Divine Relationship

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Abstract: **People talk of the dynamics of human relationships in life, like filial, fraternal, marital and social. This paper *Divine Relationship* is a humble tribute to the great poet laureate, Robert Frost, who had a special affinity with God. From the time of birth to the time of death, we are in the hands of the almighty. It is he who bestows his blessings on us, illumines our path, make us aware of good and bad, the importance of one over the other. An attempt has been made to cover the intense depth of divine relationship and spiritualism in a few of his poems.**

Key Words: **Isolation and solitude, dualism, transcendentalist and monist approach, tough realities and hard rationalities, responsibilities, heavenly dwelling, imagination, benevolence and malevolence of Nature, intimacy and God-belief.**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Taken from the root verb '*divinus*' in Latin, '*divine*' in English, according to *The Compact Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus and Word Power Guide,* means adj. of, from, or like God or a god, sacred. *The Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged* terms it as taken from Latin *divinus*, from *divus* a god; related to *dues,* a god. '*Divine'* in English, *adj*. 2: resulting from divine providence. *adj*. 6: being of such surpassing excellence as to suggest inspiration by the gods. '*Divine' verb* 1: perceive intuitively or through some inexplicable perceptive powers.

An intense mental discipline is required, if an individual wishes to live his life in the presence of divinity. One "Acquainted with the Night" creates and conveys a certain mood. It is solely a poem of isolation and solitude alienated from the urban dwelling, 'a place of togetherness'. A feeling one gets when one is not able to connect. If there is gloom within the heart, it is contagious; it definitely casts its spell on the surrounding. This lonely man walks down the city's saddest lane, unable to look into the eyes of the watchman. His comfort level is low, he is not able to relate, and perhaps there is some kind of guilt. Internal anxiety is being built up, some internal conflict reflected by his leaving and returning, his stopping to see if the call was for him. It seems he is on the threshold of some major decision. The "luminary clock", that "unearthly" higher thing is indifferent and unwilling to tell him whether the time is right or wrong.

In the words of Sofia Poullada, the poem resonates with silence. The silence is spellbinding and relates the ghostly experience that comes only by a going beyond the self. Frost seems to be walking out of himself into an anticipated aura of divine existence, where the 'luminary clock' decides the time and setting for his transcendence. Throughout the poem the tone reverberates between pride and a quiet desire, to be 'acquainted' with the night. So that even if the suggested experience could or could not reach the zenith, the feeling to have come close to acquiring that unearthly state is pure bliss.

The refrain, *I have been one acquainted with the night*, reminds one of the Jewish prophet Isaiah's description of the son of man as *'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.'* The use of the word 'acquainted' suggests intimate acquaintance with the rain and the dark side. The isolation and depression is emphasized by the first person 'I' in the first seven lines. The narrator's inability to make an eye contact with the people he meets suggests that his depression has made him incapable of interacting in normal society. Where normal people are associated with the day, which is again synonymous with happiness, sunlight and optimism, the narrator is solely acquainted with the night and thus can find nothing in common with those around him. He is unable to use the same sense of time as the others in the city. Therefore, instead of using the regular clock, he relies on "One Luminary clock" in the sky. Since night is the only time that he emerges from his solitude, he has even less opportunities to meet someone who could pull him from his depression.

The first word that would appear into a reader's mind while dealing with the poem *"Birches"* is 'longing'. Every picture in the poem reflects the pining of the speaker for something which he missed somewhere. Each and every image in this poem is a part of this craving. The image of the child playing with the Birch, the image of the swinging movements that moves forward and backward, the image of the snow, painting the trees white, all images mirror the nostalgic yearning of the speaker. This is very much evident in lines 41–42 where we find a note of hankering "*So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be."* Here we find the poet aspiring for the simpler and happier days of his childhood. This reveals his frustration about the adult world. He describes the adult life as *'pathless wood'* and expresses his desire to return to the world of his childhood.

The act of swinging on birches expresses the poet's desire to escape from the tough realities and hard rationalities of the adult world, at least for a brief moment. The poet longs to go back to

his carefree childhood days. As the boy is climbing the tree, he is climbing to heaven, which is the world of free imaginations. The narrator explains that climbing a birch is an opportunity *to "get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over"* (*l*.48-49). A swinger is still grounded in the earth through the roots of the tree as he climbs, but he is able to reach beyond his normal life to a higher plain of existence. The poet includes the speaker's longing and says that swinging on birches is no longer bringing him peace. He feels that his longing for childhood will never be satisfied, as he cannot escape the real world of his adulthood. Being an adult he can never withdraw from his responsibilities and climb to heaven. It is apparent to the speaker that he cannot become a child unless he starts life afresh on earth. He now no longer enjoys the image of the boy who is swinging in the birches. He is forced to acknowledge the reality concerning the birches. Birches are bending because of the winter storms, not because of the climbing of the boy. The speaker's longing to leave the rational world and enter an imaginative world is found to be questionable. He desires to climb to heaven as a young boy, at the same time he wants to return to the earth. The speaker has a strong desire to enter the imaginative world, but the truths of the real world are not letting him go. The poet gets so exhausted finally that he desires to lay down his life. This is evident in the end of the poem, *"It's when I'm weary of considerations,/ And life is too much like a pathless wood"*(*l*.43-4) *"I'd like to get away from Earth for a while/ And then come back to it and begin over* (*l*. 48-9)." The poet desires to escape from the world and at the same time desires to return to it.

Frost deploys symbolism to present the images used in the poem. The symbolic image of aging birch trees illustrates the images of a child who is growing into adulthood. The depiction of these images enables one to view the reality of the world, compared here to the carefree childhood. Initially, in the poem we find the image of life filled with difficulties. Later we find the use of images to present the speaker's longing to revert back to the happy moments of his childhood. The language of the poem is carefully positioned through the use of images. Frost makes use of natural symbolism to express the longing of the speaker who desired to escape the trouble-filled world and enter a heavenly dwelling. In the beginning of the poem we find images of life, aging and death. The first three lines of the poem give the image of childhood and adulthood. *"When I see birches bend to left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them."* (*l.* 1-3) Childhood is symbolically represented as the speaker believes that the swinging of the branches is caused by a boy climbing on it. Adulthood is symbolically explained through the image of the straighter darker trees. The speaker was once a swinger of birches and cherishes those memories. The birch trees symbolically show life and it is used as the speaker's means to escape from the world of callous realities and truths. The concept of bent birch trees symbolizes life and the speaker's denial of the real world. He desires to escape to an imaginary world and at the same time likes to return to the real world.

"Into My Own" also includes the strange longings of the speaker. In the poem we find the speaker desiring for a life which is beyond his present state. In the last quatrain we find how the speaker achieves his aim. He gives us an insight into how he expects to react to what he's found. The poem talk of a boy's longing to leave home and find his own identity. The very title *"Into My Own"* is synonyms with the child's longing to explore himself. This brings about his transformation from a child to an adult, a fully grown individual. He looks for his own space where he can be himself. He doesn't just long for an identity but a breathing space where he is at complete liberty to do as his heart desires. Seeing a line of *"dark trees"* the speaker desires them to be extended to the *"edge of the doom."* The second quatrain tells the reader that he would *"steal away"* and that he reveals in the notion of never again finding *"open land or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand* (*l.* 7-8*)." The third quatrain is ironical. Here, though, the speaker says that he doesn't see why "those should not set forth upon my track / To overtake me, who should miss me here, / And long to know if still I held them dear."* (*l.*10-12). Here we find that the speaker is young and he is connected more to his family. The speaker finally understands that he will not be able to change even if he leaves home. The speaker is assertive of the fact that *"they would not find me changed"* instead more confident, more sure of himself and his convictions. He returns to his original state like the speaker in *"Birches"*

Trees often serve as a symbol for borders in Frost's poetry. They do not just show the boundaries of the earth like that between a pasture and a forest. They rather symbolize the boundaries between heaven and earth. In *"Birches,"* trees show a link between earth (humanity) and sky (divine). Trees also represent boundary spaces, where a connection between heaven and earth is possible. The strange longings of the speaker in the poem make him move beyond the present realm. Like *"Birches", "Into My Own"* also includes the images of forests that represent some boundaries. Trees act as borders between different human experiences. In these poems we find the speaker considering these trees as a link between earth and heaven. This link between earth and heaven encourages the longings of the speaker. When Frost's speaker reaches the edge of a forest or climbs a tree, he reaches some kind of boundary, a border line between the earth and heaven. Out of his longing to reach a heavenly world, he crosses these boundaries. This helps the speaker to communicate with nature and feel moments of exposure. Getting the right revelation makes the speaker desire for a return to his present state.

The well known transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem, *"Brahma"* is miraculous in its blend of Eastern and Western thought. In the poem, Emerson assumes the role of Brahma, the Hindu God of creation. The overall theme of *"Brahma"* is the divine relationship and continuity of life and the unity of the universe. He says that Brahma, can create, destroy, re-create, and in the end, the mortals are merged in the unity of Brahma. When Brahma re-creates or "turns again," it is known commonly as the concept of reincarnation.

The ultimate unity of the universe is expressed through the second stanza. Emerson uses such opposites such as shadow

and sunlight, good and evil, in order to prove this philosophical belief. In essence, Emerson states that all opposites are reconciled in the ultimate unity of the universe. Thus, the universe according to him is built through harmony and not counteracting forces such as good and evil. This view is averse to what Frost thinks. Though a great admirer of Emerson, Frost was not a transcendentalist, a monist, but a dualist for whom spirit and matter are both regarded as real and they exist together in a complex relationship in the universe and the existing world of mankind.

In Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem, *"Brahma",* the overall theme is the divine relationship and continuity of life and the unity of the universe. To begin with, this is explained through the concept of re-incarnation, which is expressed in the first stanza. Frost only talks of the existing life. He talks about the day to day life and problems of the common man. Secondly, Emerson, in the second stanza, states that the universe lives in harmony and not opposing forces such as good and evil. Here again Frost differs in opinion. In his opinion, "endless other things in pairs are ordained to everlasting opposition. A summary of this could include the following: good-evil, God-Devil, body-soul, Old Testament-New Testament, justice-mercy, fire-ice, rich-poor, feminine-masculine, universal-particular, objective-subjective, light-dark, day-night, pessimism-optimism, servile-dominance, youth-age, civilization-Utopia, truth-error, past-present, reality-illusion, motion-rest, intelligence-stupidity, whole-part, fact-fiction are to name a few. This could go on "ad infinitum". This contradiction, contraries, paradoxes, ambiguities were to Frost the universal, God given to prove the very existence of man. "Quandary" exemplifies an excellent passage on Frost's dualism:

Never have I been sad or glad
That there was such a thing as bad.
There had to be, I understood,
For there to have been any good.
That good and bad so long had lasted

(ll. 1-6)

In *"The Wind and the Rain,"* he outrightly rejects the optimistic monism and the escapist psychology of Emerson: *"It were unworthy of the tongue / To let the half of life alone / And play the good without the ill."* (*ll*. 15-17) *"The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus,"* indicates that his dualism is built into the physical nature of man and his spirituality:

You know how cunningly mankind is planned:
We have one loving and one hating hand.
The loving's made to hold each other like,
While with the hating other hand we strike.

(ll. 113- 116)

His poems are replete and gorged with his ardent belief in dualism. Yes, Frost is of the opinion that at the time of death, when the soul is about to leave the body, or couples are to be separated, dualism dissolves into the oneness of monism. In "A Winter Eden" he says, *"So near to paradise all pairing ends,"* again in *"Love and a Question", "A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God, / Or for the rich a curse."* (*l.* 27-28) Lastly, Emerson calls upon the reader to abandon praying for material thoughts, whereas Frost is not didactic in his approach; he merely relates a thing as he sees it, and is not suggestive. He allows his readers to understand, analyse and judge for themselves. He serves as a mere onlooker, a silent spectator, showing his reader the true authentic picture. In writing *"Brahma,"* Emerson boldly crosses new bounds by assuming the perspective of God. In short, the dark is not merely a contrasting backdrop against which the stars can be better seen. In Frost's poetry, darkness leads to illumination, and chaos becomes cosmos. At this new level of consciousness, he attains not only solace, sustenance and enriched soul, but also knowledge of a different and deeper reality resulting in the ultimate bliss.

In this context, it should be clear that poems like *"Design," "Stars,"* and the tragic narratives of "*North of Boston*" are neither at the centre of Frost's poetic vision nor in real opposition to his more affirmative and optimistic poems. Rather, they merely express the nature of the blasphemous world, and they are included in the process of illumination, which ultimately reveals the cosmos, the sacred. They are the everlasting negations to Frost's everlasting affirmations, the experience of alienation before the blessing of harmonious togetherness, the expression of disillusionment before undertaking an ardours task. Not that these poems are trivial; the picture they present is neither final nor absolute- it is indispensable for a thorough knowledge of human existence, and must be accepted by the illumination of thought.

Therefore, it can be stated that Frost was not "a sentimental escapist," a brooding rebel, or a practical person who courageously faced chaos in order to impose meaning on it. As a romantic, he did not believe that truth is simply willed into being; nor did he believe that beauty is merely created. According to his belief, truth and beauty are discoverable in reality. They come into being when the thinker and artist rise above their ordinary selves and allow experience to complete itself.

All things considered, Frost must have been amused by the responses elicited by the question in *"The Oven Bird"*: *"Is what to make of a diminished thing."* (*l.* 14). The answer, I think, is given in two poems. On the one hand, he says in *"At Woodward Gardens," "It's knowing what to do with things that counts"* (*l.* 37). But, on the other hand, he adds in *"Hyla Brook," "We love the things we love for what they are"* (*l.* 15). What we do with them and what they are depends of course, on what we are. And that depends on where we have been and where we are going. Creation, in Frost's view, is a matter of being, doing simultaneously and a means by which "diminished" things, subjects and objects, material things, can be seen spiritually - not only as parts, as Frost suggests in *"Fragmentary Blue,"* but also as parts of a whole. Even a stone can be a star, Frost says in *"A Star in a Stone-Boat"*, *"Such as it is, it promises the prize / Of the one world complete in any size / That I am like to compass,*

fool or wise. (*l.* 213-15)

Not that the case for Frost as realist and sceptic cannot be made. Frequently, as in *"Spring Pools," "Reluctance"* and *"Nothing Gold Can Stay,"* his poems deal with the irreversible change of seasons and the changeability of things. The joys of summer are brief, and the losses brought about by the fall are experienced in winter as a kind of spiritual death.

Indeed, despite the frequency with which Frost portrays the indifference of nature and the cruelty of human beings, he just as often gives at least intimations of a monistic vision. Moments of joy are transitory, he says, but they remain occasions for celebration regardless of their brevity. Even the most trivial event can alter the poet's mood by suggesting to him the possibilities of communication and even communion between people and God, people and people, and people and things, as he suggests in *" 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"

(l. 1-8).

Maybe the shaking off of the dust of snow from its wings is indicative of the crow being ready for its flight. This served as a hint enough for Frost that it was time for him too, to shed all inhibitions, gear himself up and get started. In *"Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter",* Frost indirectly laments the passing of summer into winter and realizes that the "*bird with an angelic gift"* (*l.* 7) he saw before has abandoned the tree and left only *"a single leaf"*(*l.* 10) behind. But as he looks out from his vantage point on a hill, he sees something like a brushstroke across the blue sky and *"a piercing little star"* (*l.* 20) shining through it. Again, walking by unidentifiable flowers along the highway, in *"A Passing Glimpse,"* he wonders, *"Was something brushed across my mind / That no one on earth will ever find?"* (*l.* 9-10).

Sometimes, of course, the "glimpse" is so brief as to seem inconsequential or even questionable, as in *"For Once, Then, Something."* There can be little doubt, however, that the clock of *"Acquainted with the Night"* is really only the dark side of the moon of *"Moon Compasses,"* in which the heavenly body *"exalted"* (*l.* 7) a mountain in the way that loving hands embrace a face. And the stars in Frost's poetry are not always signs of cosmic meaninglessness, as they are in *"Stars"* and *"Bond and Free."* They are also, in *"Take Something like a Star,"* images of steadfastness and dependability and, in *"I Will Sing You One-O,"* intimations of eternity, *"Beyond which God is"* (*l.* 52).

Frost offers a similar view of man and nature in three visionary poems: *"Going for Water," "Two Look at Two,"* and *"Iris by Night."* The speaker in the first poem sets out with his companion to fill a pail with water from the brook in the midst of the woods. The two first hear the musical notes of the brook and then see moonlit "drops . . . on the pool," which look like pearls, and a sliver of moonlight running across the brook, which looks like *"a silver blade"* (*l.* 26). In this poem, the momentary union of heaven and earth (represented by the light of the moon hitting the surface of the water) is not regretted because of its brevity, but celebrated, as if it were meaningful and even miraculous.

Another night journey into the woods in *"Two Look at Two"* begins as the two travellers prepare to abandon their walk: *"This is all"* (*l.* 13). Suddenly a doe appears, unafraid of their presence and willing to remain. Clearly the travellers' mood is full of awe at the sight. *"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"* (*l.* 25) they either think or say - as if the "all" meant "everything." Finally, they see a buck that similarly stays for a moment. *"This must be all,"*(*l.* 39) they conclude. And the narrator comments:

It was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

(l. 39-42).

The final four lines of the poem serve as the culmination of a gradually escalating emotion that begins with disappointment but ends with rapture.

Frost does not deem nature as beautiful but as something dangerous - a viewpoint also apparent in his other poems. The doe is not described while the other is only mentioned as *"an antlered buck of lusty nostril",* words not meant to elicit a sense of beauty but more of fear. Frost's view of nature as a dangerous force is reinforced in the fact that the couple seem afraid. They stay still, without speaking or moving, leading the doe and the buck to wonder if they are alive. It is as if the animals have a certain power over the humans since they are the ones who are curious. Frost views nature as a masculine force - strong, intimidating and potentially destructive.

For Frost, the relationship with man and nature, like the relationship between the deer and the couple in *"Two Look at Two"* is one that is somewhat alienating. It is more of a confrontation, a struggle and not a connection. True, at the end of the poem, there may have been a slight connection since *"earth returned their love"* but for most of the poem, it is a struggle - man against nature rather than one with nature. There is, after all, a wall in the poem dividing the deer and the couple, one with barbed-wire binding that cannot be scaled, suggesting that though they are equal, man and nature are separate. Indeed, the deer are only puzzled by the couple whereas the humans feel alienated by the deer, afraid to come close and feeling that they are on dangerous and unfamiliar territory.

Numerous references in *"After Apple Picking"* like the drowsiness of sleep, to strangeness of sight, and to the harvest itself, all reinforce the parallel between the terminations of day, season and existence. The span of life is embraced within the curve of season, spring to winter. But the question that arises is what completes the circle? Ordinary spring again, returning

after winter to bring re-birth.

The very second line, the ladder pointing *"towards heaven still,"* the word *heaven* – subtlety indicates death and immortality. The second hint is towards the end as the verse concludes with a whimsical contemplation of the woodchuck's sleep, the hibernation and obviously evens, *"just some human sleep"* (*l.* 42) implies a reawakening. Seeing the bumper crop, the enthusiasm is slightly diluted. First the endless hours of labour, then weariness engulfs what energy is yet unspent. Finally, the task of plucking all, no longer seems critical to finish. Towards the end comes the letting go, first with the hands, then with the mind, but never with the heart. The apple picker, sadder but now a wiser man, relinquishes his task altogether. Now, finally, is the time to rest.

The poem ends in deliberate ambiguity, but Frost says if the reader chooses it to be an allegory of man's life ascending from the eager grasping of youth to the letting go of age, Frost will not object. He will also not object if his poem be viewed as a moral tale of the world having its inevitable way with human ambition.

The main protagonist Meserve in *"Snow"* had faith in himself. Being an inhabitant of the place, he had faith in the snow, and most important, he had faith in God. It is this special chord that he struck with God that made him come to inquire about the Coles in the blizzard and then risk his way back in spite of the repeated protests made by the Coles, for a simple reason because he had faith in the Almighty.

Being very close to Nature, Frost is well aware of the appalling savagery of nature. His *"One Step Backward Taken"* brings out a live picture of a fierce, tumultuous storm in its brutal form. A line of caution, *"But with one step backward taken / I saved myself from going. / A world torn loose went by me."*(*l.* 10-12) reflect the barbariousness of the storm that does not spare anyone. *"Then the rain stopped and the blowing / And the sun came out to dry me."*(*l.* 13-14) The same callous and ruthless nature earlier was in the next instance mild and gentle. A significant attitude of God since he is our father, who, when angry with his children does show them his rage by penalising them, but the very next moment embraces them as though nothing has happened.

Human life in the poems of Frost are replete with apprehensions that separate men from women; the loneliness, lack of communication and miscommunication that creates a rift between them, converts hostility into antagonism. One gets a clear insight that the real and the ideal are separated by a barrier which is beyond penetration. Though Frost often portrays the indifference of nature and the hostility of human beings, he often gives intimations of a monist attribute.

Frost was the blessed one to share a very close relationship with God. Once in a million years is one such divine soul born, and Frost was the one. He inherited his spiritualism from his mother. He did not have to make an effort to write poetry, poetry came to him. Being a recluse by nature, he remained confined to himself, went for long solitary walks and it is here he said he heard voices; he could also have been deluded in mistaking his own inner voice for the voice he heard. He shared a close affinity with God and fed on that relationship till the end; otherwise, knowing Frost, the kind he was, he would have collapsed long back. It was his faith in God that helped him pull up with life in spite of losing his four children and his wife, who was his source of inspiration. The presence of the almighty is always felt in his poems.

In his essay, *"Education by Poetry"* he talks of the three beliefs – the self-belief, the love-belief, and the art-belief; are closely related to the God-belief, that the belief in God is a relationship you enter into with Him to bring about the future. Talking at the Amherst Alumni Council Address, November 15, 1930 he said, "the relationship we enter into is with God, to believe in the future." Only one with the playful intimacy of a naughty grandchild could be bold enough to say,

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee,
And I'll forgive Thy great one on me.

ROBERT FROST

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