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The Phenomenology of the Dwelling Space in Robert Frost's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

In many of his poems, Robert Frost deploys space, rather than time or the narrative episode, to anchor the tragic, which we define as the lack of the habitable attributes of the dwelling space. Frost brings the domestic tragic into a high degree of prominence, sketching for his readers a spatial reality that is situated within the parameters of the dwelling space. To him, this interaction with space defines a permanent struggle on the part of human beings to create a habitable environment, one that embodies the true essence of dwelling. Following from a critical conversation on spatiality and dwelling, we appropriate Gaston Bachelard's and Martin Heidegger's phenomenological notions of homeness and non-homeness to interpret Frost's nuanced spatial dramatizations and his poetics of dwelling. Informed by the critical insights of these two thinkers, we argue that Frost's spatial dramatizations describe a polarized, irrational environment where the notion of homeness is built upon non-homeness and where the dweller is unable to understand his/her relationship with the dwelling space. We thus bring attention to Frost as a modernist poet significantly contributing to the critical conversation and phenomenological tradition on modern spaces and the modern experience of homeness/non-homeness.

Keywords: Twentieth-Century Poetry; Robert Frost; Space; Bachelard; Heidegger; Dwelling

INTRODUCTION

In Robert Frost's poetry, the tragic is spatially anchored. This means that the development of action is not typically temporal or episodic but rather spatial. The "Witch of Coös" and "The Death of the Hired Man" are two poems that exhibit an awareness of spatiality as tragedy unfolds or as it is remembered through a spatial memory that locates action in a limited, formal space—the house. The tragic, as we define it, is the lack of the habitable attributes of the dwelling space. The characters in these two poems have something in common: They are struggling to learn how to dwell. Frost brings the domestic tragic into a high degree of prominence, sketching for his readers a spatial reality that is situated within the parameters of the dwelling space. To Frost, this interaction with space defines a permanent struggle on the part of his characters—and on the part of human beings as well—to create a habitable environment, one that embodies the true essence of dwelling.

Gaston Bachelard's and Martin Heidegger's explication of the notion of dwelling (homeness and non-homeness) inform the conceptual framework of the discussion below. The two philosophers' theoretical insights are especially relevant to Frost's poetic representations of the dwelling spaces in a particular period of time: industrialization and World War I radically impacted—rather, fundamentally altered—the living conditions of the rural communities in New England, whose people had yet to psychologically and socially adapt to a drastic modern experience of alienation in the early years of the twentieth-century. Hence our appropriation of the notion of non-homeness (theorized by Bachelard and Heidegger) as a designation for the lack of the habitable attributes of the dwelling spaces in

Frost's poetry. We believe that Bachelard's and Heidegger's conceptualizations of dwelling are more relevant to Frost than Frederick Nietzsche's or especially Emmanuel Levinas', the one attending to a nihilistic understanding of homeness/non-homeness, the other debating an ethical universalism of homeness/non-homeness.[1] Bachelard and Heidegger attend instead to a phenomenological, rather than ethical or nihilistic, understanding of the notion in question: both philosophers deal with the entities' (the individuals') *self-nurturing experience of dwelling* (or lack thereof) in their spaces. They do not argue for a specifically ethical character of dwelling or for an ethos of nihilistic/existential despair. This phenomenological understanding of dwelling informs Frost's representation of a specific community experiencing a rupture in its modes of dwelling and a consequent feeling of non-homeness.

Frost's concern over the notion of dwelling (non-homeness/homeness) is in consonance with both Bachelard's and Heidegger's. Putting the American poet in conversation with this phenomenological tradition helps us to gain insight into the complex nature not only of the modern experience of non-homeness in general but also of the poet's unique *translation* of the intricacies of such experience and phenomenological notions into dramatic poems describing American domestic spaces in decline. Critics such as Frank Lentricchia (1975), and more recently, David Spurr (2012) consider Frost in light of this European phenomenology of dwelling. Following from this critical trend, we appropriate the notion of non-homeness/homeness in Bachelard and Heidegger to discuss *the domestic tragic* in Frost's dwelling spaces. While Lentricchia ignores the inhabitable attributes of the dwelling spaces, their tragic character, Spurr discusses Frost's dwelling spaces from a specifically architectural perspective. Spurr brings attention to the conflict inherent in Frost's dwelling spaces, but he does not consider *the spatial anchoring* of the tragic. Our interpretation is informed not only by Heidegger, which Lentricchia and Spurr use in their readings, but also especially by Bachelard's phenomenology of the polarities of dwelling.

Bringing attention to space in modern literature, in the works of many American and British poets and novelists (such as T.S Eliot, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, James Joyce, and many others) has been a very recent critical trend. As we mentioned before, Frost's spatial tendencies have only been acknowledged by very few critics, such as Lentricchia and Spurr—some critics, in fact, are still paying attention to Frost as a poet of region, ignoring as such the poet's appeal to a larger phenomenological tradition on the spatial aspects of the human experience in terms of homeness and non-homeness. By doing this, we bring attention to Frost as a modern poet significantly contributing to the conversation on modern spaces and the modern experience of homeness/non-homeness.

It is important to note that this spatial turn in literary criticism is still a blooming field; in their attention to the literary representations of spaces, different literary critics rely on different theoretical, political, geopolitical, geographical, and social conceptualizations of space postulated by a considerable number of thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, Hall Stuart, Edward Said, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, David Harvey, Doreen Messy, and Yi-Fu Tuan, Heidegger, and Bachelard. As complex as the field is, we are, therefore, only attending to a specific notion of space (dwelling) that is theorized by Bachelard and Heidegger, who provide a phenomenological, rather than typically political or geopolitical, conceptualization of space as dwelling. Situating Frost and many other modern and contemporary writers within this recent spatial turn in literary studies speaks to the growing interest amongst critics to provide fresh contexts of interpretation and understanding. For instance, while Iran Nazargahi (2011) attends to an existentialist explication of space, identity, and language in W.S. Graham's poetry, Mahdi Teimouri (2016) and Ensieh Shabanirad (2017) interpret space and spatiality as loci of hegemonic power and of "social organization" and "resistance," respectively (p. 113). A recent trend in literary studies of spatiality as well—geocriticism—situates the literary representation of spaces within geopolitical, political, and geographical traditions on spatiality, proposing multifaceted, "geocritical practices" to the understating of the heterogeneous nature of spaces in fiction and poetry (Tally 2011, p. 3). As we emphasized earlier, we are contributing to this recent blooming conversation on the notion of spatiality in literature and especially in modern poetry through phenomenological, rather than political or geocritical or geopolitical, lens, especially that critics continue to ignore Frost's spatial dramatizations of the domestic tragic and his phenomenology of dwelling.

DISCUSSION

Bachelard's phenomenology of dwelling, especially his detailed description of the relationship between the subject and his space, is very pertinent to Frost's spatial dramatizations of these domestic occurrences that speak to the poet's consistent preoccupation with the modern experience of non-homeness. Most of these dramatizations describe the dwellers' interaction with space through delineating a domestic environment where conflict is the salient feature of the relationship between the dweller and the space. The tragic aspect contingent upon this conflict is localized in a spatial reality of tension, fear, and tragedy, and the house often functions as a locus of heightened emotional and social encounters. Bachelard's analysis of the house provides an informing context for Frost's spatial dramatizations of these encounters.

In his *The Poetics of Space* (1964), a phenomenological study of the poetic image of the house, Bachelard contends that the house is a "privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value"(p. 3). In this seminal work of criticism, Bachelard examines images of the house as a felicitous space, but at some point in his discussion, he also examines one infelicitous space of the house—the cellar, a significant spatial zone. His examination of infelicity is related to the spatial anchoring of events in a Frost poem. In his analysis, Bachelard (1964) stresses an important point concerning the house as a poetic image: He talks about man's attachment to his dwelling space in terms of spatiality rather than temporality, arguing that we think that "we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability" (p. 8). As he explains, our being is located in spatial, rather than temporal, reality; he elaborates on this spatial complexity of the house and its relation to our being, claiming that our memories of our abodes are "securely [. . .] fixed in space" (p. 8). To reinstate, he objects to the localization of our memories in time, contending that such act of temporal localization is only a matter of concern for the historian and the biographer and is a shallow manifestation of the depth of the human psyche and its dwelling and being. A phenomenological approach to our association with the inhabited space is more profound, Bachelard suggests, because it conceives of the house as an entity, a conscious object that has a deep binding connection with its dwellers.

According to Bachelard, dwellers and their memories are spatially localized; their knowledge of dwelling is stripped of a "conjunctive temporal tissue" (Bachelard 1964, p. 9). Bachelard (1964) argues that the "localization" of our dwelling history "in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates" (p. 9). It is important to note as well that Bachelard does allow space—though limited in scope—for the examination of the negative poetics of inhabitation. The house, according to Bachelard (1964), "constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability" (p. 17). To examine what he calls the "dark entity" of the house, he cites examples from Rainer Rilke's poetry of houses and explains the poet's "cognizance of the drama that attaches to the dwellings of man" (p. 43). His overriding concern is to show how houses can sometimes be the "reverse of the function of inhabiting" (p. 42). Quite interestingly, Bachelard (1964) argues that the negative poetic representation of dwelling is also "revealing" since "it gives evidence of dynamism in combat" with the positive description of the house (p. 43). This dialectic relation shows how complex the notion of dwelling is: Bachelard seems to suggest that it is untenable and critically unsound to steer away from the negativity of the abode and its implications, a viewpoint which Frost evidently subscribes to.

Bachelard uses the example of Rilke and of some other poets to argue for a more tenable explication of space—the negative and the positive. In his discussion of the negative components of the house, he examines two specific spatial images that demonstrate an opposing relationship: the cellar and the attic. According to Bachelard (1964), verticality of the dwelling place is "ensured by the polarity" of these two spatial parts, whose "marks are so deep that they open up two very different perspectives for a phenomenology of the imagination" (p. 17). As for the cellar, Bachelard (1964) says that it is the "dark entity" of the house, the one that "partakes of the subterranean forces" (p. 18); besides, it exemplifies the "irrationality" of the house. However, as for the attic, it is the representation of the "rational zone" of the dwelling space.

Frost's spatial dramatization bears semblance to Bachelard's phenomenological analysis of the ambivalent nature of spatiality of the house. Often in Frost's poetry, events and actions take *place* (rather than simply *occur* in the temporal sense of the word) in a house which functions as a reservoir of personal, domestic and familial history. We see characters descend down, and climb up, the stairs, tip-toe down darkened passages, push each other through doors, sit on porches, close and open doors, pass by slab-built houses, look through windows, and walk in empty dwelling spaces. Often, space in Frost is conceived of as a being interacting with its dwellers. However, intimacy (a term which Bachelard uses to argue for the habitable aspects of the house and its positive representations) is sometimes not a prominent feature of the dwelling space owing mostly to the domestic tension between the characters. While in some poems, spaces hide familial secrets of love stories gone awry, in some others, the dwelling space is threatened by intruders and outsiders, whose inexplicable presence constitutes threats of physical assault or burglary. To complicate Bachelard's notion of the inhabited space, Frost's houses do not "bear the essence of the notion of home" (p. 4); as a dwelling space, houses in Frost deromanticize notions of at-homeness as they bear marks of insecurity, tension, dissolution, fear, and marital perfidy

These phenomenological insights on the conflicting nature of the dwelling space, of its lack of intimacy and of its evident infelicity, are most pronounced in Frost's "The Witch of Coos," a poem whose events unfold not only temporally but also, and most importantly, spatially. In this poem, Frost spatially dramatizes a situation of infelicity which Bachelard considers highly significant in our understanding of the polarized nature of the dwelling space. In this poem, a hidden family secret of murder is exposed to a silent stranger who "stayed the night for shelter at a farm" with a mother and a son. The divulgement of the secret, which lies hidden (yet now exposed to the stranger and, consequently, to the reader) is filtered through a spatial memory which exemplifies, to employ Bachelard's terminology, "the polarity of the cellar and the attic" (p. 17), two spatial entities that create what Bachelard calls the "vertical being" of the house. "The Witch of Coös" demonstrates the phenomenological polarities of rationality and irrationality. The secret of the murdered man (who is now reduced only to some walking bones) has always been kept in the irrational zone of the dwelling space (the cellar). The witch and her husband Toffile dug a grave for the man in the cellar. Forty years ago, the bones of the man left the cellar and ended up in the attic (the rational zone of the house) whose door was nailed permanently shut. Responding affirmatively to her son's observation that the bones are forever trying to leave the cellar, the Mother-Witch tells the stranger at the house that she will never let the bones out of the attic:

"We'll never let them, will we, son! We'll never!" (Frost 1995, p.188). Bachelard explains the dweller's complex relationship with the cellar; he claims that the fears that lie in the cellar cannot be rationalized nor can they be detected. The woman in the poem is careful not to let the bones back in the cellar because that would re-institute fear in her spatial and temporal reality. In the attic, Bachelard contends, fear is easily detected and can be rationalized. This means that, despite its presence, it no longer constitutes a threat to the family. The elimination (or rather its containment) of fear is made even stronger because the door of the attic is nailed shut permanently. The source of fear is detected and is almost forever contained. As she tells the stranger, the bones appeared suddenly and left the cellar with them unawares. She also tells the stranger that she thought it was Toffile "downstairs in the cellar," (Frost 1995, p. 189), but of course these were the bones descending the stairs and re-instituting themselves in the temporal and spatial reality of the house.

In his *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler (1996) explains in a chapter called "Dark Spaces" that certain spaces in our houses always hide secrets and continue to haunt the dweller's imagination almost permanently. His description of the dark space as a "harbinger of the unseen" (p. 167) is somehow similar to Bachelard's own understanding of the cellar as a threatening entity. Himself a modern architectural theorist, Vidler, just like Bachelard, examines phenomenologically the subject-space relationship. He, too, sees space as having a conscious entity that is in constant interaction with the dweller. Unlike Bachelard, Vidler is concerned with the strictly uncanny attributes of space and its architectural manifestation in modern buildings from the eighteenth-century onwards. What we find most relevant to Bachelard's own understanding of the consciousness of the space is that space, according to Vilder (1996), has taken in contemporary discourse "a lived experience" and "almost palpable existence" (p. 168). Both stress the physicality of space as an entity interacting with the dwellers. Vidler, however, goes beyond Bachelard's understanding of space and suggests that space can sometimes function as a metaphor for the destruction of "the bodily and the social well being" (P. 168). Vidler brings the hostility of the dark space into a higher degree of prominence than Bachelard does, suggesting that darkness is an instigator of fear in the dwelling place.

In the "Witch of Coös," it is mostly the cellar that induces—rather, augments— such darkness. The woman almost always heard the bones walk, climb up and down, rustle and run through doorways. As she tells the stranger, when she saw the bones, "she had a vision of them put together/ Not like a man, but like a chandelier" (Frost 1995, p. 189), and when the bones walked into the bedroom, she shouted "the bones" and wanted to put out the light to *see*, but she never did. Panicking, her husband Toffile threw his bare legs out of the bed, sat up by her, and took hold of her. The room was dark, the lights were never put out, and both were trying to lock the bones into the attic.

Vidler gives special emphasis to space as a dark entity, citing two theorists who talk about space and who suggest that darkness in a certain space does no simply mean the absence of light. One theorist called Eugene Minkowski contends that "darkness touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him [……….] the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else" (qtd. in Vilder 1996, p. 175). He even goes further to suggest that in a dark space, there is a lack of distinction, meaning that sense organs function modestly and improperly with regards to their ability to recognize objects in darkness. The suggestion here is that the woman in this poem is simply eaten up by space. There are no bones; their presence is induced by an imagination troubled, as it were, by the spatial parameters of the engulfing darkness issuing from the threatening recesses of the house—the cellar. The woman in the poem is spatially digested by the guilty memory of betrayal; her body walks through the house and her mind is anchored in the dark reality of the cellar, which is, as Bachelard explains, the locus of irrationality.

From Bachelard's perspective, the woman is as irrational as the cellar; in a sense, she merges with the dark reality of the cellar. In this poem, body and space become one. In her "Place is the Asylum," Katherine Kearns (1987) contends that the bones "represent the woman's guilt and resulting insanity rather than her husband's, who can neither see nor hear them despite his having done murder" (p. 197). This takes us back to the point where the spatial and the physical merge together to induce madness and, most importantly, to contain it. Kearns (1987) points out that the cellar has traditionally always been "a place of potential horror" and is often associated with "sexual betrayal" (p. 196). She adds that its function in "The Witch of Coös" is "what one would expect from a folktale, and typical to the genre, a place where the consequences of sexual madness resides" (p. 196). Frost's choice of the cellar as a space *containing* irrationality reflects his awareness of the phenomenologically conflicting nature of the dwelling space; in the poem, space thus acquires concreteness and a psychological depth through its association with the murderous past of a woman and her lover. As Kearns contends, not only is there a buried secret of murder, but there is also a buried emotional life: "sexuality between the husband and the wife appears to have been killed as well, for the wife in years afterward prefers sitting by the fire to going up the cold stairs to the bedroom where the bed 'might just as well be ice and clothes snow" (p. 197).

The woman's mental and emotional states are both defined according to her relationship with space where the localization of memory is best represented through situating a family secret within the vertical beings of the house—the cellar and the attic. Like Bachelard, Frost is concerned with the phenomenologically polarizing nature of the dwelling space, bringing into relief, as much as Bachelard does, the contingent consequences of the modern experience of non-homeness. Besides directing the reader's attention to the polarities of the inhabited space, Frost gives special emphasis to the representation of the house as a shelter; however, in "The Witch of Coös," the house does not completely fulfill such representation when it comes to the connection between the space and the woman. Perhaps we can consider the house as a shelter only when we look at it from the perspective of the outsider-speaker who "stayed the night for a shelter at a farm/Behind the mountain" (Frost 1995, p. 187). Arguably, however, this same space does not fulfill terms of domestic protection, social stability or emotional nourishment, when we consider its murderous familial past. The same space thus acquires different meanings for different dwellers. In this poem, the house is looked at from different viewpoints; for some, it is a shelter from the dark and the inhospitable reality of the outside, and for some others, it is an asylum harboring secretive realities of madness and horrendous crimes. Like Bachelard, Frost is concerned with the image of the house and with what different physical and psychological realities it assumes when the perceiver or the dweller is involved.

Frost, as Robert McPhillips (1986) mentions, is more concerned with the "act of perceiving" than with the process of perception itself (p. 85). In "The Witch of Coös," the perceiver, or what Bachelard calls the dreamer (the dweller of the house), conceives of the house as a being communicating emotionally and mentally disturbing images of an irrational familial history. Though the poem itself does not fully represent the infelicitousness of such space, the mentally disturbed dweller stands for the outsider (and for the reader as well) as an example of an irrational reporter of events and domestic infelicity. In this poem, the outsider helps the reader gain access to such infelicitous space, being an attentive listener recounting for the reader his experience at a house located "Behind the mountain." The secret of the murder is exposed to the reader once the outsider-speaker walks into the house. What was a secret became now a narrative historical account about bones, the remnants of a love affair that never left the spatial reality of the dwelling space or the memory of the dwellers. The invisible "locked" past is revealed twice: first, the bones left the cellar long time ago and are now kept in the attic; second, the story of this event is recounted to an outsider whose presence brings back the memory of an absent presence—the bones. The invisible has thus always been visible owing to its *concreteness* and its spatial, rather than only historical, presence.

Commenting upon the phenomenological aspects of visibility and secrecy, Perla Searfaty-Garzon (1985), building upon Heidegger's understanding of space, observes how the dwelling space "ensures secrecy and visibility" (p. 71), a notion which is applicable to the state of affairs in "The Witch of Coös." Searfaty-Garzon (1985) mentions that the dwelling space:

> essentially ensures secrecy and visibility: secrecy in closing doors and windows, secrecy in chests and shut closets, secrecy in putting the outside world at a distance: visibility in hospitality and shared meals and in conflicts and contradictory claims. The question of the hidden and the visible in the dwelling place, therefore, is the question of the relationship between secrecy and the relationship with others. (p. 71)

These notions of visibility and secrecy and what they entail are explicitly present in "The Witch of Coös." The suggestion here is that there is tension between secrecy and visibility in the poem. The secret of the hidden bones is exposed to the outsider-speaker and to the reader as well, and visibility assists in such exposition as the outsider-speaker is received hospitably and offered a place to stay at for the night. The outside world is never put at a distance owing to the presence of an outsider who let the readers into the secrecy of the house. The closed doors of the past are wide ajar, and the windows of a secret love affair are open to the outsider and to the reader as well. The woman in the poem mentions even how truth is finally revealed and secrets are divulged: "We'd kept all these years between ourselves/So as to have it ready for outsiders" (Frost 1995, p. 91). The very essence of what constitutes homeness (protection from outside world and the intrusion of guests and outsiders) is demythologized in "The Witch of Coös." The shared meal between the dwellers and the outsider becomes an occasion for the divulgement of secrets and revelation of truth, which have always been spatially anchored down the cellar and up the attic.

Similar in his phenomenology of dwelling and spatial dramatizations to Bachelard's own phenomenological explication of the polarized nature of the dwelling spaces in a modern experience of non-homeness, Frost certainly understands the intricacies of modern man's lived experience and the polarities of his dwelling, aka, his constant struggle to learn how to dwell. This is spatially dramatized in a narrative of relations, interactions, and tensions.

While in "The Witch of Coös," the inhabited space is phenomenologically described in terms of rationality and irrationality, in "The Death of the Hired Man," the house is described in terms of homeness, a phenomenological dimension that defines the very essence of dwelling which is discussed at length in Heidegger's famous chapter "Building, Dwelling, and Thought" (1971). In fact, Heidegger's phenomenology of dwelling is somehow like Bachelard's: whereas Bachelard provides a very focused phenomenological interpretation of spatiality through the poetic image of the house, Heidegger opts for a more thorough understanding of spatiality as a modern experience defined through homeness and non-homeness. Both, however, systematically explain notions of inhabitation and man's conflicting and evolving relationship with space. In his well-known chapter "Building, Dwelling, and Thinking," Heidegger explains what the essence of dwelling is and what constitutes homeness. The notion of homeness, as far as we can understand Heidegger, can only be actualized through the intersubjectivity of different beings, meaning that "you" should take care, protect, and nurture the "I." To paraphrase Heidegger, nature, beings, and the space that every being occupies, are all interrelated agents of dwelling, and Man cannot dwell if he does not understand his relation to the space which he resides upon. Heidegger (1971), however, mentions that the main plight of man is that "he must ever learn to dwell"

(p. 161). To Heidegger, dwelling is an evolving process in man's reality, and we have yet to understand what our relationship with space all is about.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Frost's spatial dramatization of homeness/non-homeness echoes the phenomenological sentiments of Heidegger. "The Death of the Hired Man" recounts the return of Silas, who was once hired by Warren, an owner of a farm. Warren is not happy about the return of Silas, who has been absent for a long period of time and who only comes back when he is penniless and in need for money. Silas always leaves when he is most needed, a very bad habit which makes the employer Warren unwilling to hire him back. Warren's wife, Mary, tries to talk her husband into hiring Silas back as he is a very old man and has no place to live. Warren is reluctant to do so, and his wife shows a high degree of sympathy for the homeless old man. In the poem, husband and wife engage in a discussion about home and what constitutes homeness:

> 'Warren, she said, 'he has come home to die.
> You need not be afraid he'll leave you this time.
> 'Home,' he mocked gently.
> 'Yes, what else but home?
> It all depends on what you mean by home.
> Of course he's nothing to us, any more
> Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
> Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.'
>
> 'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
> They have to take you in.'
> 'I should have called it
> Something you somehow have not to deserve'. (Frost 1995, p. 43)

The husband and wife argue over the correct definition of home and what it means to be a hired man unwelcome within the spatial parameters of the dwelling space. The question is, are servants and hired men strangers to the spatial locus we call home, or do they have the right to belong to a space that's not their own? As Richard Poirier (1977) suggests, the "shared environment" is the main focus here, since the return of the hired man poses a threat to the "marriage idyll" of Warren and Mary (p. 106). Silas is accounted as intruding upon the idyllic privacy and the nuptial harmony already present in the dwelling space; he has no right to dwell or to belong to such tranquil habitable space.

In this poem, Frost draws his readers' attention to the modern experience of non-homeness. Poirier points out the significance of the year when this poem was written (1905-1906). This was a time, Poirier (1977) contends, when Frost was "persuaded that home and marriage were the antidotes to poetic as well as personal sterility" (p. 106). Situating Frost with a Heideggerian phenomenological tradition, we can suggest that Frost anticipated Heidegger's notion of homelessness, the latter's nuanced interpretation of the dwelling space, and what it means to dwell. Poirier might have thought about the dwelling poetics of Heidegger and its relationship to Frost's poem: his suggesting that home for Frost was the antidote to poetic and personal sterility reflects how significant and noteworthy the very idea of homeness for the poet was. The representation of homeness in "The Death of the Hired Man" describes the poet's Heideggerian tendency to define the relationship between man and his inhabited space. As Haim Gordon (2000) suggests, Frost in this poem makes it articulate that "persons do not dwell in buildings, huts or tents; they dwell in a home, almost always sharing that home with fellow human beings" (p. 58). He adds that "home is something that the person does not obtain by deserving it; a person obtains a home by being born into a family, a society, a world, in which a home will be shared with him or her" (p. 58). Haim, of course, is stressing the intersubjective notion which Heidegger talks about in his explication of the idea of home. For Heidegger (1971), dwelling, which does not necessarily only mean inhabiting a space, involves a relationship between the "I" and the "you": I dwell, you dwell.

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on earth, is Buan, dwelling" (p. 147). To reinstate, what really constitutes dwelling is the realization that our relationship with space essentially involves a relationship with other fellow human beings.

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Silas is denied the Heideggerian sense of homeness since he has no place to stay at and since his tragic death at the end of the poem represents his failure to be accepted as a dweller in Warren's domestic space. At some point in the poem, we are told that Silas and his brother are not very good friends and that Silas is not willing to ask his brother's help or to even go live with him. In the Heideggerian sense, home does not necessarily mean a space where you can live; it is more of a shelter where "dwelling occurs" (1971, p. 146). The house of Silas' brother does not really fulfill the terms of the real dwelling: the tension between the two brothers necessitates a destruction of the very sense of dwelling.

CONCLUSION

Heidegger explains how home can assist in the process of our self-affirmation and our existential harmony with reality, suggesting that man can learn to dwell poetically if he understands all the essential possibilities of dwelling and the real meaning of his interaction with space. In "The Death of the Hired Man," Silas does not understand the possibilities of dwelling, nor is he able to evolve into a real dweller. His tragic death as a homeless eccentric man reflects his inability to dwell and to rightly measure his relationship with the idyllic space where Warren and Mary live. The "inherent instability" of the dwelling space in "Witch of Coos" and "The Death of the Hired Man" (its containing irrational and tragic eccentric figures) reflects the poet's involvement with the problematics of dwelling and the human experience with space (Spurr 2005, p. 73). The spatial reality of Frost defines a troubled, irrational environment where the notion of homeness is built upon non-homeness and where the dweller is unable to understand his/her relationship with the dwelling space. Frost's phenomenology of dwelling, his dramatizations of spatial polarities and the consequent lack of intimacy and connection with the dwelling spaces, reflects the poet's deep awareness and knowledge of the fundamental concerns and existential questions of the modern period. This awareness is embedded in his detailed spatial dramatization of specific situations that speak to all readers who are burdened by their constant struggle to dwell and to adapt to the polarized nature of existence. Frost thus brings attention to himself as an important modern poet of space and not only of a specific regional place.

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ENDNOTES

See Gauthier (2016) for an insightful analysis of dwelling in the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger, Levinas, and of other major modern philosophers and thinkers.

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