This essay argues that Robert Frost’s poems enact a poetic and psychic process of displacing and managing generalized anxiety through converting it into object-specific fear. Drawing upon the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud, Dominick LaCapra and Eric Santner, this essay analyzes how and why Robert Frost’s poems display a “defensive eye”: a self-protective relationship to the world dependent upon a continual switching of visual and linguistic perspectives that diffuses the pressures interior to the poem and creates a “momentary stay against confusion.” Through close readings of “The Vantage Point,” “The Mending Wall,” “The Wood-Pile,” “The Fear,” “An Old Man’s Winter Night” and “A Considerable Speck,” the essay traces Frost’s visual preoccupation with boundaries, walls, doors, and frames that demarcate spatial limits, and describes how the poem negotiates the psychological and linguistic tension between containment and catharsis.

Keywords: Robert Frost / anxiety / fear / Eric Santner / Sigmund Freud

My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good? That’s what I’d like to know and all I need to know.

—Robert Frost (Letter to Kimball Flaccus, October 26, 1930)

The problem of anxiety,” wrote Sigmund Freud in his 1917 Introductory Lectures, “is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our own mental existence” (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 393). Psychoanalytic critics have long noted literature’s power to process psychic experience: Suzanne Henke, for example, notes the way in which narrative offers a kind of talking cure — what she calls “scriptotherapy” — through the process of confronting and verbalizing experience (Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Woman’s Life Writing, 1998). Yet anxiety, by definition, is nebulous: an affect more sensed than sensible, indefinite in its origins and ends, psychically and spatially dislocated, and linguistically difficult to describe. If modernism was, as W.H. Auden famously
wrote, the age of anxiety, an account of how the felt structure of anxiety is registered in modern writing needs to be articulated. How do literary texts register, reshape, and release anxiety?

Robert Frost is not the first literary figure one thinks of in conjunction with the subject of anxiety, nor even with a tradition of particularly psychological readings. As “the ordinary man's modernist” (51), according to Frank Lentricchia, Frost was long classified as a genteel poet fit for middle-class enjoyment and solidly American public prominence. Frost has been characterized as a poet of order, control, and management, “afraid even of his own poetry unless he can supervise just when, where, and how it is to appear” (Poirier 76). Yet beneath his work’s controlled pastoral veneer we can reread him as consistently struggling to transmute and sublimate threatening, disorderly anxieties. Titles such as “Storm Fear,” “The Fear,” “Misgiving,” “Bereft,” “Too Anxious for Rivers,” “The Fear of God,” and “The Fear of Man” self-consciously broadcast the troubling anxieties and trepidations that characterize Frost’s efforts at poetic mastery. His structural self-reflexivity can thus be seen not merely as a formal means of linguistic play but as a technique by which he explored and expressed emotional disturbances, creating via the formal and rhetorical structure of his poems a “momentary stay against confusion” (“The Figure a Poem Makes” 777). The resulting carefully structured poems, as Richard Poirier writes in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, “include terror without being [themselves] terrified” and leave us “more rather than less confident about our capacities” (7). If Frost’s poetry can be said to include terror without being terrified, how then is terror contained and safely registered within the space of the poem?

My interest in turning to Frost’s poems is to explore how they respond to anxiety through a series of imaginative crossings and affective displacements that enable the poem itself to provide an opportunity for the ritualistic discharge of anxieties through a process that binds these energies into determinate forms that then seal these anxieties from sight. Whereas Paul Giles (2000) and Jeff Westover (2004) have recently concentrated their critical efforts on demonstrating how Frost’s poetry reflects issues of national and historical importance, this essay focuses on the psychological rather than the historical dimensions of Frost’s work, detailing the formal means by which the poem itself binds and contains the psychological tensions of an age of anxiety, and making claims about the work of writing and representation rather than historical influence. Specifically, I examine how Frost’s poems enact a poetic process of displacement and binding that is given particularly visual dimensions: his work displays what I call here a “defensive eye”—a protective relationship to the world dependent upon a continual switching of visual and linguistic perspectives that diffuses the pressures interior to the poem. This visual and linguistic movement, which often takes the form of the speaker alternating between panoramic vistas and localized objects, is a key poetic and psychic strategy for containing and binding generalized anxiety through converting it into object-specific fear.

For Freud, the trauma of birth was the prototype for all anxiety states; he located anxiety as a universal, inescapable phenomenon and a primal, innate
reaction. Indeed, for Freud each phase of mental development could be defined by its own set of anxieties: the trauma of birth, separation anxiety, castration anxiety, fear of the loss of love, and the fear of death. Intrinsic to our being and our development, anxiety, with its disruptive, uncontrollable character, continually tests and haunts the subject’s self-mastery, generating an uncomfortable feeling of helplessness.¹

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra provides a brief gloss on anxiety that will serve here as our central definition:

For Freud, anxiety had the quality of indefiniteness and absence or indeterminacy of an object; for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it was the fear of something that is nothing. In these conceptions, the idea that there is nothing to fear has two senses. There is no particular thing to fear. And anxiety—the elusive experience or affect related to absence—is a fear that has no thing (nothing) as its object. A crucial way of attempting to allay anxiety is to locate a particular or specific thing that could be feared and thus enable one to find ways of eliminating or mastering that fear. The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome. By contrast, the anxiety attendant upon absence may never be entirely eliminated or overcome but must be lived with in various ways. It allows for only limited control that is never absolutely assured; any cure would be deceptive. (57)

Here, La Capra discusses the movement from generalized anxiety (“no thing” to fear) to object-specific fear (something to fear) as one strategy of mastery. Anxiety is thus distinguished from fear by the fact that anxiety is a reaction not to a discrete object, but to an indeterminate danger situation. Binding anxiety to an object locates it in relation to a fixed space and enables active control rather than painful, passive subjection. This conversion of general anxiety into a specific fear (he describes this as a movement from absence to loss) enables anxiety to be managed through a focalization of destructive energies. Binding is the process that collects and makes coherent “free” or unbonded energy in order to establish stable forms, and it takes on an important function for the psyche, limiting the quantity of destructive, “free” excitation in circulation.

The excess or chaos that Frost’s poems contain can be seen from a psychoanalytic perspective as a primordial, overwhelming experience of what Lacan terms *jouissance*: a pleasure that is excessive, and which leads to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously fascinated. In psychoanalysis, the human subject comes into being through a series of attractive and repulsive maneuvers with respect to this Janus-faced force. The identity of the “I” is founded upon an economic relationship with *jouissance*, and it is the endless play of *jouissance’s* bivalent difference that constitutes this identity. For Freud, identity could be viewed as the space opened up by the deferment of the death drive. Freud thought that the ego could be “regarded as a great reservoir from which libido is sent out to objects and which is always ready to absorb libido flowing back from objects” (Laplanche and Pontalis 137). The boundaries of the ego are established by the economics of the
libidinal energy as it moves to and from this great “storehouse” of energy. The space for this reserve is created by the “deferment of the dangerous investment,” and it in turn serves as the energetic source for all object cathexis (Derrida xlii). The “I” has come into being only through a kind of deferral of the death drive, or to put it in Derrida’s terms, through the “perennial postponement of that which is constituted only through postponement” (Derrida xliii). The entire structure of the psyche, in a surprisingly sophisticated way, rests upon the deferment of the knowledge that it is literally groundless.

However, if the ego is caught unprepared and is unable to sufficiently cathect or bind the inflowing energy (as it might in a traumatic situation), then its protective shield is breached and a release of unbound and unpleasurable energy occurs. This unpleasantness will remain until this free-floating anxious energy is discharged or sublimated in a way that reestablishes the protective shield. Only by safely binding the energy of jouissance into determinate forms can the organism defer the death drive and maintain the integrity of its identity. As in Freud’s fort/da game, mastery is achieved by a controlled staging that reenacts the original trauma within a ritualized space. In the fort/da episode, the child translates his anxiety into loss through the formal, regular rhythms of his game. As Eric Santner writes in “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma,” the “capacity to dose out and to represent absence by means of substitutive figures at a remove from what one might call their ‘transcendental signifier,’ is what allows the child to avoid psychotic breakdown and transform his lost sense of omnipotence into a chastened form of empowerment” (146). In other words, the child, like the poet, playfully enacts the opening of the abyssal interval within the confines of a controlled space of ritual. The child translates fragmented narcissism into the formalized rhythms of symbolic play and, in so doing, opens up a space within the psyche for the binding of new figurations of difference. The child releases the tension of narcissistic self-love by turning away from the necessity of seeing itself as whole, and instead, acts as-if it were in control of its difference. By losing itself in this trope, the child is once more able to mask the destructive tendencies of the death drive.

By translating traumatic loss and anxiety into the “rhythmic manipulation of signifiers and figures, objects and syllables” of literature, poetry itself approximates the creative play of the boy’s game, substituting word for thing, and overcoming absence by positing presence. The poem itself forms the necessary controlled space in which anxiety can be elaborated and, finally, integrated. Santner reminds us that a “dosing out of a certain negative — a thanatotic — element as a strategy of mastering a real and traumatic loss is a fundamentally homeopathic procedure” (146). Anxiety’s introduction into the poem ultimately becomes the homeopathic poison that cures, creating the constitutive tension necessary for a successful work of art.

In Frost’s “Mending Wall,” for example, the “something” elliptically evoked in the first line exerts a threatening force that “sends the frozen-ground-swell under” the wall and “spills the upper boulders,” riddling the wall with gaps and holes. The poet must find a “spell” that will repair the breached barrier, checking its excess before releasing the tension into another order of experience: “We keep
the wall between us as we go. / To each the boulders that have fallen to each. / And some are loaves and some so nearly balls / We have to use a spell to make them balance” (39). The spell binds the excess that initiates the poem, creating form while stopping short of stasis: the poem cannot entirely eliminate the energy that accompanies excess, but must maintain it in a constitutive tension. Frost’s “spell” grants form to power and power to form, beautifully balancing the poem’s wildness with civilizing walls.

Many of Frost’s poems are clearly self-consciously controlled spaces for such negotiation, filled with boundaries, walls, doors, and frames that demarcate spatial limits and carefully scaled scenes. Even when his poetry enacts the breaking of demarcated boundaries, it always does so carefully and with restraint: the measured step through the snow in the opening of “The Wood-Pile” serves to emphasize the balanced prepositions of the first line of the poem (“Out walking in”). This tension between order and disorder is keenly felt in “The Wood-Pile,” both in terms of the spatial order of the poem and the speaker’s unsteady emotional balancing: “The view was all in lines / . . . / Too much alike to mark or name a place by / So as to say for certain I was here / Or somewhere else: I was just far from home” (100). In the midst of feeling distressed by being surrounded by an oppressive visual sameness, the speaker’s emotional anxiety is broken by a small bird gliding between the trees. After a momentary encounter, the speaker sees a wood-pile for which he leaves and forgets the bird, telling us that the bird, his lone companion amidst the trees, was driven off by a “little fear” that the speaker now sees “Carry him off the way I might have gone, / Without so much as wishing him good-night” (100). One feels the underlying existential crisis of the poem in phrases such as “I was here” and “I might have gone,” which highlight the questions of presence and absence that play out in the poem.

Frost’s speaker displaces his anxieties about death onto the figure of the bird, and this displacement allows the anxiety to be momentarily carried off. This displacement reorders the speaker’s ideas in such a way as to disengage them from the affective charge they would normally have: freed from an excess of affect, anxiety can be both realized and released. The bird, then, to employ D.W. Winnicott’s terminology, effectively serves as a transitional object, an object that serves a mediating function, important here more for its subjective function than for its external presence. The speaker must fantasize about the departure of the bird, who flies off here beset by a similar “little fear,” in order to free himself from the strain of inner and outer reality. Through the personification of the bird, a representational act triggered by imaginative play and fantasy, the speaker renegotiates his relationship to the external world and projects away the pressures of his internal one.

Likewise, in “The Vantage Point” (26), the “too much” of the poem’s initial panoramic view is visually renegotiated and checked by the speaker’s turn to “look into the crater of the ant.” The initial macroscopic vantage point provides a variety of scenes that the self becomes subsumed in looking at: “Myself unseen, I see in white defined / Far off the homes of men, and father still, / The graves of men on an opposing hill.” The deflective turn toward localized, intimate spaces restores
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the self, as the speaker’s arm, face, and breath fill the second and final stanza of the poem, reinscribing the body alongside the eye. The two stanzas counterbalance each other and defer the “too much” of anxiety safely into a conditional statement: “And if by noon I have too much of these, / I have but to turn on my arm, and lo, / The sun-burned hillside sets my face aglow.” As the poem reminds us, signification is dependent upon perspective: the freedom to choose from different viewpoints remains crucial to the poem’s maintenance of stability: “I have but to turn . . . and lo.” “‘To turn’ is to perform a rhetorical maneuver as well as a performative one: to trope and bend linguistic and representational power, creating the potential for a transformation or release. “The Vantage Point” evades the vertigo and anxiety of “too much” by localizing it in the final two images of the poem: “the bruisèd plant” and “the crater of the ant.” The poem looks down into its own hole, covertly containing loss into localized, specific images, reasserting control against a potential, peripheral chaos registered on the horizon of the poem.

“The Fear,” on the other hand, fails to find an object or image in which anxiety can be sufficiently bound (thus the poem’s title is a misnomer, as the poem is technically about anxiety, not fear). A longer poem with dialogue, “The Fear” opens when a couple returns to their country home and suspects that an interloper is nearby. The opening scene of the poem is almost cinematic: an eerie chiaroscuro in which images and light sinisterly refract and play off objects. Distorted “lurching” shadows play uncannily upon the house’s exterior, foreshadowing the poem’s final suggestion that the real loci of terror was always already within. For Frost, anxiety often gathers force by being mapped onto home and by becoming fixed and entrapped within domestic forms.

In “The Fear” (89–92), anxiety stems from the lack of any identifiable object—“no thing” to fear—on which to locate anxiety and begin to convert it into manageable loss. “The Fear” externalizes the origin of anxiety as a problem of vision: the couple is seen but unable to see the interloper. Furthermore, their individual visions do not coincide: the wife sees a face in the darkness, while her husband sees nothing. It is this lack of conforming visions that sets other anxieties aflutter, and makes the wife fervently press on to confirm her suspicion. “The Fear” structurally gives voice to anxiety through a number of different poetic strategies: the tension inherent in resisted imperatives (“‘Put it away.’ / . . . / ‘What’s the hurry?’”); the clip of the frequently used dashes; lingering, elliptical speeches that never get finished or resolved; doubled, repeated expressions (“Hear that, hear that!”); and the language of obligation (“should”) and prohibition (“mustn’t”). As Katherine Kearns notes, the very language of this poem is itself in excess: the couple speak in “eleven-to twelve-syllable lines, which come in the context of the iambic pentameter to represent a kind of spillage, a prolifigacy of language that, for them, is without its desired effect—to communicate their separate griefs” (120). The dialogic format of the poem creates the effect of a poem at odds with itself, and indeed the poem articulates conflicting drives: the fear of seeing counterbalanced by the compulsive drive to see and “face” the spectral interloper. The couple recognizes the need to locate the interloper before anxiety is made manifest everywhere:
And now’s the time to have it out with him
While we know definitely where he is.
Let him get off and he’ll be everywhere
Around us, looking out of trees and bushes
Till I sha’n’t dare to set a foot outdoors. (90–91)

Anxiety needs to be checked before it swells to excess, and these lines point to the way in which anxiety’s anticipatory nature creates a present that is fundamentally dislocated. The temporal disjunction that Freud notes here is compounded by the spatial indefiniteness central to “The Fear”; the poem is doubly disjointed. Furthermore, “The Fear” becomes a drama of confrontation on two fronts, as the wife not only argues with her husband but also calls out to the mysterious interloper. The poem’s conclusion forms a strange call and response: the bodiless face the wife saw calls out a haunting “nothing” twice.

“What do you want?” she cried, and then herself
Was startled when an answer really came.

“Nothing.” It came from well along the road.

She reached a hand to Joel for support:
The smell of scorching woolen made her faint.
“What are you doing round this house at night?”

“Nothing.” A pause: there seemed no more to say. (91–92)

This “nothing,” one feels, should be reassuring, but “nothing”—and its attendant “no more to say”—seems the threat at the heart of the poem. Earlier intimations of threats of rape, bodily harm, robbery, even death, dissipate under the staggering weight of “nothing.” This nothingness reverberates in the final few lines of the poem, as the wife, who should be reassured, is instead frozen stiff with anxiety. As the figure comes out into the light, the petrified wife stands “her ground against the noisy steps,” and “looked and looked.”

Furthermore, the doubled verb “looked” attests to some excess need or desire that the actual interloper cannot fulfill, suggesting that the objects the woman has found for her anxiety—a woman and a child out on a walk—aren’t sufficiently frightening figures, and her anxiety therefore has nowhere to go. Anxiety has found something, but not something to fear, and therefore anxiety cannot be converted into loss. Instead, the anxiety eerily swells, freezing the woman into a kind of statuary: “She spoke as if she couldn’t turn. / The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground, / It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.” Her body is held in an “as if,” paused as her mind tries to fill in the gap between her anxious expectations and the terrible “nothing” that she found. By concluding with the image of a stiffened body, the poem suggests that anxiety intercedes between “as if” and what actually is: here, she can’t finally turn: the “as if” has been translated into what is. The petrifaction of the body is the paralyzing force of anxiety’s excess.
At the end of the poem, anxiety cannot be troped or managed; instead, it overflows the bounds of all proposed containers. The lantern usurps control, becoming the final character in the poem, and performing all the dramatic motion of the poem’s *denouement*: it illuminates the woman’s momentary *rigor mortis* before finally going out. “The Fear” concludes with an ominous darkness that blankets the ground. The poem ends with this petrifaction because the real source of anxiety has been misapprehended, remaining unrecognized via a confusion of prepositions: “The Fear” centers on anxieties in the home, not within the couple’s relationship. As the woman states at the conclusion of the poem, “This is a very, very lonely place.” The loneliness of the country home is made doubly lonely by the couple’s seeming estrangement from each other; their trouble seeing the same vision echoes the difficulties they have in speaking to one another.

Frost partially—and more positively—replays this scene in “The Hill Wife” from *Mountain Interval*. The second section of the poem is entitled “House Fear”:

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Always—I tell you this they learned—
Always at night when they returned
To the lonely house from far away
To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,
They learned to rattle the lock and key
To give whatever might chance to be
Warning and time to be off in flight:
And preferring the out— to the in-door night,
They learned to leave the house-door wide
Until they had lit the lamp inside. (123)
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Like “The Fear,” this poem is about returning to an “unhomely” home, and the shiver of *unheimlich* that can make the familiar seem suddenly unfamiliar. The poem sets itself up aphoristically: a passing-on of country wisdom concerning the delicate equilibrium between the domestic inside and the wild “whatever” of outside. The ritual of rattling the door diffuses the anxiety associated with returning home after an absence. Here, the “house-door wide” serves both as exit and entrance, enabling the necessary interchange and reestablishment of balance. The doubled function of the door is mirrored by the poem’s own self-conscious doublings and repetitions (the doubled “Always” that begins the poem and the anaphora of “To” throughout). The poem thus functions as a formula for successfully separating the domestic from the destructive.

Here, as elsewhere, Frost gravitates to boundaries that need to be balanced, managed, or maintained in order to contain or avoid a horrific “whatever” that lies in wait. This maintenance involves a spatial staging that maintains equilibrium via fluidity. Frost’s poems frequently perform a careful staging of permeability in response to the threat of enclosure. If there is not a hole or a breach, libidinal energy (the “whatever”) is dammed without the possibility of release, resulting in anxiety’s overflow. As we saw in “The Fear,” that blocked surplus has a paralyzing effect.
The generating of semantic instabilities, as Wolfgang Iser writes in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, creates “two sets of discourse [that] are also contexts for each other, so that each in turn is constantly switching from background to foreground” (227). Frost’s moments of poetic intensity are often registered in lines or phrases that contain multivalent meanings: the temporally and spatially loaded word “still,” for example. The interpretive tension produced by the incessant switching of figure and ground function as a method of discharging and containing anxiety by perennially postponing any final interpretative solution. Yet, when one is confronted with interpretive open-endedness, a desire arises to close the gap and find the point from which the ambiguous makes sense. In other words, one of the effects of reading Frost’s poems is that they trigger “the reader’s need to close the event and thus to master the experience of the imaginary” (17). Frost discussed this play of semantic instability in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, writing that “all the fun is outside, saying things that suggest formulae but won’t formulate — that almost but don’t quite formulate” (692). This “almost but not quite” is central to the playful doublings and correspondences that drive Frost’s poetry.

Frost’s poems often play upon clever metaphors that suggest simultaneous interpretations, and upon repetition with a difference that constitutes the mirroring structure of chiasmus. Frost’s penchant for double entendre can be seen in “Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” a poem which relies upon the interplay between a coarse vernacular and a high-pitched poetic sublime. The idea of being “versed” refers of course to a way of having learned, as well as a way of existing within or through a poetic medium, but it may also suggest the etymological root of “turning,” of angling or positioning oneself in a particular way toward the nature of “things.” The title’s emphasis on “the need” to be able to take up such a perspective perhaps suggests that one needs this “turned” observational stance in order to truthfully apprehend the relationship of nature’s cycles to human losses and to understand the true ambivalence of natural forces. Likewise, “Tree at My Window” elucidates the transferential exchange between inner and outer space through the speaker’s apostrophic projection of his own state onto that of the personified tree as well as through the doubling generated by the poem’s various repetitions, recursions, and revisions. The rigidity of Frost’s aphorisms becomes undone by ironic inflection: the repetition of “Good fences make good neighbors” in “Mending Wall” is made to sound both earnest and absurd. Moments of poetic intensity are often registered in lines or phrases that contain multivalent meanings: “still,” for example, is a word loaded with connotations, both temporal and spatial.

When the play of connotation and denotation becomes blocked or stalled, anxiety cannot be converted or sufficiently bound. With an excess of anxiety comes concurrent problems of representation and vision. “An Old Man’s Winter Night” registers the blockage of both eyesight and insight: “What kept him from remembering what it was / That brought him to that creating room was age / He stood with barrels round him — at a loss” (105). Home becomes disorienting, for the old man is now “kept” rather than able to keep: “One aged man — one man — can’t keep a house.” He hears a cacophony of noises that swell until too big for the space: “And
having scared the cellar under him / In clomping here, he scared it once again / In clomping off; — and scared the outer night” (106). Home becomes an echoic space in which the necessary free-flowing dialectic of in and out is stopped. The morbidity of this self-contained, isolating space is exemplified in the recalcitrance of the man’s body at the end of the poem: “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” (106). Frost suggests that the cost of inwardness is a loss of reciprocity; here, this loss emerges in dislocated referents (the “it” found throughout the poem: “remembering what it was”). “It” points to a morbidity beyond what the poem itself can articulate, as anxiety claustrophobically closes down the flexibility of metaphor and simile.

Frost focuses on the relationship between anxiety and writing most directly in “A Considerable Speck,” a poem that begins with the poet writing at his desk until his solipsism is broken as he notices a small mite walking across the page. The representational play of “A Considerable Speck” turns disturbingly serious after a lighthearted comic start. This poem begins as a joke, but ends up releasing pent-up thoughts, dramas, and anxieties to conclude in a vertiginous *mise en abyme*. Once staged on the page, the banal everydayness of the meandering mite is a fit—a “considerable”—subject for poetry, even a figure for poetry itself. The first two lines of the poem—“A speck that would have been beneath my sight / On any but a paper sheet so white” (324)—suggest that the visual moment of contact is enabled by the particulars of its spatial setting (contact as contingent upon context). The word “beneath” in the first line indicates that vision is always framed: what we see is dependent upon what is excluded. Furthermore, and particularly in conjunction with the speaker’s later lamenting of the modern world, the word “beneath” also suggests the underlying Darwinian crisis of the poem, with its anxiety-producing leveling of hierarchy and difference. As the poem attests, a mite might indeed have “inclinations” of its own, and those inclinations may be quite fierce, for the mite’s consumptive “reading” of the text results in a near-nauseous “loathing” and an urge to evacuate.

As the poem progresses and as the mite falters back and forth across the page, we see the animating force (“must”) of personification attribute to the mite its own contemplative considering, effectively displacing the poet’s concerns upon this unlikely figure. The poet “reads” the mite, but instead of rendering it distinguishable, we see a movement toward the flattening of difference and the establishing of sameness through analogy. The microscopic matter of the mite seemingly contains a self-sufficient, distinct consciousness, gifted with “intelligence” (and a concomitant “terror” and “desperation”). The mite ultimately mirrors the man too closely, triggering the speaker’s self-assertion of superiority and his reassertion of hierarchical difference: “It faltered: I could see it hesitate; / Then in the middle of the open sheet / Cower down in desperation to accept / Whatever I accorded it of fate.”

This reassertion of difference is echoed in the next few lines. The speaker’s declaration that “I have none of the tenderer-than-thou / Collectivistic regimenting love” is at once a parroting parody of the obscurant abstraction of political jargon
as well as a cathartic cry for difference. In his refusal of the collectivistic and the regimented, the speaker enables the sympathetic, if helpless, cry that comes next: “But this poor microscopic item now!” The intelligent, animate mite has been refigured into an “item,” a word that rings with modern anxiety. (The “any sheet” of the last line, combined with the triplicate of “mind” also suggests nebulous modern anxieties.) The empty line that proceeds the poem’s final two couplets strangely makes us aware that the mite’s fate has been withheld or obscured despite previous poetic concern.

Since it was nothing I knew evil of
I let it lie there till I hope it slept.

I have a mind myself and recognize
Mind when I meet with it in any guise.
No one can know how glad I am to find
On any sheet the least display of mind. (325)

This absentmindedness about the mite’s miserable fate seems to be connected to the concern with “mind” in the poem’s final four lines. “Mind”—and especially “mind myself”—suggests a play upon the sound of the possessive “mine,” hinting that the poet slyly recognizes his own willful self-projection. Rereading “mind” as “mine” also suggests the narcissistic pleasure of self-recognition: “how glad I am to find / On any sheet the least display of min[e].” Even without this suggested substitution, these final two lines evoke the trickster side of Frost in their play between revelation and concealment, especially in the narrator’s curious assertion that he can always “recognize / Mind” but that no one can penetrate his own secreted self (“no one can know how glad I am”). “Guise” bespeaks dissembling, and the doubled “mind myself” returns us to the differential play of subjectivity, coming into relationship with itself as object, that the poem is predicated upon.

In poems such as “A Considerable Speck” and “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” referential dislocations signal moments of existential dislocation in which anxiety is voiced. If Frost’s attraction to bounded spaces is that they defer or screen a knowledge of the self as groundless, “Desert Places,” a poem from A Further Range, is, like “The Fear,” a poem unable to locate a determinate form on which to bind anxiety and maintain the integrity of identity. In this poem, Frost voices anxiety as a type of motion or flight. The poem begins with a breathy line full of doubled terms: “Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast” (269). Space and time vertiginously coalesce through the speaker’s awareness of night and of the space of the field. The “oh” squeezed into the line is an attempt to slow down that becomes a gasp ripe with emotion. The speaker’s emotional exposure in this “oh” is projected upon the land itself with its almost-covered ground “showing last.” Such images of vulnerable exposure dissolve in the obscured, occluded referents of the following line: “The woods around it have it—it is theirs.”

Negotiating this difficult line slows the poem and draws it inward, and exposure becomes enclosure. The final parts of the poem enact an introspective pulling
inward that counterbalances the quizzical looking out that set the poem in motion. A sinister-sounding, smothering claustrophobia stops the poem’s initial speed and motion: “All animals are smothered in their lairs.” As in other poems, home is here made “unhomely,” tinged with connotations of death and suffocation. The poem voices loss and lack in its next lines, as a roving, almost atmospheric loneliness becomes palpably felt. The speaker attests to his dissociated state, calling himself both “absent-spirited” and “unawares.” Expression becomes stuck as repetitions fill an echoic, empty space:

And lonely as it is that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less —  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars — on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places. (269)

Here, the poem shifts tenses, and the speaker’s anxiety about the future is suddenly transferred from an exterior scene to an interior “desert place.” The constriction of anxiety takes on a formal poetic dimension as the speaker’s effort at flight becomes bound instead in the stuttered sameness of repetition, as the tightness and constriction of the smothering animal lair becomes emphasized in the poem’s concluding entropy of repetition. The poem concludes with intimations of a claustrophobic narcissism (“me, myself, my”) and ultimately forms a particularly visual representation of loss: “desert places” demarcates an undifferentiated emptiness and gives an external language of landscape to the psyche.

Yet the apparent nothingness of the desert place is not as barren as it seems. Through presenting the psyche as landscape, Frost’s poem becomes the linguistic stage on which fears and anxieties can be performed and confronted. As the speaker meditates on “scar[ing] myself with my own desert places,” he gives to nothingness the language of place, turning “blanker whiteness” into a mediating landscape in which he can safely “scare” himself, repeatedly enacting what frightens him until he has mastered it. Through externalizing loss into a visual language and translating it into the formalized signifiers and syllables of literature, the poem itself becomes a controlled space for working through the dislocations and disruptions from which it generated. The poem’s voicing of nothingness is actually a momentary stay against confusion, registering energies that ultimately the poem is sufficiently able to bind and to stage. Frost’s poetry continually shows us the way in which the disorientation and dislocation of anxiety can be generative, even revelatory, for anxiety creates a certain level of indeterminacy that functions as a necessary self-interruption. Anxiety thus breaks potentially totalizing structures by creating a gap between temporality and representation, revealing the ever-elusive nature of poetic mastery.
Notes

1. As Freud notes in *The Problem of Anxiety*, “I anticipate that a situation of helplessness will come about, or the present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences which I have previously undergone. Hence I will anticipate this trauma; I will act as if it were already present as long as there is still time to avert it. Anxiety, therefore, is the expectation of the trauma on the one hand, and on the other, an attenuated repetition of it” (114).

2. Lacan cleverly comments on the paradoxes of *fort/da* by stating in his Seminar X, “What provokes anxiety? Contrary to what people say, it is neither the rhythm nor the alternation of the mother’s presence-absence. What proves this is that the child indulges in repeating presence-absence games: security of presence is found in the possibility of absence. What is most anxiety producing for the child is when the relationship through which he comes to be — on the basis of lack which makes him desire — is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back” (qtd. in Fink 53). Here, as in Frost, form without fixity is the goal: the poem, like the child, needs to create the space for desire.

3. One also thinks of Poirier’s comment that for Frost freedom is “contingent upon some degree of restriction. More specifically, it can be said that restrictions, or forms, are a precondition for expression. Without them, even nature ceases to offer itself up for a reading” (104). Paul Giles suggests (2000) that such restriction is historically and politically specific. Giles argues that Frost’s poetry cultivates what Pierre Bourdieu calls an “oracle effect,” through which the poet self-consciously represented himself as a spokesperson for America” (713). This self-fashioning “might be seen to derive not so much from the simple reproduction of native moral assumptions but, in a more sinister way, from the compulsion to repress less homely forces systematically” (713). Frost’s pastoral order, in Giles’ reading, is “designed as a form of containment, a defense against radically discordant elements which would not acquiesce in the ritualistic exchange of rhyme” (735). My psychologically-inflected reading of Frost’s strategies of containment is clearly more positive and less political.


5. As Poirier notes, the “very nature of metaphor involves for [Frost] a constant pressure, at some point, against intensifications and the excesses that go with them” (*The Work of Knowing*, 149; emphasis Poirier’s).

6. Home is often a fearful place in Frost’s work; his poem “Home Burial” perhaps epitomizes the way in which home can become a site of too much signification. The feeling of uncanniness (*unheimlich*) is defined by Heidegger as a “not-being-at-home.” In anxiety, the question of being is brought home as *Dasein* “gets brought before itself through its own being” (228). The concept of “home” also suggests Freud’s words in “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” (1917). Writing on Darwin and the resultant crisis of differentiation (a crisis that Frost’s poem “A Considerable Speck” mediates on and responds to), Freud states, “Man feels himself to be supreme within his own mind but these discoveries amount to a statement that the ego is not master in its own house” (141; emphasis Freud’s).

7. This excessive looking is suggestive of “For Once, Then, Something” (208), a narcissistic drama of collapse and compensation that articulates the petrifaction of autoerotic self-love.

8. Fluidity and interchange are necessary as a defense against a stifling systematization that Frost felt both poetically and politically. As Poirier writes: “Politically and intellectually, Frost tended to find evidences of ’system’ and its deleterious effects not in anything that has ‘come down’ to us but in what had been more recently contrived. Darwinism, socialism, the New Deal, Freudianism were all to him the dangerous imposition of ‘system’ upon the free movements of life” (49).

9. As Freud notes, anxiety can have contradictory outcomes: flight, regression, withdrawal. As he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defense measure. At the same time, the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action. There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of
stimulus, and another problem arises instead—the problem of mastering the amount of stimulus which
have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.” This
libidinal excess needs to be contained without being fully fixed, and Frost utilizes strategies of aversion,
deferment, and reserve in an attempt to do so.

Works Cited


