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Diverging and Converging Paths: Horizontal and Vertical Movement in Robert Frost's Mountain Interval

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In "The Road Not Taken," that over-read, critically-neglected poem that opens Mountain Interval (1916), Robert Frost apparently suggests the necessity of choice and the subsequent rejection of other possibilities that such a choice entails:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair. . . .

The conclusion of this poem begs us to misread it in typical Frostean fashion ("Some people want you not to understand them, / But I want you to understand me wrong," he exclaims in the voice of the narrator of the keeper in his "A Masque of Mercy"), and even Richard Poirier, perhaps Frost's most perceptive critic, seems to understand the ambiguously elaborated metaphor only partially (though he only glosses it obliquely, and then in a manner consistent with the sense of the passage cited from "A Masque of Mercy") when using it as a metaphor for Frost's conscious divergence from the path of modernism. Poirier is "at

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home” in Frost’s metaphor to the extent that he recognizes Frost as an artist “who insinuates his presence in the ordering and arrangement of the material [but who] is not anxious to demonstrate his freedom from the possible snares and delusions of it.”

That is, without explicitly reading the poem, Poirier recognizes in a chapter sub-heading (“A Road Not Taken: Frost—Eliot and Joyce”) that Frost, in his conscious rejection of modernism, is still able to subvert his readers, albeit in a different, less obvious fashion, from that of the “obscure” modernists. But this implied reading only partially recovers—in fact largely obscures—Frost’s playfulness in suggesting that a real and correct choice has been made by the conclusion of the poem. The apparent smug self-confidence of the poem’s final lines—“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference”—easily read as a rejection of the much-trodden, critically-respectable path of literary modernism, is quietly undermined by the rest of the poem.

In fact, “The Road Not Taken” is an imaginative grappling with the inevitability of traveling simultaneously two seemingly diverging paths which, on closer observation, seem the same, each of them, paradoxically, worn and untraveled, each of them converging within the mind of the poet, that “one traveler.” If one path has “perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear,” the poet still recognizes that “as for that, the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” One road is less traveled, and yet both are equally traveled as “both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.” What can account for this recognition of the equality of two diverging paths, each alternately (and yet, ultimately, simultaneously) perceived as traveled yet untraveled, but which seem to provoke within the persona a conscious choice to travel one path as less traveled—a choice which “has made all the difference”? The ambiguity of Frost’s language suggests a possible solution. “Yet knowing how way leads on to way,” he concludes the third stanza, “I doubted if I should ever come back.” The initial line would seem to suggest that if both paths are (paradoxically) identical, and if “way leads on

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to way," then ultimately one path should lead into, should converge with, the other. The subsequent line would seem to negate this reading by suggesting that one's choice of a path commits one to a particular vision, to a particular mode of experience, a particular type of writing, antithetical (if equal) to that of the alternate path.

Seemingly. And yet with Frost, can any apparently obvious reading—like the one initially prompted by "way leads on to way"—be incorrect? The final stanza of this poem, despite the apparent affirmation of the consciousness imposed by the path taken, seems rather, through its "sigh," to lament the loss of vision which is connected with the road not taken—and it is the road not taken which the poem proclaims itself to celebrate.

The dialectical logic of this poem can be understood in conjunction with Frost's seminal essay "Education by Poetry." Here, Frost suggests that "[p]oetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another"—that is, that poetry is a process of metaphorical thinking. Considering this the primary mode of thought, Frost is nonetheless conscious of the limitations of metaphor: "In carrying numbers into the realm of space and at the same time into the realm of time you are mixing metaphors, that is all, and you are in trouble. They won't mix. The two don't go together." Metaphors of time and space—horizontal and vertical metaphors—are mixed; and yet, like Eliot in the Four Quartets, Frost recognizes that the "[g]reatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity." The paradox revealed in "The Road Not Taken" is that, ultimately, one road open to the poet is the horizontal road of time, history; and the other is the vertical road into space, the imagination, the timeless moment of the epiphany. These roads diverge in the sense that they invalidate the concrete metaphor of two

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5 Selected Prose, p. 37.

6 Selected Prose, p. 41.

7 See also Frost's "The Middleness of the Road" in The Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 388.
roads meeting in the woods: the meeting of horizontal and vertical roads is nothing if not fantastic. But if the metaphor of the two roads breaks down, the larger metaphor that Frost creates does not; if the image of a road in the woods contrasts civilization with nature, the will with chaos, it also balances within a coherent pattern the horizontal with the vertical—the road with the tree—and as such suggests that within the woods two roads can both diverge and converge and so suggest the “final unity” between the material and the spiritual.

Rather than being a simple-minded poem on the inevitability of choice—and, as such, suitably epigrammatic to initiate a book of more complex visions—“The Road Not Taken” is itself a poem in the American visionary tradition of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman which Poirier describes as the struggle to build, through language, a “world elsewhere,” a “desire to make a world in which tensions and polarities are fully explored and then resolved.” Frost is as equally concerned with the road not taken as he is with the road taken in that he is ultimately concerned with unifying, within the imagination, the apparently divergent paths of living horizontally, in the “real” world, and the extravagant, vertical path of the transcendent imagination, escaping time in “boundless moments.” Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s seminal work on phenomenological space, Frank Lentricchia usefully points to a series of significant recurring images in Frost’s poetry—trees, houses, brooks—while at the same time ascribing too static a meaning to these images, aligning trees and houses, for instance, with isolation and alienation and brooks with redemption. What is significant about these images is that they all represent, in varying degrees, the dialectical tension between horizontal and vertical modes of perception. Like Bachelard, Frost is less concerned with the image than with the imagining, less concerned with the house than with the “dreamer of houses,” less concerned, finally, with the perception than with the act of perceiving.

10 See, for instance, pp. 26 and 45 in Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975). In general, Lentricchia’s readings of individual poems are far more supple than his static conception of these images would suggest.
11 Bachelard, p. 41; also quoted in Lentricchia, p. 31.
In this context, Harold Bloom’s discussion of the process of *daemonization*, “founded upon the ancient notion of the daemonic as the intervening stage between the human and the divine” and characterized within a poem with “imagery of great heights and abysmal depths,”¹² which draws upon the Swiss psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger’s distinction between the *process* of *Verstiegenheit*—the phenomenological experience of falling upward—and the *state* of Extravagance which ensues is particularly relevant. Bloom argues that, like the schizophrenic (whose experience Binswanger is describing), the poet in his visionary state—floating between the human and the divine—“appears (to himself) to levitate, an experience of afflatus that abandons him on the heights, risen to an Extravagance that is a ‘failure of the relationship between height and breadth in the anthropological sense.’”¹³

This, as we have seen, describes the apparently “fantastic” situation faced by the persona in “The Road Not Taken”—except that it is a vision *not* of a schizophrenic but rather of what Bloom calls a “strong poet.” If Extravagance, as Binswanger describes it, is for the schizophrenic an experience parallel to that of a mountain climber abandoned upon the heights whose only chance of survival is the intervention of “outside help,” it becomes a useful category for describing the poet, Bloom argues, if read backwards: “a strong poet, as poet, by definition is beyond ‘outside help,’ and purely as poet would be destroyed by it. What Binswanger sees as pathology is merely the perverse health or attained sublimity of the achieved poet.”¹⁴

Bloom’s strong poet, as he is involved in the process of *daemonization*, falls upward toward Extravagance and in doing so not only loses the distinction between heights and depths but between height and breadth—between vertical and horizontal movement—as well. Through an act of will, however, an act of the imagination unavailable to the schizophrenic, he is able to bring *himself* down

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¹⁴ *Anxiety*, p. 105.
from the precipice and so, heroically, produce a poem. Much of Frost’s best poetry dramatizes either a horizontal, backwards movement toward a source, an origin (a movement that parallels the psychoanalytic quest), as in “West-Running Brook”; or else an imagined vertical movement, a movement toward self-transcendence and transcendence of the horizontal, “real” world, as in “After Apple Picking” or “Kitty Hawk.” Thus, while it is important to recognize the abundance of horizontal and vertical images found in Mountain Interval—the road, the brook, the house, the trees, as well as the related images of the airplane and the star—it is more important to recognize the psychic significance which these images assume within the dynamic of individual poems. It is important, that is, to examine the horizontal and vertical movement within the poems, movements which parallel the acts of poetic perception which constitute them. Such an examination reveals that horizontal movement in these poems is essentially dramatic, focusing on domestic and sexual situations, whereas the vertical movement is primarily lyrical and cosmic, the isolated poetic persona meditating on distant objects such as stars, upon his relationship with the universe, and not with other people. And yet, the most significant images in the poems—the house, the “roads” within the wood—in some way combine the vertical and the horizontal, emphasizing that the typical Frost persona is caught somewhere in the flux between the backward pull of domestic responsibilities and the forward pull toward spiritual transcendence—and that poetic strength lies in the ability, within the imagination, to balance the two. Mountain Interval represents Frost’s attempt to achieve this balance, to reconcile the path taken with the path not taken, to move from two roads diverging in a wood to a final convergence of the horizontal and the vertical in the book’s final meditation, “The Sound of Trees.”

The poems focusing on houses in Mountain Interval are of particular interest, as suggested above, both because the image of the house combines horizontal and vertical planes (and inspires

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16 I am indebted here to Martin Karlow’s unpublished essay “Hawthorne and the ‘Upward Fall’: The Early Life (After Death) of a Romantic Imagination” which traces the process of daemonization in “The Maypole of Merrymount.”
both dramatic and lyric poems), and because it is such a traditional image of poetic form. Bachelard, for instance, draws a well-known distinction between "non-house" and "house," the former representing "a form of cosmic negation in action" which is itself negated by the "dreamer of houses." Frost's own discussion of poetic form aligns him with Bachelard's "dreamer of houses" while also emphasizing the potential for madness open to such dreamers, avoided only by Bloom's "strong poet." A poem, for Frost, is like "any small man-made figure of order and concentration," constructed against a background of "hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos." Upon this confusion, the poet "look[s] out . . . with an instrument or tackle[s] it to reduce it." The poet's eye—not unlike the window of the house—exists at a point of tension, the scene of the strong poet's agon, between form and chaos, and the houses in the poems in *Mountain Interval* are themselves mere "momentary stay[s] against confusion," like the poems which contain them, ready to dissolve into formlessness, chaos. In addition, then, to being concrete, "static" images rooted firmly in the "real" world, they are also imaginary structures which propel the poetic persona either vertically out through the window or door toward the trees, the stars, or the fields beyond; or else horizontally (and backward) into the sometimes gothically oppressive responsibilities of domesticity, into one's personal and collective past. At once representative, then, of achieved form, the house also represents the fluidity of the poetic imagination, opening potentially either into the past or the future, madness or freedom.

The most significant poems in *Mountain Interval* which focus on the house as the dominant and organizing image are "In the Home Stretch," "The Hill Wife," and "An Old Man's Winter Night." Of these, "In the Home Stretch" is the most typical of Frost's domestic poetry; like "Home Burial" and "West-Running Brook," it consists of a dialogue between a husband and wife which questions the very basis of their relationship. Though the cellar is

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16 See Bachelard, pp. 40–41, and also Lentricchia, p. 31.
17 "Letter to The Amherst Student," from *Selected Prose*, p. 107.
19 Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," from *Selected Prose*, p. 18.
absent from this poem, the past isn’t, and there is a clear contrast
between the warm interior of the house (including the bed) and the
confusedly bleak landscape presented by the window. Specifically,
the tension is between the husband’s attempt to hold his wife
within the house and so to the origins of their marriage, and the
wife’s impulse to escape, if only imaginatively, through the
window into the garden of weeds.

The poem begins with the wife’s isolation:

She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked
Over the sink out through a dusty window
At weeds the water from the sink made tall.
She wore her cape; her hat was in her hand.
Behind her was confusion in the room. . . .

Forward or backward, the wife faces a chaotic landscape, though
one suspects that even the harsh garden, fed with dishwater, a
diminished product of a female imagination ("'Rank weeds that
love the water from the dishpan / More than some women like the
dishpan, Joe’"), producing something "scarce enough to call / A
view," would seem more attractive than the "confusion in the
room, / Of chairs turned upside down," made that way not by her
but by the "infernal face[s]" of the moving men—and her hus-
band. Yet even more explicitly than "Home Burial," this poem is
about reimagining a marriage, rebuilding a home, making a poem
from the chaos of the past.

The poem presents the moving into a new house, the moving
from the city to the country, the past to the present (and projected
future), as an image of an attempt to reimagine a marriage, to
return to its source. "'It's a day's work,' " the husband proclaims

"To empty one house of all household goods
And fill another with 'em fifteen miles away,
Although you do no more than dump them down."

His wife responds, though provisionally: "Dumped down in
paradise we are and happy." But if, at best, this poem represents a
paradise regained, it is one significantly diminished by memories of
the paradise lost. Notably, this paradise is regained through a
horizontal movement—"fifteen miles" into the country—as if into
the past, as if in order to return to a past existence and thereby
revitalize the present and the future.
This return to the past to redeem the future seems supported by the final stanza of the poem:

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen,
The fire got out through the crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much as if they'd always danced there.

Yet there is also the sense in which, because the past cannot be transcended, no new beginning is really possible—"'New is a word for fools in towns who think / Style upon style in dress and thought at last / Must get somewhere. . . . / No, this is no begin-
ing'"—and hence the possibility of final entrapment within the home is ever present. If the wife in "In the Home Stretch" denies "'[e]nds and beginnings,' " claiming "'[t]here are only mid-
dles,' " that life, like the tenuous image of the house, is always in flux, the vision presented in "The Hill Wife" is far bleaker.

If the extravagant movement out through the window into the bleak garden of weeds is a potent attraction in "In the Home Stretch" (even the husband wants to walk out among the trees at the conclusion of the poem, albeit under the protection of mar-
riage, though, recognizing the landscape to be potentially antithethe-
tical to marriage, he urges his wife away "from that window where you see too much"), the extravagant landscape is boundlessly indulged in by the hillwife because her marriage isn't imaginative enough to keep her from fully indulging in her imagination and possible chaos:

. . . there were but two of them,
And no child,
And work was little in the house. . . .

Lacking the dialogue of most of Frost's marriage poems—dialogue for him seems to be a metaphor for marriage—"'The Hill Wife" seems a particularly stark, almost uncharacteristic poem, present-
ing husband and wife alone against the landscape. The marriage in this poem never draws the husband and wife together into the house. They identify too easily with the joy and grief of birds; the wife is pathologically concerned with the meaning of the smile of a stranger; both are uncomfortable with their house: "' . . . preferring the out- to the indoor night, / They learned to leave the house door
wide / Until they had lit the lamp inside.” Failing to draw the couple backward into their shared past, the image of the house—and so of form itself—breaks down in “The Hill Wife,” releasing husband and wife into an extravagance that is not redemptive, and fails to balance horizontal and vertical movements.

In a sense “An Old Man’s Winter Night” is about a disintegrated marriage, though more precisely it is about the inability of “[o]ne aged man—one man” to keep a house, presumably after the death of his wife. In many ways it parallels “In the Home Stretch,” primarily in its contrast between the confusion within and without the window of the house. However, it serves as a better transition between the horizontal domestic poems focusing on the house, the horizontal poems set in nature (like “Hyla Brook”), and, finally, those lyrics in which an isolated persona contemplates heights in the form of stars (“Bond and Free”) or trees (“Birches”), poems which finally reintegrate the persona with the horizontal “real” world—but only after an upward fall. In “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” the figure of the old man exists tenuously between a horizontal slipping into the past and a vertical upward fall into Extravagance, as fragile and exposed as the “transparent eyeball” of the Transcendentalists:

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.

Like the wife in “In the Home Stretch,” who is confronted with a bleak landscape of weeds outside her window and the confusion of chair upon chair behind her, the old man is confronted with darkness outside of his pane, emptiness behind it. However, the pane itself—representative of the old man’s eyes—contrasts with the “dusty window” of the wife in “Home Stretch.” His pane shines amidst darkness with “thin frost, almost in separate stars”; and it does so because of “the lamp tilted near [his eyes] in his hand.” Certainly a poem about ensuing death, “An Old Man’s Winter Night” cannot precisely be called visionary—as “Birches” and “Hyla Brook” can. However, rather than merely being about senility, it is about the willful attempt—a light held against darkness—to hold off senility, madness.
This poem again dramatizes the tension between form and chaos, and in doing so reemphasizes that form is only a momentary stay against chaos. While emphasizing the old man's willfulness in holding up the lamp, the poem also makes clear the necessity for his willfulness:

What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping here, he scared it once again
In clomping off—and scared the outer night,
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box.

The old man's age is the cause of his isolation; seemingly it "kept him from remembering"—no doubt in moments of partial senility. The rest of the passage is somewhat more ambiguous. The barrels which surround him seem at once to parallel the domestic clutter that surrounded the couple in "In the Home Stretch," containing the relics of a past—a marriage?—which he no longer remembers, and contrasting with the "common"—yet potentially chaotic—"things" of the outer night. On the other hand, it is possible to read these barrels more metaphorically, as merely representing the bareness of the house which results in drumlike beating sounds from the old man's clomping to and fro on the bare floors. Either reading—and the poem seems to support both, once again echoing the real / imagined dichotomy initiated in "The Road Not Taken"—however, emphasizes that the old man's senility is the source of a kind of naive poetry, the "noise" he makes holding at bay the chaos of the past ("the cellar under him") and the sounds of the "outer night" and the trees (echoed in "The Sound of Trees").

In more healthy, youthful poems, the journeys backward toward sources or up and outward toward the trees and stars, while posing the threat of madness, also offer the possibility for an expansion of consciousness. For the old man, they can only offer madness and death, the disintegration of consciousness—and his consciousness is discriminating, death is imminent:
A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.

His light is minimal, fading; but it fades into sleep and the natural
light of "the moon—such as she was, / So late-arising—. . . the
broken moon, / As better than the sun in any case / For such a
charge. . . ." No longer able to face and imagine the harsh reality
that the sun illuminates, it would seem that

One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

He cannot really "keep" the form of his life—his house, farm,
countryside—intact; but he can hope to maintain his world dimin-
ished—like the sun faded into the moon—without finally getting
lost in the confusion of the intersection of horizontal and vertical
paths; he can hope to die in his sleep and not in the madness of
senility.

Frost's poems of horizontal movement beyond the house, partic-
ularly poems like "West-Running Brook," are often more affirm-
ative than his frequently fragmented attempts at recreating the self
or a marriage within the home. "The Telephone," a straightfor-
ward poem of extravagance and return, echoes the earlier lyric
"Waiting" in the persona's discovery of his lover (and so of home)
in the field beyond. Mountain Interval contains a number of Frost's
strongest short poems on the imagination and its ability to consti-
tute the self (and only in doing so make marriage possible), and two
of the strongest, "Hyla Brook" and "Bond and Free," deal
explicitly with horizontal and vertical movement and make clear
the connection between Frost's house poems and his most obvious-
ly "extravagant" poems in this collection, "Birches" and "The
Sound of Trees."

"Hyla Brook," though not explicitly concerned with marriage, is
finally concerned with the epistemology of love, working some-
what obliquely to its final affirmation: "We love the things we love
for what they are." This is a curious affirmation because the poem
seemingly celebrates Hyla Brook for being exactly what it isn't at
the moment: a brook. The logic of "Hyla Brook," however, is similar to that of "The Road Not Taken": the latter poem affirms the road not taken by suggesting that it has been taken in the imagination, whereas the former reconstitutes the real brook while observing its dried-up bed. The persona in "Hyla Brook," like the one in "The Road Not Taken," is visionary in precisely the way that the old man in "An Old Man's Winter Night" is not: in his ability to reconstitute the past, to recreate the "song and speed" which "[b]y June our brook's run out of"—and as a result of this backward horizontal journey, this purely imaginative journey, he has reconstituted himself by enabling himself to "love," to redeem an object.

The imagery of "Hyla Brook" subtly broadens this notion of love; it implies that the backward imaginative movement necessary to love an object parallels the movement necessary to love in marriage:

Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by heat—
A brook to none but who remember long.

The dried-up bed of the brook, covered with a sheet of dead leaves, becomes an almost gothic image of the marriage bed, a suggestion that it is necessary for the imagination to replace this worn image with the original brook, the source of love, and, in that sense, the thing that it is. Also implied in this imagery is that the artist himself must "love" in order to write, must see the object's past as well as its present to truly "live in" it and therefore transform "dead leaves" of "paper" into a brook of "song and speed." Only, then, it would seem, if we follow the poem through its succeeding lines, only if we imagine an object's present and past, can we make it new, project it into the future: "This as it will be seen is other far / Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song." Only by seeing objects as existing within the flux of time can we love them "for what they are."

"Bond and Free" also considers the connection between love and imagination, though this poem explicitly classifies love as a horizontal and thought (or imagination) as a vertical movement. Nowhere in Mountain Interval are the contrasting modes of phe-
nomenological redemption—*Dasein* (being-in-the-world) and *Verstiegenheit* (Extravagance)—more clearly presented. Yet, as in “The Road Not Taken,” there is a sense in which both movements are identical. The first stanza identifies love as static, thought as free:

Love has earth to which she clings  
With hills and circling arms about—  
Wall within wall to shut fear out.  
But Thought has no need of such things,  
For Thought has a pair of dauntless wings.

The poem achieves a peripeteia so that in the final stanza it can assert, as Frost has often asserted about form, that

... some say Love by being thrall  
And simply staying possesses all  
In several beauty that Thought fares far  
To find fused in another star.

Freedom is only possible within thralldom—yet poems like “The Hill Wife” have already suggested how stifling thralldom can be without the interplay between home and extravagance, and the second stanza of “Bond and Free” suggests that it is from “snow and sand and turf... / Where Love has left a printed trace / With straining in the world’s embrace” that “Thought has shaken his ankles free.” Not only, then, is the extravagant flight of the imagination launched from the horizontal path of love; it functions similarly in its flight. If love “clings” to earth, “Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom / And sits in Sirius’ disc all night”—and then travels “[b]ack past the sun to an earthly room.” The imaginative flight is temporary; and just as its vertical cleaving parallels Love’s horizontal clinging, so too does the product of this flight—the poem written at dawn “[w]ith the smell of burning on every plume”—finally celebrate the contrary movement of Love.

“Birches” presents the fullest dramatization in *Mountain Interval* of the process of the upward fall consciously controlled by the persona of the poem, brought back down finally to coalesce with the horizontal plane. This poem begins with a fanciful interpretation of an encountered landscape:

20 “Home Burial,” in *Poetry*, pp. 51–55, is perhaps Frost’s best dramatization of this.
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.

He immediately contrasts this reading, however, with the probable “Truth” of the matter: “But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay / As ice storms do.” If “Bond and Free” moved toward the resolution of the parallel movements of love and thought, so “Birches” moves toward the resolution of the parallel movements of truth and imagination. In doing so, Frost simulates the daemonic process of poetic creation, transforming the birches themselves into symbols of this process.

After posing alternative interpretations of the bent branches, Frost proceeds, in lines 5–20, to lay the horizontal groundwork from which he makes this extravagant leap in lines 21–40:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

In this imagining—which echoes, though far more optimistically, the old man in “An Old Man’s Winter Night” walking to and fro—Frost would see the boy, participating in extravagant activity “too far from town,” isolated like the artist in his internalized quest. Further, Frost posits what would seem to be an aesthetic theory:

He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground.

This would seem to parallel Frost’s own literary career—he didn’t publish his first book, A Boy’s Will (1913) until he was forty—as well as suggesting that a work of art ought to be a conscious balancing of form and extravagance, flight and descent—and that the final product should hover between vertical and horizontal movement: a momentary stay.

Like the birch tree itself, Frost’s poem rises and dips: the final nineteen lines balance the literal and the figurative readings of the
bent birches by connecting his figurative reading with a horizontal, indeed historical truth: "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be." Like "Hyla Brook," "Birches" dramatizes the idea that present and past must be combined to project an image into the future—to make it extravagant. This final synthetic passage again expresses Frost's persistent wish "to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over." The poem's final vision emphasizes the necessity of this journey, this balancing of horizontal and vertical movements:

Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

If earth is the right place for love, the poems in Mountain Interval make clear that love itself is dependent upon imagination and therefore possible only in conjunction with vertical flight, possible only for swingers of birches.

Like "Birches," Mountain Interval itself fluctuates between horizontal and vertical movement, form and chaos, restraint and freedom. If the book opens with an apparent horizontal divergence of "[t]wo roads . . . in a yellow wood," these roads—one real, one real in imagination—finally converge, at the book's conclusion, with the vertical images of trees in "The Sound of Trees." I have argued that the initial poem was a grappling with the necessity of traveling two roads simultaneously—one real, one imagined; one horizontal, the other vertical. The final poem presents this imaginative problem more explicitly, and with the opposite image. Trees "are that that talks of going / But never gets away"; so too are poets, so certainly is Frost. Like the persona in "Bond and Free," his feet "tug at the floor"; and if the persona of that poem "cleaved" to the stars, Frost as poet at least swayed his head "to [his] shoulder" in emulation of the tree's extravagant fixity. But the concluding lines of the poem present the same problem for interpretation that the final lines of "The Road Not Taken" did:
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I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

If *Mountain Interval* opened with two apparently diverging roads which indeed converged, one could say, into this book of poetry, converged, in fact with the image of trees in this final poem—indeed, the connection between the first and last poems of this volume was emphasized by the fact that they were both italicized in the initial publication of *Mountain Interval*—the final lines of this poem remind us of the tenuous balance that has been attained in even the most affirmative poems in this volume. In “The Road Not Taken,” Frost ingeniously builds a metaphor of choice which is actually one of synthesis; similarly, in “Birches,” the persona identifies with the balancing metaphor of the birch. “The Sound of Trees” presents the dark side of these metaphors—it suggests that there is an alternative road, a “reckless choice,” like that made by the hill wife, a falling *into* Extravagance and thereby a losing of the voice which enables the poet to bend back toward the earth. If the central poems in this book—“Bond and Free,” “Birches,” “Hyla Brook,” “Putting in the Seed”—are redemptive, the final one reminds us that, even for Frost, the flight from form into the chaos of silence always seemed attractive. Unlike the noisy trees, the poet can break free of the forms and metaphors he has created, become uprooted, lose the distinction between height and breadth which is the distinguishing characteristic of the strong poet.