this uncanny power; the speaker of the poem charges himself with a kind of indifference. Concerned for the young birds, the child wishes "to restore them to their right / Of something interposed between their sight / And too much world at once" (17-19), but the father is uncertain whether building a shelter over the nest will make the mother-bird "more afraid" upon her return (25). Still they build a screen together. Then the father says, "All this to prove we cared" (31). This is where his consciousness of death diverges from the child's, and this divergence leaves him in a place of speculating isolation—the child had been building this screen without concern about unintended consequences, genuinely caring about and perhaps sympathizing with the young birds' experience of "too much world." Only the adult speaker has a question to ask himself and the child about the capacity for caring for the survivors of the work of the blade. The encounter with death brought to the field by the cutter-bar presents a challenge to the speaker to understand how he responds to it, how he acts in reaction. The poem ends this way:

> All this to prove we cared. Why is there then
> No more to tell? We turned to other things.
> I haven't any memory—have you?—
> Of ever coming to the place again
> To see if the birds lived the first night through,
> And so at last to use their wings. (31-36)

The words "at last" in the final line and the address to the now older child—"have you?"—both serve to imply a correspondence between the human parent caring for his child and the mother-bird's relation to her young. The human relationship,

too, has at last survived, even as they have turned to other things. There is also a sense of family community evoked by this memory, one deepened emotionally by the echo of one family gathering to aid another. But the relationship between the adult and the child only makes the line "All this to prove we cared" more haunting. Only the father is confronted with the question of how to prove to himself that he cares about the aftermath of a visitation from death; however, he finds himself to be cold. Despite the many gestures towards the father's relationship with the child in the poem, the parent alone is being tested by the cutter-bar, and left with an uneasy sense of his own coldness, a sense of numbness. This scene of survival is a scene of transformed self-interrogation in which the poet finds himself both fascinated by and numb to death.

A commentary on this poem by William H. Pritchard can take our engagement with its evidence of survival a step further and suggest grounds for continuity with the other poems I present in this section of the essay:

> Frost's question bursts out in the middle of a line—"Why is there no more to tell?"—as if the questioner is suddenly pricked with disappointment at the incompleteness or unfulfilledness of the tale told. Turning to other things, the pair can't even remember returning to the spot. Yet of course there could have been as much to "tell" as Frost the poet had cared to invent. (153)

Precisely at the heart of the terrifying thing about Frost is the sense that the last line in Pritchard's analysis is true and not true. This poem is obviously a work of imaginative literature, leaving the poet notionally free to imagine anything. But in much of Frost's work there is an implied author who is testing himself to see what he can imagine out of his experience, who is true to an emotional pattern that precedes invention. This is the case in "The Exposed Nest," where the question suggests a kind of candor and fidelity to the state of his imagination, a sense of obligation to some reality of the self as it is experienced. The implied author is free to imagine, but bound in his imaginings, to tell a version of the truth. And this truth is that a brush with mortality has left him feeling estranged from himself and numb.

The focalization in several of Frost's poems also suggests this kind of presence of an implied author who is the survivor of an encounter with death that leaves him numb in some dimension in the aftermath of his experience. Critics have remarked on the shifting focalizations in "The Hill Wife." Guy Rotella says that the "several voices ... multiply points of view not in order to choose between or among them but in order to show any point of view indeterminate, and to leave all points of view as unresolved complements in action" ("Comparing Conceptions" 188). This may be true, and it is one element of his writing that puts Frost squarely in the tradition of high modernism as constituted by Faulkner, Joyce, and others. But there is another plane of meaning on which this unresolved quality of multiple focalizations in the course of a poem is haunted and even haunting. The shifting focalizations can give us as readers a sense of where the author's understanding of characters—or of their fates—is not under his control, that he is compelled to the tell the story in the way that he does because there is an emotional truth by which he is compelled to write.

The fifth section of "The Hill Wife," "The Impulse," begins with a report of the consciousness of the wife: "It was too lonely for her there" (1). She follows her husband as he works, and the focalization on the wife's experience and mind continues when the narrator says:

> She rested on a log and tossed
> The fresh chips,
> With a song only to herself
> On her lips. (9-12)

The speaker's awareness of this song only to herself suggests an enfolding of the implied author's mind and that of the wife, as if the author has become her in order to be able to understand the creative choices she makes out of her solitude. But then she chooses to flee, and the focalization shifts. We do not know where she has gone, even as the husband "looked / Everywhere" for her. The author no longer shares with the reader the workings of the wife's mind. But this change in focalization is not only privative—we as readers come to gain insight into the consciousness of the husband now as well:

> He never found her, though he looked
> Everywhere,
> And he asked at her mother's house
> Was she there.
>
> Sudden and swift and light as that
> The ties gave,
> And he learned of finalities
> Besides the grave. (21-28)

The wife is hiding here from the implied author as well, who could notionally have followed her in her escape but has been unwilling or unable to. And instead, we have a sudden shift into the mind of the husband. "Sudden and swift and light as that," the author says, "the ties gave"—the ties are to his wife, and perhaps to parts of himself as well, but there is no revelation here of what precisely caused the undoing of ties. Was it the visit to the mother's home? If so, why then? And if not, then what was the precipitating event of the breaking of the ties? The husband is opaque to us as well, and by implication, to the author.

But we know that he has survived "finalities / Besides the grave." The implication is that he has already known the finality of the grave, the ultimate end of any relationship on earth. But why the plural, here, since the finality he seems to have learned of in missing his wife is the end of marital love? I suggest that the plural is used because the husband has been profoundly shaken by the loss of his wife in a way that calls up his sense of mortality, and that the finality of the grave and the finality of the end of his marriage converge to give him a sense that they are not the only finalities in his life—that other finalities will come to visit him in the future. He has been transformed in such a way that his very sense of his life becomes one in which there are or will be many finalities. He becomes haunted by the prospect of the traumatic repetition of the experience of a death.

This is another instance in which the implied author of Frost's poem is left wondering after an experience of mortality just how he should understand him-

self. The author could have imagined the whereabouts of the lost wife, but he doesn't—it is the fate of the poem that the wife, whom he had previously understood in a kind of tacit communion, should be lost to him. As such, there are grounds to identify the author with the husband, and to take his opaque and question-begging description of how the ties give as representing a similar kind of death in himself. Thus, the plural of "finalities / Besides the grave" suggests that this finality is not simply a loss to be grieved, but rather a wound that utterly changes the focalized character in his relation to the future—one finality is in the past, and one to come (the grave), but there will also be others now that the husband has, like the implied author, lost the companionship of the hill wife. He has been subjected to an experience like that of going into the grave, and surviving it has left him with a new sense in which finality becomes finalities, threatening to visit him in other relationships and realms of experience.

A similar effect takes place in "The Death of the Hired Man," another poem Rotella remarks upon for its proliferations of points of view (240). As Mary and Warren talk about the choices and vulnerabilities of Silas, the erstwhile hired man on their farm, we have no sense of what is going on with Silas, who has returned to them as a kind of last resort and is resting on their property. They critique him and, at least in the case of Mary, extend some degree of empathy towards him. The poem ends with Warren leaving to talk with Silas. When he returns the poem takes this turn:

> "Warren?" she questioned.
> "Dead," was all he answered. (166)

The occlusion of Warren's encounter with Silas, and the narrator's implied commentary on what he has to say upon his return—"was all he answered"—serves as a haunting reminder of the way that we only know Silas, the hired man, through the consciousness of others. He is objectified by the couple in a way as they discuss him, but his dying in the poem is a kind of objectification by the implied author as well—we know him only as a fate and not as a person. Warren's coldness, both before and after his knowledge of the death of Silas, serves as a kind of proxy for the implied author, who can know Silas only by the shape he and his end have made in the consciousness of other characters. The implied author has survived the death of Silas, a death he has somehow been compelled to invent, and he has been left with a focalization in which he does not say what the thoughts and emotions of Warren are, simply hearing, as Mary does, his words. We may, cued by the title, have seen this death coming, but Warren has not, and his reactions are lost to us. The implied author can make the part of himself that is Warren say no more. Confronted by a kind of compelled experience of death, he is numb.

Let me briefly discuss two other poems in which the implied author seems both haunted by and numb to death. The first is "The Vanishing Red" which tells the story of the racist hatred of the Miller for The Red Man who arouses his particular ire for speaking at the mill when he should, in the Miller's judgment, be silent. So, he takes him down to see the wheel pit, and

> Then he shut down the trap door with a ring on it

That jangled even above the general noise,
And came upstairs alone—and gave that laugh,
And said something to a man with a meal-sack
That the man with the meal-sack didn't catch—then.
Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel-pit all right. (24-29)

I have looked at three other poems to discuss how the focalization of the poem creates a sense of an implied author who is haunted by and yet numb to death. The shift to free indirect discourse at the last line of this poem does precisely that as well. Who speaks this line? Is it the murderer, or the implied author? Is it the perpetrator or the one who has imagined the crime? In either case, we have an implied author speaking in an unsettlingly cold tone about a death, either inhabiting the mind of a murderer or adding his own chillingly distant line of ironic judgment to the aftermath of a killing. One could perhaps go so far as to say that the use of free indirect discourse here is indicative of a general sense of numbness in relation to the racist violence that the poem seems compelled to imagine, particularly as we are also imaginatively given the sound of the ring as presumably The Red Man struggles for his life. This is a sound that only we, as readers, and the implied author have the knowledge to make a kind of horrifying sense out of.

Another poem that works in this way is "'Out, Out—'". The poem describes an accident in which a boy loses a hand and eventually his life while sawing. The poem moves quickly past the injury and then to the visitation by the doctor:

The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (30-36)

The focalization moves quickly in this section, first gathering only what the observers know by watching his breathing and listening to his pulse. Then to the thought "No more to build on there," which seems the sort of thought more appropriate to the implied author than to the characters—what would they build on? So, the focalization turns for a moment to the implied author, who quite coldly and emotionlessly describes the fate of his poem. And then back to the watchers. But the strange phrase, "since they / Were not the one dead" is striking here. Of course, they are not the dead one—why have them reflect this way? The implied author imagines them as numb to this death as well. But perhaps he mentions this as well because they are alive in comparison not only with the dead boy but also with the implied author—he is the one dead, he is the one who has imagined this scene of death and followed the inner life of the boy from fear to unconsciousness to death.

In each of the preceding discussions of poems, I have identified a way in which the implied author of the poem seems compelled to narrate a death, while at the same time he uses shifting focalizations to express a kind of coldness or numbness in relation to that experience. This is precisely the kind of estranged obsession that Carruth says is central to the experience of trauma. Confronted with these

phenomena, the question arises: what was the source of this trauma? If Frost is, as Parini said, a survivor, and if this surviving is traumatic, what should we take the beginning of this story to be?

Part Three

One of the questions presented by these imaginative acts of survival is: what is the source of the fascination with death and the experience of surviving in Frost's poetry? A certainly acceptable answer is that each poem in which death is encountered works in its own particular way in relation to the whole or, as Frost might say, the figure of that particular poem. There are a number of experiences of death in Frost's poetry, this answer would propose, because he encountered mortality in various ways in the course of his writing life. But to me this answer still begs the question of why the implied author should seem so constrained by having survived an encounter with death, so haunted by death, and even transformed by it. These recurrent and similar deaths in the poems, as I see them, may have their source in a grounding and original encounter of mortality and an experience of survival.

Frost biographers can offer us a variety of explanations of this ur-death in Frost's life. Mark Richardson's *The Ordeal of Robert Frost* suggests an attitude towards poetry as a form of inner contestation and struggle that might explain why the implied author is constrained in the ways that I suggest he is:

> A corresponding movement in Frost's poetics discloses that "formity" (inner discipline and motivation) and "conformity" (the "discipline from without") are actually two aspects of the same fact. In a word, Frost imagines in his poetics a final transcendence or reconciliation of his own central "ordeal." (9)

Richardson offers an explanation of Frost's terrifying qualities that comports with Frost's articulated and expressed values as a formalist poet, to make an allegory of emotional process out of the submission to or embrace of formal constraints that characterize Frost. His answer is basically aesthetic in its terms and in its conclusions.

I propose a different explanation for the "ordeal" of encounter with mortality that characterizes the poems I have discussed and a good number of others. This is, simply put, that Frost as a participant in the capitalist culture of America of his time has been estranged from what Marx calls the "species-being" of a community of humans and that he is both expressive of and in denial about the degree to which the estrangement or alienation caused by this capitalist culture has pervaded his imagination (75). Frost is, in short, a terrifying poet because he is a survivor of capitalism and yet, as a celebrity poet and political thinker, he refuses, or is unable to, discuss the lethal quality of his society's economic and ideological cultural structure.

There are biographical grounds for this suggestion. Frost's childhood, particularly after the death of his father, was spent in a perpetual concern about money as his mother worked as a school teacher and, as Guy Rotella explains in an essay about Frost and economics, Frost himself worked a number of jobs:

> In the period between 1886 and his graduation from high school in 1892, Frost worked for brief periods in a shoe factory and a back year leather-cutting operation, at cutting hay, as a handyman at a seaside resort, as a farmhand, and as bobbin-boy at one wooden mill and a gatekeeper at another. If he enjoyed the varied people he encountered and the new skills he was learning, he often quit his jobs in boredom or frustration. ("'Synonymous'" 246)

Frost's formative years were spent in a sense of financial insecurity and need to labor at in some ways alienating jobs, and this would have subjected him to the experience of alienation that Erich Fromm diagnosed as an inextricable part of capitalist culture. Working to provide for himself and his family, Frost knew early on in his life that labor involves a kind of estranging self-objectification, one that is no less deforming or wounding for being pervasive in his culture. Frost the child worker was subject to the kind of experience that Fromm, glossing Marx, describes this way: "The alienated man is not only alienated from other men; he is alienated from the essence of humanity, from his "species-being," both in his natural and spiritual qualities" (53).

The source of this alienation, according to Marx and Fromm, is that the worker in a capitalist society is unable to find his or her creative capacity or sense of self-realization embodied in the work that he or she does for a wage. This means that alienation has to do not only with one's relationship to one's own work but also with one's relationship to others, a relationship that Marx goes so far as to liken to a kind of death: "In general, the statement that man is alienated from his species life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life" (qtd. in Fromm 53). Departing from these long-ago but enduringly relevant articulations of the psychological effects on a culture of its economic structure, I would propose that the ur-ordeal Frost has survived, one that fixes his imagination in patterns of wounding confrontations with death, is the ordeal of alienated labor. His species-being, as Marx termed it, has been harrowed by the pervasive and personally experienced self-estrangements and social deformations of capitalist culture. It is not so important to describe this alienation as the enduring fate of Frost as a worker and a farmer so much as to recognize that his socialization into a capitalist culture gave him a profound personal knowledge and anticipation of the psychology of alienation from species-being.

There is also ample evidence of alienation among the other characters in the poems I have discussed, a kind of alienation that is perhaps different from but complementary to the traumatic survival of species-death in the implied author. "The Exposed Nest," for instance, can be read as a story not only of numbness but of intergenerational alienation, with each character deeply isolated from the other. Similarly, in "The Hill Wife," the wife's mysterious disappearance suggests a loss of rootedness or belonging. The vain search for shelter and care that Silas demonstrates in "The Death of the Hired Man" dramatically shows the scarcity of protective environments in the social world Frost knew all too well. It is not only in his shifting focalizations that Frost demonstrates the harshness of a capitalistic culture. Such harshness permeates his world view, the worlds of his poems.

This makes Frost representative. What makes him a terrifying poet, in my view, is that he remains, both in his celebrity persona and in his poetry, identified

with the social and economic structures that have harrowed him. There are in this context various ways to read his chosen profession as farmer, his musings against socialism and in muted celebration of the rightness of the effects of markets, and his affiliation with the U.S. government during the Kennedy presidency. But Rotella, I find, names well the ambivalence of Frost towards his nation's pervasive capitalist ideology:

> For most of his life, Frost would live on the margins of middle-class versions of career, respectability and success (and dress the part) . . . This was an implicit critique of capitalist economics and an active refusal of its rules and values. Yet Frost also admired – and was apt to see as inevitable – an economic system seemingly based on what he considered "natural" competition and struggle, one that rewarded performance and prowess. ("'Synonymous'" 247)

To return to classical Marxist terms, Frost's poetry and persona are evidence of a kind of false consciousness, one which denies the lethal quality of American capitalism. Yet his poems attest to the forms of alienation and even inner death that the Marxist tradition diagnoses as a consequence of capitalism. He is terrifying because he is a survivor of capitalism who does masterful work of defending and celebrating the social and economic structures that have so deeply wounded him and left him a haunting mystery to himself.

One way to give some more substance to this argument is to emphasize the poetics of "conformity" that Richardson describes Frost as such a proponent of. The picture Richardson paints is of a Frost who could claim that "I have always thought of poetry as prowess—something to achieve, something to win or lose" or that "a book ought to sell. Nothing is quite honest that is not commercial" gives a clear sense of a kind of false consciousness that is in denial about the toll on imaginative freedom taken by capitalist culture (52, 34). But I'd like to offer also some evidence that connects the two elements of my thesis, evidence that suggests that Frost is at once dead with respect to species-being and a proponent of the ideological values that have wounded him.

For this I offer a brief closing reading of "Two Tramps in Mud Time." Richardson says that in this poem "Frost is . . . a critic of the culture of industrialism" insofar as in such a culture practical and spiritual life are divided from one another (27). But it seems to me that the poem shows Frost attempting to sell himself on the possibility of poetry's ameliorating precisely this kind of alienation:

> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes. (69-72)

What does it mean for this to happen: the work is play for mortal stakes? Doesn't the nature of the stakes in such a case make the idea of play something of an understatement? To be animated by both "love" and "need" may make work into play, but what is "mortal" about the stakes of such play? It is possible that Frost means to say that one's way of meeting one's material needs should be a kind of play, and in the happiest convergence of vocation and avocation this happens. But in my way of reading the poem, the stakes are mortal because the death has

already happened. The play is to make sense of, to redeem, to convey a death of species-being that has already occurred to the speaker, and which the poem gives him a sense of further coming to terms with. As evidence of this, look at the way the "tramps" are imagined—it is not possible, given the "need" that they remind the speaker of, for Frost to also imagine them to be motivated, as he is, by "love" of their work. Frost is estranged from these fellow beings in an emotional and even spiritual sense, and the estranging, competitive culture of capitalism has made him in a way dead to the fellow feeling that they might have elicited in him. The mortal stakes that the poem wants to imagine winning on one level have already been paid.

What if Frost was well aware of his trauma and its numbing effect with respect to death, and what if he meant to awaken others and lessen their suffering at the hands of this fate through his poetry? To make this argument would, I think, be to follow the lead of Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* and seek to show that literature can escape ideology, or can intensify feeling in a space where ideology is bracketed as irrelevant. But my response is to double down on a symptomatic reading, not to be perverse or contrary but to suggest the paradoxical importance of critique in a context in which we read not so much to interpret but to feel. Frost was wounded by capitalism and was in denial about it. A reading that does the most to diminish the force of ideology in the experience of readers would not spin this suffering as a kind of prophylaxis, but would rather warn those who look to Frost as a guide not to miss the testimony he offers about the harm that can be wrought by American capitalist ideology on the mind of a middle class white man. Coldness, with its rewards and its costs, is not the only option.

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