Frost's Negotiations with Khrushchev

National Health, Poetics, and the Fate of West Berlin

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The collective Cold War imagination did not take long to single out Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"—his old poem of 1914—as best expressing postwar diplomatic strife.[1] Not considered nearly as important in earlier decades, the poem suddenly became, as Steven Axelrod has argued, a "necessary" poem without which no postwar anthology of American poetry seemed conceivable. Popularly read as an eloquent expression of several Cold War sentiments such as the desire to contain communism or the yearning to withdraw into a snug rural-looking suburban spaces, it perfectly "organized," asserts Axelrod, "public ambivalences about the world starkly divided by an iron curtain."[2] To the ears of many, the poem also sounded a class-conscious high-minded scorn for Khrushchev's wall, scorn that nourished a sense of separateness from and superiority to the Soviets. Didn't the Communists—so the reasoning went—fit Frost's description of the brutish neighbor, the "moving-in-darkness" and "old-stone savage armed"? Though Frost warned against easy readings of the poem and explained that it locked together a nationalist and a "one-worlder" in an irresolvable tension, "Mending Wall" spoke to Americans as an unequivocally "wall-

1 *The Worcester Sunday Telegram*, for instance, argued that in "Mending Wall" Frost was nothing less than "referring" to the Berlin Wall. See "People," *Worcester Sunday Telegram* (Worcester, MA), September 9, 1962, in Robert Frost Collection, 1887–2008, 12:11.

2 Axelrod, "Frost and the Cold War."

tearing" poem, expressing the universalist ideology of brotherhood of mankind that the West arrogated to itself in its public-image war against the Communist block. It became part of a cunning strategy that effectively positioned the West's antagonists as gracelessly and pettily jealous of their territory.

Yielding to such liberal readings, "Mending Wall" seemed to sculptor Leo Cherne a perfect choice for his design of a monument he was planning to build in West Berlin for the second anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1963. The planned monument, which was to rise against the western face of the Wall, was to be inscribed with an excerpt from Frost's poem, in both English and German, and was intended to announce that the people of goodwill—implicitly, Westerners—wanted the wall taken down (fig. 1). Without consulting Frost first, Cherne even began making arrangements for the poet to meet Willy Brandt to discuss this anti-wall campaign.

Characteristically, when he was finally informed of the various arrangements made for him, the poet flatly refused and extricated himself from Cherne's elaborate plans. In an ironic and obviously patronizing letter, Frost told the sculptor to go ahead with the project if he must, but he made it clear that he had no wish to be involved in this folly. Frost also suggested that he had been misunderstood–he couldn't see how one could easily get rid of walls—and wrote, obliquely, that braving walls is not good for one's health:

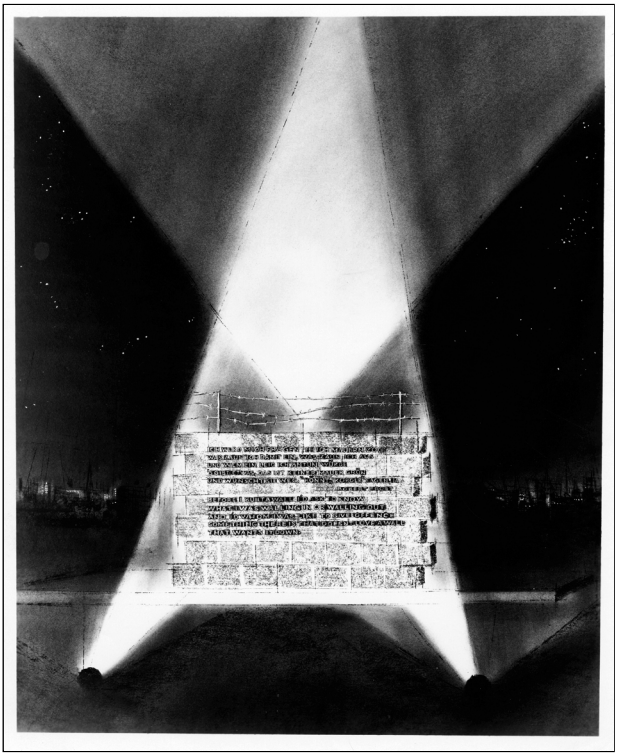
> But you mustn't ask me at my age to storm the barricades for the fun of laughing the whole thing off with the Russians. I suppose I should have to gather myself together and brave it if this were an order from the top to do something really dangerous for my country. This is at once dangerous to health but not dangerous enough to anything else.[3]

The letter effectively discouraged the sculptor and ultimately prevented him from pursuing his project any further. (Eventually Cherne organized a different commemorative event, without the poet's contribution whatsoever.[4])

3 Frost's response to Leo Cherne is attached to the sculptor's letter to the poet of Nov. 29, 1961, folder 41, box 2, Robert Frost Collection, 1866–1996 (originally Frost 906129 [8] 321).

4 Cf. Smith, *Rescuing the World*, 52.

Figure 1: Leo Cherne's design of the Berlin Wall monument with an excerpt from "Mending Wall" in German and English



Robert Frost Collection, 1866–1996, Frost MS-1178, box 2, folder 41 (new catalogue). Rauner Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

More importantly, the letter testifies to the great complications in Frost's attitude to the Cold War and points to a huge discrepancy between the Cold-War politically expedient readings of his poetry and Frost's own complex understanding of it, even in this new postwar context.

The letter serves as a revealing introduction to this essay's major objective—an interpretation of a meeting Frost had with Nikita Khrushchev about the future of West Berlin. The meeting took place in Gagra, Abkhazia, on September 7, 1962, culminating the poet's ten-day visit to the Soviet

Union. I explore the main subjects of this conversation—the details of which are known from two independent first-hand accounts by Frost's companions F. D. Reeves and Frederick B. Adams—in the light of Frost's lifelong preoccupations with such themes as the nature and scope of human knowledge, the appropriate borderlines of lasting and thriving nations, US-Russian relations, and the question of loyalty. Echoing the chasm between Frost's intended meaning in the poem "Mending Wall" and its Cold War appropriations, I will show that the poet envisioned for himself a role far more complicated than any of those into which Cold War America had tried to mold him. Useful as it may have been for the Kennedy administration to keep Frost in Washington, DC, sending him on a diplomatic mission sponsored by the State Department involved considerable political risk. Frost demonstrated a truly "poetic" or soulful approach to diplomacy by investing the meeting with deep conflicting desires, which he felt were also at work in the process of poetic composition. More universally, the essay will suggest that the poet's imaginative response to the Iron Curtain richly illustrates how the dividing line "from Stettin to Trieste" provoked in both ideological blocs, well into the 1960s, strong desires for the Other, the unthinkable, and a vantage point from which they could look back on themselves and comprehend their own historicity.

Though today few would take seriously the idea of a summit between a poet and the leader of a superpower, and even fewer would accept such a summit in the midst of Cold War, Frost himself thought it absolutely natural. Never did it occur to him that, as a poet, he might be out of his depth in international diplomacy. He always claimed a special role for poets in the political world, and his meeting with Khrushchev must have struck him as wholly appropriate. Frost was once asked whether he concurred with Percy B. Shelley that poets were "unacknowledged legislators of the world," attuned to the harmonies towards which all creation strove and towards which human history was heading, albeit slowly. He responded with an emphatic No.[5] Poets, he believed, are not attuned in any special way to some inherent order of the universe, for there may not be one. He argued that such pursuits belonged to the preoccupations of philosophers, making them ill-suited for the position of political power. "I'm no Platonist," Frost explained, "to agree with Plato that the philosopher should be king. Neither

5 Cook, *Living Voice*, 65–66.

do I agree with him that the poet should be suppressed. The poet would make a better king than the philosopher."[6] Precisely the difference of poetry from philosophy makes the former, in Frost's view, akin to politics and makes poets better suited for the job of political leadership and international diplomacy than philosophers will ever be. Frost believed that statesmanship and poetry had much in common, because neither strained to acquire the knowledge of a wider truth. If philosophy, he thought, was the love of truth, poetry, more modestly and similarly to politics, showed more interest in creating habitable and sufficiently safe and enduring environments. In short, writing poetry has much to do with shaping state borders. In Frost's view, the occupation of poets corresponds to that of politicians and statesmen insofar as they all, state leaders and poets alike, create habitable human realms. Poetry, too, consists, in the main, of wall-building; if it sometimes also involves wall-tearing, that is only because the poet intends to move the wall elsewhere, to push it outward thus enlarging the realm of intelligibility.[7] When confronting Khrushchev, Frost saw both of them as involved in more or less the same business, partners in the same trade.

GOOD AND BAD MAPS

Frost's "negotiations" with the Premier stemmed from the poet's complex views on a whole series of political maps that haunted him and played the role of important correlates for his sense of the beautiful and the ugly. Frost occasionally talked of the aesthetic aspects of the geographical outlines of nations or city states (outlines he confusingly called "maps"), always suggesting that they rehearsed the same tensions as poems by asserting realms of intelligibility and meaning against the expanse of meaningless nature. He would call some of the maps "good" and others of them "bad," both epithets having clearly poetic implications. A country with "good" borders is, in this way, like a good poem, a provisory "stay against confusion" balanc-

6 Frost, *Collected Prose*, 192–93.

7 For Frost's insistence that poets should play the same role in Washington as politicians, see *Collected Prose*, 342, 193; cf. Thompson and Winnick, *Later Years*, 272. The poet liked to entertain his audiences by telling them, as if in confidence, that his real purpose was to set up a Secretary of Poetry or of the Arts in the Cabinet. See Frost, *Collected Prose*, 193; Frost, "Playful Talk," 183.

ing its meaning-making with the recognition of its limitations. Good borders, too, mark out a habitable realm guaranteeing safety and internal order but are not airtight, providing the citizens with openings into a wider world and offering them insights into the relative provisionality of their realm. Frost believed that the West, and the US within it, should be marked out as good poems, realms of intelligibility and stable meaning that nevertheless would not preclude awareness of the wider world or the conditionality of that meaning. Inasmuch as West Berlin was the opening onto the Other, it was, for the West, a place of danger and opportunity.

With the island of West Berlin set deep in East German territory, the outlines of the West resonated in the poet's imagination with ancient territorial formations and geography-conditioned cultures and styles of expression. To begin with, Frost saw the city—linked as it was to the West by a motorway and designated air corridors—with the map of ancient Athens in mind. Ancient Athens was a small city-state closely walled in except for one opening onto a narrow corridor between the famous Long Walls leading to the port in Piraeus and the sea. As a result, Athenians were rather confident of their native worldview but not completely isolated or ignorant of the wider world. The opening of Athens to foreign lands through a single port and the narrow, long corridor connecting the city with the docks promoted wider experiences which, even if incongruous with local values and prejudices, had to be regularly accommodated. Occasionally Frost recalled with great fondness the moment he saw the map of Plato's city-state for the first time. He liked to point out that he instinctively sensed in its outlines an important poetic lesson: "I don't know what I could do with it [the map of Athens] . . . but something I know I . . . was in. . . . I remember the look of that map . . . and what I had to do with it with nothing on it except the looks."[8] For Frost, the "look" of Athens illustrated the sensual and epistemological boundaries of a "good" poem.

Significantly, in Frost's mind, the maps of ancient Athens and of the West with its opening in West Berlin contrasted with two other maps—those of less worldly ancient Greek provinces. Athenian borders, for instance, were significantly less closed than the outlines of Laconia (Sparta). Like Athens, Laconia had a port, at Gythium, but the province was sur-

8 Robert Frost's lecture, Athens College, March 23, 1962, Guide to the Collection of Robert Frost Lectures of Edward C. Lathem, 1941–1962, box 2.

rounded not only by walls but also by chains of mountains, the Parnon and the Taygetus. This mountain-hedged plain was thoroughly internalized by Spartans, who were less curious about the outside world than Athenians, possibly in proportion to the degree to which the Laconic mountains outgrew Athenian walls.

Most isolated, however, was Boeotia. The Boeotian plain, large and sprawling, was surrounded by mountains with only a few passes. "Access to the sea was there, to the east or southwest to the Corinthian Gulf," writes one classical historian, but the plain itself was fertile enough to stifle any curiosity whatsoever. "There was not much to tempt a Boeotian to lift his eyes above the surrounding hills and mountains to the sea."[9] Hence the province's notoriety for its inhabitants' widespread dull-wittedness.[10]

Now, if the link between the geography of a people and their open-mindedness seems so natural, so should Frost's tendency to associate the outlines of states with poetry. He saw the map of Athens relevant to his art because the relative openness or closure of political realms, as illustrated on maps, often dictate analogous qualities in the language and poetry practiced within those realms. Each community develops a language that to a great extent reflects the integrity of its territory and the nature of its borders. For instance, the geography of Athens produced the so-called Attic style of oratory, functional and restrained, quite concise, with few redundant descriptions or folly in expression, but with considerable "fresh noticing of details." The recognition of detail and variety in the Attic style was moderated by the sense of wholeness and by the need for generalization and abstraction. Athenians' verbal expression bore witness to their disinterested experience of the wider world through their port.

The functional conciseness and closure characteristic of the Attic style reach a certain extreme in the verbal expression developed in Laconia by Spartans, whose view was consistently enclosed by high mountain ranges. Accordingly, Laconic language appeared almost dumb, a little crude, to the more worldly Athenians. But the truly uncurious style was the Boeotian. If the Boeotian map is ugly by being too closed, Boeotian phrases too were blind to experience, thoughtlessly repeated and caricaturely proverbial. On the continuum of maps and equivalent styles of verbal expression, as we

9 Boardman and Hammond, *Cambridge Ancient History*, 289.
10 For a related discussion, see Davis, "Laconic Response."

move from Athens to Boeotia, the language becomes more schematic, dogmatic, generalized and blind to experience. What Frost was "in" in poetry was striking a golden mean between, on the one hand, conciseness and functionality and, on the other, disinterested curiosity. Frost called it a tension between Platonic "justice," that is, minding one's own business and magnanimity or the largeness of spirit.

The significance of West Berlin in Frost's imagination, of the city planted deep in the territory of the West's ideological enemy, the Soviet bloc, becomes clear when we see its map against the ancient city-states their verbal styles. Other, more contemporary maps also shaped the poet's understanding of the Berlin case. Frost valued highly the map of Ireland (which was on his mind most forcefully during his June 1957 visit[11]). He thought the country's outlines "beautiful" and "poetic" precisely for the same reason that prevented Athenians from becoming too parochial; that is, he admired the patch of Northern Ireland saving Eire from becoming too snug in its Catholicism.[12] The Irish Republic had become autonomous ten years earlier, in 1948, and throughout the 1950s the poet saw, to his satisfaction, various tensions between Eire government and the Unionists.

In the same way, the poet appreciated and thought beautiful the blurry-edged map of the Jewish state within Palestine. Frost often called himself an "old Balfourite," evoking the figure of Arthur James Balfour, whom he called "the fellow who in a way created Israel—and gave it more than it could keep."[13] Of course, Frost is alluding to the Balfour Declaration by the British foreign secretary who set the rules of the British support for the establishment of the Jewish nation. Given that the declaration explicitly said that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,"[14] Balfour gave Jews more than they "could keep," that is, more than they could take for granted and complacently think of as their own forever. The British statesman gave them a state for the integration of which they would have to work, and he made sure their efforts were to be perennially frustrated by the protected presence of the Arabs. The Israelis were given so much, in terms

11 Meyers, *Robert Frost*, 307
12 Robert Frost Collection 1887–2008, Tape 140. Quinn, "Frost and Ireland."
13 "Old Poet," 101.
14 "Balfour Declaration," *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2008, Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 15 Nov. 2008, http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9011963.

of protecting the freedom of all the people involved, including the Palestinians, that their home would perennially have to be negotiated and never taken for granted.

Balfour founded Israel on the recognition of the full rights of all the people living in Palestine, something that potentially could bring the undoing of the Jewish nation. In 1960 Frost saw the Israelis engaged in an effort to accommodate the Palestinian minority. "But Israel has taken care of waifs—of the body and of the intellect," he wrote, probably referring to the new country's social programs extended to the Arab minority as well.[15] The poet's praise for Balfour's gift was limitless: the statesman even gave them opportunity to become something more than a stable Jewish nation. He made them look like a good poem—a nation dynamically asserting its beliefs and recognizing its limits. [16] He expected the Israelis would want to repeat the certainties of their home culture but those certainties would now have to be repeatedly confronted with, and would have to allow for, the Arab presence. Frost sensed in such language a source for the poetry of the highest order.

The "capitalist island" of West Berlin evoked all of the above maps of difficult beauty. The Western "outpost of freedom" was something of the port Piraeus opening the Athenian worldview to everything incongruous with the Athenian creed. Checkpoint Charlie, where the West exposed itself to communism, brought to mind Ireland's susceptibility to Protestant loyalism along the borders of Ulster; it constituted the West's soft spot like Israel's underbelly, dangerously vulnerable and stretching today along the borderlines of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Nothing less than this open-

15 "Old Poet," 101. For a more critical view of Israel's social policies toward the Palestinian minority after the war, see Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State.*

16 Frost was angered that the walls between Israel and the Palestinian territories were becoming impenetrable and unmovable: "Stones and stones, and walls and walls, and barbed wire, wire, wire. The shame of it! That barbed wire was invented in America! Wherever I look I see that fence!" See "Old Poet," 98; cf. Smythe, *Robert Frost Speaking*, 148. In his view, Israel would err if they sought too great a security to the point of effectively insulating themselves from all outside world: "Israel is a going concern—something the world must recognize. But one Hebrew told me, 'We've never had security since the age of Solomon.' I told him, 'You're doing fine without it!'" See "Old Poet," 106. He believed that like a good poem, the Jewish state should be engaged in maintaining its worldview against encroaching experience, but should also keep acknowledging alterity by allowing that of the Palestinians.

ness and the related openness of the verbal expression of Westerners was at stake in the Gagra negotiations with unsuspecting Khrushchev.

But through West Berlin, the West also courted, dangerously, another extreme, a version of ugliness that Frost feared more than a nation's or a poem's closure. The capitalist territory a hundred miles inside the body of the communist bloc threatened to open the West to communism with the result that the West might be infected beyond healing. The fear was that the city might take in too much of the variety of life and as a result become disoriented. Frost sometimes suggests that, to avoid such shapelessness, he is even ready to accept Laconic and Boeotian styles and poems—poems that are relatively narrow-minded and analogous to a map with no ports. Certainly inferior to the Attic realm, Laconia and Boeotia are the lesser evil to a shapelessness to be avoided at all costs. Tracing the line of the growing openness of a nation from the ancient archetypes of Boeotia, through Laconia and Athens, Frost's readers arrive at the most dangerous mindset at the other end of the continuum—too great alertness to what he liked to call "too much," too full recognition of all life without holding to one's own narrower but viable beliefs. The open and shapeless realm found expression in a style called "Asiatic," which was scorned by Horace, Cicero and Quintilian, and which Frost himself found abhorrent.[17]

Frost feared that West Berlin would be a place where "too much" would pry the West open. The city could become the origin of his culture's ugly and excessive openness. In the long run the opening at Berlin could make America and the West culturally incoherent:

> There is nothing like a good map. And the evidence of that is that we've got a good map—from the Atlantic to the Pacific—laid out neat, however we got it, by hook or by crook, I don't say; it's a great map. And Berlin is the worst map the world ever saw. See, bad maps make bad troubles. Maps do it—that's all—maps do it.[18]

By the same token, the outlines of the US had been "good" and beautiful until America acquired military bases in the Pacific, that is to say, as long

17 Cicero, *Ideal Orator*, 23–32; Quintilian, Institute XII 10.12–14; Frost, "Playful Talk," 187.

18 Cook, *Living Voice*, 194.

as the nation had an integrated shape with clear outlines.[19] By the 1950s the poet became worried by the frayed edges and fragments of America's western border. In his view, the US projecting its power on the Pacific gaped wide open like Pound's cantos. In 1960, Frost wrote: "It took me a long, long time to get over the idea that the Pacific Ocean was going to be more important in our history than the Atlantic. If I ever got over it."[20] Characteristically, the fragmentation of America's Western border and the country's expansion into a flurry of little islands all over the Pacific—processes which took place during his lifetime—were traumatic for Frost who believed that a neatly-bordered country is the requisite condition for a healthy self. Frost feared similar formlessness on the West's eastern border.

For all its promise, West Berlin posed a serious threat to the West by making it vulnerable. It was, Frost even said once, "a big mistake, like the Danzig Corridor. Here we are with Communist territory all around us. That should never have been. That is why Khrushchev can rant and threaten us."[21] In the postwar territorial settlement, the poet sensed the ghost of the map of the pre-World War II Germany and of East Prussia separated from the main body by the Danzig corridor. To Frost, both arrangements looked like the self that shows itself exposed in a poem consisting of incoherent fragments, a worldview capitulating to experience, and giving in to incongruous details. The poet seems to have felt confirmed in his views on the nature of all human-made forms, whether nations, poems or artifacts. Frost apparently saw the German efforts to re-incorporate East Prussia and become one people—territorially coherent and drawing strength from that coherence over the heads of the Polish majority in the Western Prussia—as analogous to writing poetry. More generally, the desire to connect East Prussia with the Reich illustrated any epistemological effort to round off one's realm and make it snug, immune to too much of experience in excess of an integrated worldview. According to Frost's analogy, the Polish Corri-

19 The poet absorbed the view of American democracy as largely territorial from his father. William Prescott Frost, Jr. was convinced that the US had become too vast for it to remain one nation. He believed that America would ultimately split up into six or seven regional independent nations. Frost recalled that when he was a boy, his father once spread out a map of North America and drew out the approximate boundaries of his hypothetical future nations. See also Stanlis, *Frost as a Philosopher*, 100, 230, 268, 430, 433.

20 Frost, *Collected Prose*, 220.

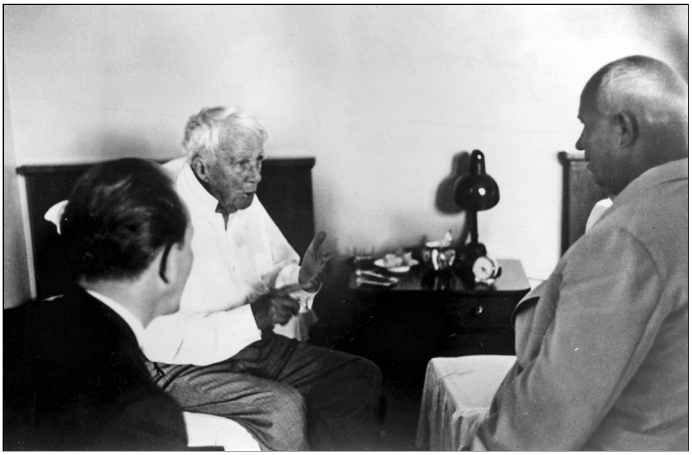
21 Smythe, *Robert Frost Speaks*, 147.

dor constituted the "prose" or the "dirt" intrusion, and was designed to prevent the German mind from becoming perfectly circular and self-referential—that is, overly poetic. In the aftermath of the war, the geographical outlines of the capitalist West and the communist East again spurred Frost to aesthetic distinctions. Two ideologically coherent collective bodies became locked territorially and torn between the conflicting desires of, on the one hand, purging themselves of the "other" body and, on the other, uniting with the antagonist (what Frost was tempted to call "love"). If the war started with the Danzig Corridor, it ended with the cyst of West Berlin. Europeans made a historical loop and returned to a map that was again, arguably, ugly. In short, Frost came to the negotiating table with this complex vision of West Berlin as a point of openness for both ideological bodies. He saw the city's uncertain status as both an opportunity and a danger for the West and the East, the two blocs precipitously balanced between beauty and ugliness. West Berlin offered an occasion for both societies to confront each other and negotiate their different spheres in a way that, to Frost's mind if not to Khrushchev's, seemed most poetic. Intuitively and imaginatively, he sought to reenact the ambivalence of West Berlin through a series of gestures that may be construed as the rehearsals of the West's expansive aggression and its vulnerability.

FROST AS TOM WHIPPLE

The only surviving photograph of this historical visit on September 7, 1962 shows Frost, strangely, seated on his bed and receiving Khrushchev. It is a peculiar picture showing a remarkable reversal of roles and probably a glaring violation of the Kremlin's diplomatic etiquette; the poet, instead of being given an audience with the leader of the Soviet Union, is granting one to the Premier. How could that have happened? When the time came to go see Khrushchev, Frost announced that he did not feel well. When everybody thought the meeting would never materialize, Khrushchev, informed of the poet's ailment, ignored the dignities of his office and visited him in his hotel. The photograph shows Frost in his pajamas on his sickbed receiv-

Figure 2: Frost with Nikita Khrushchev, Gagra, Abkhazia, September 7, 1962



Robert Frost Collection, 1866–1996, Frost MS-1178 [29]: 31. Rauner Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover. Used with the permission of the Estate of Robert Lee Frost. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

ing the statesman. "I sat up on the edge of the bed and went at it," the poet later told the reporters (fig. 2).[22]

To suggest that he was faking illness would be to risk charges of cheap sensationalism and—most importantly—to ignore the man's growing frailty. After all, the visit took place three months before Frost was hospitalized and less than five months before he died. I would rather see the poet's illness as the catalyst for a turn of events that perfectly capped off Frost's scheme, which consisted of making the Premier meet—against all local rules—"an ordinary American citizen."

In the months surrounding the visit, Frost often observed that in Russia the more democratized relations of the communist state coexisted with the remnants of her monarchical past. Leningrad, for instance, struck him as "still a royal city" with a "lingering royalism" remarkably different from

22 "Frost Gives Picture of Soviet Premier As Big and Unafraid," *New York Times*, September 9, 1962.

the atmosphere of Moscow, which was more of "a people's city."[23] He felt the Soviet Premier's kingly air and was awed by the man's power of nothing less than royal magnitude. "We won't call them [Soviet leaders] kings any more," he chuckled at a press conference after his return home to the US, but suggested that, after cameras and microphones were turned off, that he certainly would call them such.[24] At other conferences he was less discreet: he called Khrushchev "a mighty monarch,"[25] and teased everybody that he was ready to call the Soviet Union "democracy . . . by courtesy."[26] To the poet's mind, making Khrushchev meet an "ordinary American citizen" like himself was a momentous move, revolutionizing ancient power relations in Russia that were largely untouched by the Bolshevik revolution and were now enjoyed by the Communist elites. The huge recognition the Premier granted the poet by visiting him, sick, in his hotel room—that is, by visiting "somebody from the street," as Frost liked to say of himself in this context—only heightened the meeting's significance as Kremlin's capitulation to American-style egalitarianism.

Such interpretation is corroborated by several public talks he gave at the time. Back then, Frost was drawn to—if not obsessed by—a true story of Tom Whipple he read in a book for children by Walter D. Edmonds, a writer of historical novels and his friend.[27] Tom Whipple was a "Yankee lad" who in 1837 sailed to Russia, where he insisted on meeting the Czar, Nicholas II, because at home he believed he could, if he wanted to, meet President Andrew Jackson. The boy persisted, despite being reminded by many

23 "Muscovites Hear Reading by Frost; The Topic: A Wall," *New York Times*, September 6, 1962. See also "U.S. Poet Twits Russians with 'Why a Wall?'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 1, 1962, n.p. Robert Frost Collection 1887–2008, 12:11.

24 "Muscovites Hear Reading by Frost."

25 Max Lerner, "Frost Flavor," *New York Post*, September 11, 1962.

26 "Poet Frost Finds Nikita Not Afraid of a Fight," *Chicago-Sun-Times*, September 9, 1962, 4 (Robert Frost Collection 1887–2008, 12:11).

27 In the days of America's wartime alliance with Russia, the story was widely promoted. It was first recorded by Maria Child and retold by several writers. Frost knew it from Walter D. Edmonds's *Tom Whipple*. For Frost's different renditions of the story preceding his visit to the USSR, see, to name only a few, his reading at Yale, New Haven, May 19, 1961, Tape 140, Subseries E: Recordings (Tapes), Robert Frost Collection, 1887–2008; lecture, Dartmouth College, May 23, 1961 (14–15) and reading of April 11, 1961 at American Academy of Arts and Letters (14), both from Guide to the Collection of Robert Frost Lectures of Edward C. Lathem, 1941–1962, box 2.

Russians that their Czar was obviously not accessible to his subjects or any foreigners of the same lowly stature: "You know, Whipple, the Emperor's a pretty hard man to get to see." In the story many people try to explain to the boy the difference between an empire and a democratic country:

> Tom thought it over, but he shook his head. He said he couldn't see it that way. He could see it might apply to a Russian farmer, in a manner of speaking; but he was a United States citizen. Martin Van Buren, now, he could see the Emperor, couldn't he? Mr. Dallas [the American diplomatic minister] nodded his head; that was true. Then why couldn't Tom Whipple?[28]

By making Khrushchev take time to meet an average American like himself, Frost created a precedent incongruous with Russian political culture; he had the Soviet leader follow an American principle. Afterwards, at home, he told journalists he did not know whether he had the right to expect to influence Khrushchev's decision on the Berlin wall but that he was satisfied by "[coming] off the street as a tramp poet and [making] to the mighty monarch . . . one little request."[29] The nature of the request aside, Frost reenacted the story of Tom Whipple showing that "a boy in America was in those days . . . equal to Czar," and the Czar for a while, out of fancy or curiosity, played by those foreign and more crucially anti-monarchical rules. Only a year before he himself received a royal treatment from Khrushchev, Frost told his students that the Czar hosted the boy as if he was dealing with the head of the state. The Emperor called "a cavalcade of horses and sent him [Tom Whipple] up to see Moscow."[30]

Not only did Frost use the meeting on West Berlin to "invade" Russia with American egalitarianism, but also the Soviet "Czar" showed unusual magnanimity and careless openness to an alien political tradition. The poet never tired of repeating Walter Edmonds's story before and after his visit to the Soviet Union, how the Emperor accepted with no reservations the boy's gift, an acorn he picked up in Mount Vernon, where George Washington lived and died. "This nut's right off one of his [Washington's] personal

28 Edmonds, *Tom Whipple*, 44.
29 Seymour Topping, "Frost Gives Picture of Soviet Premier as Big and Unafraid," *New York Times*, September 8, 1962.
30 Robert Frost's lecture, Dartmouth College, May 23, 1961, 15, Guide to the Collection of Robert Frost Lectures of Edward C. Lathem, 1941–1962, box 2.

trees," Tom told Nicholas II. "I thought you'd appreciate it, being as it comes from the home of the greatest man of the U. S. A., greater even than Old Hickory."[31] As the story goes, the monarch certainly appreciated the gesture and planted the acorn in his garden. Frost was delighted that Khrushchev demonstrated a similar "compassion," "magnanimity," or "the largeness of soul" that allowed Frost to plant in the Soviet Union an American democratic principle. The poet sowed seeds of American-style egalitarianism by establishing the precedent that the First Secretary of the Communist Party was accessible to anyone.

HORSE-TRADING WITH KHRUSHCHEV

But the Gagra summit had other important themes which resonated with the collective desires invested in the divided German capital—themes which, in Frost's view, were also at work in poetic composition. One of the most difficult to explain is Frost's proposal that Khrushchev recklessly swap territories with the United States the way people used to trade horses in the olden days to try their luck and get a thrill out of life.

After the poet had returned to Moscow, he told journalists gathered in the hotel lobby that his conversation with Khrushchev reenacted the old story of a tramp poet asking the monarch magnanimously to promise he would do something for him before knowing first what it will be. He suggested to the Soviet Premier that they accept each other's proposal for the swapping of territories without knowing beforehand the terms of the deal. "I asked him," the poet announced, "if there was something of ours that he wants, and something of his that we wanted, then we could swap."[32] Though afterwards Frost sometimes denied he got that far,[33] the two first-

31 Edmonds, *Tom Whipple*, 54.

32 Topping, "Robert Frost Finds Khrushchev," 1; cf. "Poet Frost Calls Host Khrushchev 'a Ruffian, Not Afraid of a Fight,'" *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1962, F1. In a letter to Lawrance Thompson, Frost made plans for the visit: "I'd like a chance to ask the great Kruschev [sic] to grant me one request and then ask him a hard one." See Thompson and Winnick, *Later Years*, 310. On another occasion, he said he was going to discuss with Khrushchev "cultural exchanges": "Oughta get together and swap a little." Mertins, *Life and Talks-Walking*, 417.

33 Thompson and Winnick, *Later Years*, 322.

hand witnesses of the meeting, F. D. Reeve and Frederick Adams, confirm Frost's original story, adding that the poet specifically used the term "horse-swapping" for it.[34] Thompson and Winnick's biography of the writer is precise, then, to almost the word when it states that Frost "propose[d] a kind of horse-trade with the United States. . . . He was sure the United States would accept the terms of any proposal he made."[35]

Needless to say, anything resembling "horse-swapping" has been unheard of in diplomacy, because the term signifies blind and unpremeditated exchange. And yet it is precisely what Frost seems to have contemplated and proposed in Gagra. He meant something similar to the "coat swapping" his idol James Guild, an itinerant artist of early America, describes in his journal:

> While on my road I saw an [sic] young man on a head and my coat was almost wore out. I hollows out to him, say friend how will you swap coats, I want to trad [sic] a little today? Take off your coat and through it to me and Ill through you mine before wee see them. This done, I caught the coat and through him the dollar and says good by sir. I made 3 or 4 dollars in this bargain.[36]

An avid reader of American local-color humorists, Frost may also have had in mind a very specific story by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet "The Horse-Swap," in which two men engage in expert horse trading eventually to walk away from the deal feeling outsmarted by each other, for both their newly-swapped horses had major flaws artfully hidden.

While at first sight, Frost's offer seems too goofy to deserve serious consideration, upon closer analysis the proposal should at least be recognized as dovetailing with several of Frost's central concerns, such as the danger of excessive appetite or the counterproductive nature of gift giving. Paradoxically, with those concerns in mind, the most generous offer on Frost's part seems to reflect cunning Cold War gaming. By agreeing beforehand to grant Khrushchev whatever the Premier asked for, the poet fantasized he might see his old beliefs confirmed—that avariciousness is deadly and that giving is at bottom taking away. He indulged in the fancy that

34 Cf. Reeve, *Robert Frost in Russia*, 124; Adams, *To Russia with Frost*, 38.
35 Ibid., 321
36 Guild, "James Guild," 260. For Frost's interest in Guild, see Nash, "Poet and the Pirate," 320–21.

Khrushchev might be too greedy for territorial gain and if the Premier had the USSR take too large a mouthful, the communist bloc might choke on it.

For what it is worth, the poet probably absorbed the popular imaging of Khrushchev at the time as embodying, with his breadth and girth, the territorial voraciousness of the Soviet Union. Cartoons of the late 1950s and early 1960s typically evoked the Premier's appetites as a metaphor for the USSR's aggressive expansionism. One published in August 1961, shows Khrushchev closing in on the entire globe and lying that his tough position on Berlin was a symptom of this craving, "Es geht ja gar nicht um Berlin" (fig. 3). Still another, entitled "Another Toothache for Khrushchev," shows West Berlin as Khrushchev's one bite too far.[37] Given this unreasonably generous offer—that the US would yield to the Soviets whatever they ask for—Russia may have suicidally overextended herself. She may have ended up like Rome in Frost's favorite account by Edward Gibbon; or like the poet's dog Winnie, which "got her face and mouth full of porcupine quills and died under the choloroform [the Frosts] had to give her for the really terrible operation of getting them out."[38]

In other words, offering a horse-swap was Frost's way of checking how much of a good statesman, perhaps even a poet, Khrushchev was. The poet wondered whether the Premier would demonstrate wisdom when taking in new territory; whether he would adopt the kind of attitude poets—at least the best of them, he reasoned—show when they provisorily domesticate nature through their meaning-making forms. Frost wanted to see if the Soviet leader was as wise as poets when showing care not to take in too much of life and nature, in fear that their art will capitulate to such pressure. Frost seems to have hoped that Khrushchev intuitively understood that shaping a nation was very similar to writing poetry, and if one wanted to be good at it, one had to be guided by caution. Poetry, Frost said, was "caution with which to be brave."[39]

37 John Collins, "Another Toothache for Khrushchev," McCord Museum of Canadian History, online exhibition *Where to Draw the Line: Editorial Cartoons in Quebec, 1950–2000*, http://www.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M965.199.5042/.

38 Gibbon ranked fourth on Frost's 1958 list of his most favorite books. Frost, *Collected Prose*, 199. For the poet's story of his dog, see his *Selected Letters*, 398.

39 Frost, *Notebooks*, 49.

Figure 3: Fritz Behrendt, "Es geht ja gar nicht um Berlin!" [This has nothing to do with Berlin]

Reprinted from *Trotzalledem*, *Eine Auswahl von 100 politischen Karikaturen* (Rotterdam: Nijgh & van Ditmar, [s.d.]). Used with the permission of Renate Behrendt.

In other words, in Frost's view, West Berlin, South Korea, and South Vietnam were all for the taking. The best statesmen, however, should think twice before reaching for any of these territories, because any such territorial gain would be hard to integrate into a political and cultural entity that would survive and last. Paradoxically, to Frost's mind, a truly aggressive move in these negotiations—horse-swapping-style—would be less a rapacious demand for more territory and more a cold-headed resolve to refrain from expansion and, rather, to induce the other party to take in more land. By now it should be clear that Frost's proposal was less wacky than it seems at first sight. In fact, the proposed blind swapping of territories along the Cold War front could become, if undertaken by two equally savvy politicians, a truly nuanced contest of restraint. Wary of simple expansion, both

parties would rather seek to make their maps more integrated, and therefore aesthetically shapelier—if not as closed as Boeotia.

What one needs for horse swapping then is "horse sense." In one notebook entry Frost explains that "horse sense" is not any special cunning or shrewdness: "Horses have no special sense more than a cow or chicken. Horse sense means the sense a man has in trading and handling horses."[40] Rather, it is a practical sense or good judgment that will save a farmer when he becomes "over elated" at a deceptively good opportunity. It is an instinct that will prevent him from adopting, too readily, a too large animal that, in the long run, may become nothing but a liability. What seems a great gain at first may turn out impossible to accommodate, or to integrate into the farm's workings or household economy. In another notebook the poet mentions, for instance, a farmer who "opened his mouth a hundred dollars too soon on a lot of cows."[41] The man bought a herd of cows too cheaply and before he knew, his assets, depleted by the cost of fodder and vet bills, were in a shambles. Other notebook entries on horse trade also show "horse sense"; they sound like warnings against buying a horse that may become a white elephant: "Never buy a critter that you cant [*sic*] easily turn."[42] Of course, one major horse that Frost, this instinctive classicist, had in mind was the most gigantic horse in all history, the Trojan horse. The Trojans have come down in history as too eager to allow within their walls a horse's likeness which they thought was a gift but which turned out to be a catastrophic liability. In Frost's notebooks one finds scattered expressions of caution mindful of the Trojans' fatal mistake: "You mean to say he wants two hundred dollars for that old warhorse?"[43]

To Frost's mind, Germany—as well as all of postwar Europe—posed a danger to both the United States and the Soviet Union, each of which would be well-advised to keep the Old World outside their gates. For a nation to outgrow what they are capable of at their historical time may be as dangerous as "engorging a donkey." It may cause the "dilation" of one's bodily structures: "Witness the many who in the attempt have suffered a dilation from which the tissues and the muscles of the mind have never been able to

40 Ibid., 485.
41 Ibid., 17.
42 Ibid., 17.
43 Ibid., 639.

recover natural shape. . . . And they gape in agony."[44] Qualifications for poetry writing as well as statesmanship consist—to paraphrase one of Frost's notebook entries—of being "fastidious" at the mouth, if quite capacious at the innards.[45]

Frost identified this special quality, which he looked for in Khrushchev, in certain animals that he deemed particularly beautiful, models for both poems and nations. When offering his poet friend Robert Francis advice regarding the desirable attitude toward experience, the old poet counseled the "moderate attachment" of hummingbirds. "You've got to learn to hover," he told Francis. The self's ideal relation to experience—and that applies to all the self's manifestations, including nations and poems—is that of a hummingbird sipping nectar from a flower through a hair-thin tube-like beak. The bird incorporates outside matter in an uninterrupted but carefully regulated flow, is satisfied with one flower at a time for a long time, and knows better than to try to drink rapaciously from all flowers in the area. Frost's figure of the hummingbird strongly resembles the map of Athens and the city's controlled and limited involvement with the wider world through the corridor, which on a map literally looked like a bird's beak. Frost looked for the same analogies in the West's moderate openness to communism through West Berlin. He also understood a hummingbird's mode of life to be the very opposite of that represented by the Soviet Union and the US at their most voracious. In "A Prayer to Spring" he writes of hummingbirds as shapes of unparalleled beauty:

> And make us happy in the darting bird
> That suddenly above the bees is heard,
> The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
> And off a blossom in mid air stands still.[46]

Puritanly built and, arguably, self-disciplined, satisfied with a modest intake of nectar, the bird serves as a model for an ideal poem as well as an ideal state. Whether the West with West Berlin would become such an ideal—not too widely open, not too tightly closed—remained to be seen.

44 Frost, *Collected Prose*, 115.
45 Frost, *Notebook*s, 525.
46 Frost, *Collected Poems*, 21.

MAGNANIMITY AND THE LIMITS OF LOYALTY

The two sentiments discussed—the somewhat aggressive democratization of the USSR, Tom-Whipple style, and the testing of Khrushchev's art of cautious statesmanship—were complicated by one more element directly opposite in its nature. It was Frost's full and reckless responsiveness to the host country, his "magnanimity" as great as that evinced by Khrushchev when the politician descended from the pedestal of Soviet Premiership to visit the poet in his hotel room. This sentiment requires a very cautious wording not to misrepresent or too simplistically put into question Frost's obvious patriotism.

Difficult to reconcile with Frost's other sentiments, this radical openness to the Soviet point of view was much in keeping with the poet's lifelong appreciation of "magnanimity," which, he believed, had to balance with Socratic "justice" or "minding one's own business." He insisted that people should place certain limits on their loyalty to their worlds—whether their family, their region or their country—and should be careful not to miss the moment when "an attachment should be left for an attraction." This alertness to whatever his trip to Russia might bring—he said he had the disloyalty of "a mathematician or a landscape gardener"[47]—is manifest in Frost's frequent insistence that he did not go there merely to represent America's interests. He liked to think of his visit—though officially sponsored by the State Department and fully blessed by President John F. Kennedy—as off-limits and adventurous, if not semilegal. "I wasn't sent by the Government I was invited there[.] I wasn't sent by the Government to Russia[;] I wasn't an emissary at all I was invited and it was approved of accepted but I was asked by Russia."[48] Inasmuch as he was there at the invitation of the USSR, he felt he had been given license to be as recklessly receptive to Communism's alterity as poets must be to experience if they want to fashion a good poem.

Indeed, he was charmed by the USSR in general, by most of the Russians he met, and by Nikita Khrushchev in particular. The poet's alertness to his Russian experience found its culmination in the conversation with

47 Frost, *Selected Letters*, 294.

48 Robert Frost's lecture, Ford Hall Forum, December 2, 1962, Guide to the Collection of Robert Frost Lectures of Edward C. Lathem, 1941–1962, box 2.

Khrushchev and the famous quipping about Kennedy's liberalism, which was often figured as bodily softness and a lack of spunk. The poet reportedly chuckled at the Premier's joke about the West being very much like Tolstoy, who confessed to Gorky that he was "too old and too weak and too infirm to do it but still having the desire." Khrushchev's idea, of course, was more general about the West's passivity as regards its old defunct economic system, but it was also in its essence a jab at President Kennedy's ineffectiveness as the Executive and his unmanliness. Though eventually the poet politely deflected the joke by allowing "that [tardiness] might be true of the two of them [Khrushchev and Frost] but that the United States was too young to worry about that yet," he also—disastrously for his relationship with the President—brought the joke home. As soon as he got off the plane in New York City on September 9, he told journalists that Khrushchev felt the US was "too liberal to fight." The poet could not have said this at a worse moment; he struck a blow precisely in the months when Kennedy was finding it difficult to maintain the image of a politician with a manly resolution.[49] As is widely known today, the President felt this was an unforgivable indiscretion on Frost's part, amounting to a final breach of trust between them, and he never forgave the statement.[50]

That day, in Gagra, Frost left other traces of his "magnanimity" toward Russia that made him compromise his loyalty to his home country. For instance, he gave Khrushchev a copy of his poetry collection *In the Clearing* (1962) inscribed "To Premier Khrushchev / from his rival in friendship / Robert Frost / Gagra / Sept 7, 1962." [51] To be sure, *In the Clearing* had arrived fresh off the press, and it was natural for Frost to offer it as a souvenir. However, given the volume's content and the special occasion, one wonders about the gift's appropriateness. With poems such as "Our Doom to Bloom," "A-Wishing Well," and "America Is Hard to See," the volume expresses enough of weary resentment toward the US—enough of the temptation to annul or put behind the whole legacy of the West, which

49 For more on this discourse about Kennedy lacking manly resolve, especially in his confrontations with Khrushchev, see, for instance, Dallek's account, in *JFK*, of the mood in the aftermath of the Vienna summit in the summer of 1961, and then a year later when he was to respond to the Soviet buildup in Cuba, 415–17, 535–40.

50 Monteiro, "Liberal Imagination," 153.

51 Adams, *To Russia with Frost*, 17–18.

Frost repeatedly describes as a vapid and barren stretch of wasteland—to make the book seem a very injudicious gift to this leader of the West's Cold War belligerent. Finally, the telegraph Frost sent, before flying back home, to his secretary and lover Kathleen Morrison, also suggests that he felt the entire visit involved a serious transgression on his part: "BACK FROM CRIMEA, ALL CRIMES ACCOMPLISHED."[52]

While it is unclear how far Frost went in Gagra—actually four hundred kilometers east of Crimea—in suspending or complicating his allegiance to the US and even less clear how far he imagined he did, in an unpublished 1948 draft of "Speaking of Loyalty," he went far enough to shock many of his contemporaries given the opportunity:

> There is such a thing as having to break with an attachment and go with an attraction. I may be so attracted to Russian that I may want to go there and live for a while I may want to live there for life. I may want to help the Russian [illegible] come here in America even as it is in Russia.[53]

The passage is remarkable for its apparent disloyalty to his home country and to his present self, and it shows the poet awakened to the potentialities of the future. The text unfolds toward a greater embrace of the Russian cause, much like a poem dynamically evolving, opening up to experience and ever disloyal to its initial or current premises. Though not a poem by any standards, the passage shows Frost occasionally inclined to lose his bearings on the page and yield to unruly sentiments as they make themselves felt in writing. This self-abandonment to a given situation is in his view an important element, if necessarily balanced by an opposing self-

52 Thompson, *Later Years*, 323.

53 Frost, *Notebooks*, 323. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he entertained the notion that the Communist Russia might turn out to be holding a key to humanity's future. Frost's thinking about loyalty is far too complicated to discuss in this essay, but back in 1917 it seemed that his loyalty to humanity as such could override his loyalty to his home country. As early as August 15, 1917, he wrote to Nathan Haskell Dole (1852–1935), asking him for lessons in "socialistic" Russian so that he would know how to address "porters, waiters, chambermaids, bootblacks, and barbers": "So I can go ahead and engage passage for Russia (I advise myself to go the long way round by the Pacific Ocean and Siberia, would you?)". His teasing remark that Communism is further west and that Americans may be *manifestly destined* to get there is revealing. See Frost's letter, Aug. 15, 1917, box 22, Thompson-Frost Collection.

possession, of not only poetic composition but also both an individual and collective approach to political and historical change.

To sum up, embodying as he did various desires of the containment myth—such as isolation, seclusion, and conquest by superior reasonableness—Frost was used for propaganda purposes by the Kennedy administration and by the wider cultural entourage of the Camelot court. And yet the poet had his own vision of his role in the Cold War, one that dramatically manifested itself during his visit to the Soviet Union. He approached the meeting with Khrushchev and the problem of West Berlin in the way artists write poems by marking out, afresh, an experiential and intellectual territory. Like writers "colonizing" their surrounding with their forms, he tried to conquer the Soviet Union by planting a truly egalitarian principle in the heart of Russia. In addition, however, Frost yielded to the USSR and to Khrushchev and came close to betraying his people (or was radically loyal to what he thought was his people's mission), very much in the way poets betray their worldviews when they become "attracted" to the possibilities appearing on the page.

More generally, the Frost-Khrushchev summit shows that West Berlin was a site of emotional investments for many people on both sides of the ideological divide. The barrier running across the German city, uncrossable for societies on both sides, reenacted the drama of a self, asserting itself against the universe but unable to become entirely snug in its world. Such a self is haunted by the Other, stirred to the mixed desires of conquest and submission. To Frost's mind, the relative openness of both blocs in Berlin could potentially reflect the ideal shape of a poem, a healthy self, and finally a lasting and enduring state. For the sake of the future, the poet felt, all three model entities should not only hold to their beliefs but also respond to and learn from fresh experience.

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