George Montiero: On "Design"

Lecturing in 1834 on the theme of man's relationship to the globe, Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked

The snail is not more accurately adjusted to his shell than man to the globe he inhabits, that not only a perfect symmetry is discoverable in his limbs and senses between the head and the foot, between the hand and the eye, the head and the lungs, but an equal symmetry and proportion is discoverable between him and the air, the mountains, the tides, the moon, and the sun. I am not impressed by solitary marks of designing wisdom; I am thrilled with delight by the choral harmony of the whole. Design! It is all design. It is all beauty. It is all astonishment.

With this notion Emerson started hares in New England that have run from his time well into the twentieth century. In Emerson's day Oliver Wendell Holmes produced his variation on the theme, seeing it in terms of what might be called Platonic evolutionism in his poem "The Chambered Nautilus." Early in this century Frost took up Emerson's notion in two versions of the poem "Design" and had serious fun with it for a decade.

Published rather inauspiciously in the same year as T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Frost's sonnet "Design" has weathered the years successfully. Its reputation has grown to such an extent that the poem, like Eliot's, is now considered one of the century's most explosive poetic statements on the metaphysics of darkness. Indeed, historically "Design" can be located somewhere between the visionary expanse of "The Waste Land" and the mind-stretching speculations of Herman Melville's chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in Moby-Dick (1851). In paradigm, "Design" expresses the perplexing fears that respond to evidence that (1) human existence continues without supportive design and ultimate purpose and (2) human existence is subject to a design of unmitigated natural evil. In its details the poem appears to sustain both of these complementary interpretations.

"Design" is Frost's most carefully shaped investigation of the darker implications of the classical argument from design. The poem did not spring into being fully formed after a single bout with the Muse. In 1912, apparently to put the poem on record as well as to try it on a sympathetic reader, Frost forwarded an early version to an old friend, calling it a sonnet for his "Moth and Butterfly? book." Although he did not choose to publish this early version, the manuscript copy preserved among the papers of Susan Hayes Ward enables us to trace Frost's philosophical-aesthetic development as he reworked the draft and rethought his ideas over a period of ten years.

Frost's extant manuscript version of 1912 bears the title "In White," which, though it indicates the poem's principal image and motif, does not have the thematic resonance of the simpler and more direct later title, "Design." A more explicit, if far less effective, title for the later version of the poem might combine the two "Design in White." Still, this title, arty and somewhat arch, would compromise Frost's theme. Rather, concerned with any and all
designs which would foster poetic and philosophic resonance, Frost revised his poem to make it more precise, so that each image would be appropriate and every word functional.

In White

A dented spider like a snow drop white On a white Heal-all, holding up a moth Like a white piece of lifeless satin cloth— Saw ever curious eye so strange a sight?— Portent in little, assorted death and blight Like the ingredients of a witches' broth?? The beady spider, the flower like a froth, And the moth carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white, The blue prunella every child's delight. What brought the kindred spider to that height? (Make we no thesis of the miller's plight.) What but design of darkness and of night? Design, design! Do I use the word aright?

This early version of the poem is to be compared with the final version published first in 1922 and later gathered by Frost into his sixth volume of poetry, A Further Range (1936):

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white, On a white heal-all, holding up a moth Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth? Assorted characters of death and blight Mixed ready to begin the morning right, Like the ingredients of a witches' broth? A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth, And dead wmg's carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white, The wayside blue and innocent heal-all? What brought the kindred spider to that height, Then steered the white moth thither in the night? What but design of darkness to appall?— If design govern in a thing so small.

Frost's revisions turn the poem to narrative and away from unadorned lyric, thereby enhancing the mystery that surrounds the incident he wishes to describe. In removing his personal experience to the past, the poet is able to suggest as well that he has been brooding on the meaning of the tableau of spider, moth, and ritual death which he has observed, even though he has failed to reach a conclusive answer (at least for himself) on the question of design. The introduction of the poet's personal voice (as subject; into the first line, moreover, turns the spider into the object of sight and contemplation. It gives the poet more prominence than he had in the manuscript version, which begins with a sentence fragment (no verb) in apposition to the noun "sight" in the fourth line.

Little survives intact from one version of the poem to the other. Notably, only the ninth line of the early version?"What had that flower to do with being white"?survives without change in "Design." Lines 2, 6, and 11 are largely repeated, with changes only in capitalization or punctuation at the end of the line. The remaining ten lines, however, offer substantive changes, which must be taken up line by line.
The simile in the first line, "like a snow drop white," which is purely and neutrally descriptive, disappears along with another descriptive word, "dented." In their place Frost offers three adjectives: "dimpled," "fat," and "white." The first two are unexpectedly appropriate for this murderous spider. Cleverly placed in the poem, these terms more often describe a baby than an insect. By replacing neutrally descriptive terms with terms that would normally appear in another context in connection with a different sentiment, Frost both announces his theme and reveals that his approach is basically ironic. In line 3 the moth, described as "a white piece of lifeless cloth" becomes "rigid satin cloth." "Lifeless" is only vaguely descriptive of the moth?s state; but it does not at all accurately reflect the tableau of the spider holding up the moth. The moth may in fact be "lifeless," but the poem is more accurately descriptive when it compares the moth with "rigid" cloth. Hovering over this image is the hint of rigor mortis and the satin fabric which customarily lines the inside of coffins.

Line 4 in the manuscript version is rather limp, lifeless. The semi-rhetorical question "Saw ever curious eye so strange a sight?" seriously deflects the central argument of the poem. In the final version Frost moves the second half of the original fifth line, "assorted death and blight," to line 4 and extends it to "assorted characters of death and blight," thereby introducing the important metaphor of kitchen domesticity that he will pursue through line 7. So, too, does he decide to drop the first phrase of line 5 ("Portent in little")?this time, I would suggest, because "portent" is too potent at this point. Line 6 stays almost intact but no longer asks a question. Indeed, the two questions which dominate the octave in the manuscript version are strategically dropped, so that the only questions come in the sestet closing the poem. Lines 4 through 7 are intended, then, to suggest kitchens, cakes, and cookies ("Assorted," "ingredients," and "Mixed ready") as if drummed up by advertisers "to begin the morning right." The only sour note is that the whole thing resembles "the ingredients of a witches? broth." Still, it is "broth" and not "brew" (as we might expect in everyday witchcraft); "broth" echoes the culinary metaphor.

The single change in line 7 turns "beady spider" into "snow-drop spider," reinstating the adjective which Frost had discarded from his original first line. At this point the earlier poem was still fundamentally descriptive, but something was needed, apparently to keep the idea of coldness and death before us. "Snow-drop" accomplishes this aim. "Beady," however, serves another purpose. The word, less than precisely descriptive, is morally loaded. A seemingly less neutral word would keep the poem from becoming at all moralistic. In the last line of the octave "moth" turns into "dead wings," but the simile "like a paper kite" is happily retained. The simile returns us to the implicitly "childlike" description of the spider in the opening line. "Dead wings," on the other hand, moves toward precision, for it is not the "moth" in its entirety that looks like "a paper kite" but only its "dead wings." Furthermore, both "wings" and "kite" suggest the idea of flight, the image of white "dead wings" moves toward paradox.

The ninth line ("What had that flower to do with being white,"?) remains intact, this much about his basic poem Frost had been sure of all along. But if the appositive clause which constitutes the tenth line ("The blue prunella every child?s delight") adds the new information that the heal-all is also known as the prunella; it nevertheless adds nothing to the argument of the poem. Indeed, because the content of the lines is not at all functional except as a bit of incidental information, it can do no more than disrupt the poem?s discourse. On the other hand, repetition of the fact that it is a "heal-all" despite its not being blue (as are most heal-alls) pushes the argument a step further. The next line is substantially the same. But the twelfth line of the manuscript version is dropped completely, and fittingly so."Make we not thesis of the miller?s plight)" is wasteful and repetitive, seeming to exist only for the final word
("plight"), which maintains the pattern of the same end rhyme throughout the six lines of the sestet. In replacing the entire line, Frost chooses to deepen the question he asks about the tableau he has witnessed. Not only does he ask "What brought the kindred spider to that height" but also what "Then steered the white moth thither in the night?" (italics added). What power, then, actually "steered" the moth (white) in the darkness of "night" to a heal-all which is preternaturally "white"? Rather than the somewhat disingenuous admonition that avoids making a thesis out of this tableau, Frost chooses to extend the mystery of the "witches? broth" that he has ostensibly witnessed.

In the penultimate line of the poem the first five words are retained ("What but design of darkness"), but the last three words ("and of night") are revised: "to appall." In the original, "of night" merely repeats the idea in the phrase "of darkness." There is a relatively pointless, if harmless, repetition of meaning. But the phrase "darkness to appall" suggests the appalling effect that the close conjunction of two ideas?"darkness" and "design"?might well have. Moreover, "appall" is a particularly suitable word, in that it suggests both a specific color or the lack of color (pallor) and death (pall).

Because it, too, is inconclusive and somewhat wasteful, the last line of the manuscript poem gives way to a conditional clause in the final version: "Design, design! Do I use the word aright?" is crudely rhythmic, but the simple device of ending a poem with a disingenuous question does little to resolve the poem formally. On the other hand, to end the poem with the tentative clause "if design govern in a thing so small" offers thematic resolution even as it enhances poetic resonance. "Govern" develops from "steered," of course, which in turn grows out of "brought " The effect is cumulative.

A comparison of the earlier and the definitive versions of "Design" helps to define the poet?s final intention; it remained fundamentally consistent. From version to version Frost worked to clarify his idea that the philosophical argument from design was endemically ironic. Both the first published version of the poem (1922) and the manuscript version (1912) are in sonnet form. Despite internal revisions and the reshaping of several lines, the overall poetic form remained the same over the years. That the poem was conceived in the form of a sonnet, I would propose, is the poet?s final irony, for the strict formal design which characterizes the sonnet apes and mimes the internal argument of the poem. It is true of "Design," as it is, according to Frost, of all his poems: "every single one of the poems has its design symbol." The difficulty, though, is that "there are some people who want to know what?s eating you." Whether what is eating at the readers of "Design" was also eating the poet is not revealed. But here are the main questions. Does the same guiding power, the steering force, which works through the tableau of spider, moth, and stylized death, operate through the poetic process as well? After so much whiteness, have we experienced, after all, still another variant of that scriptural blackness of darkness which fascinated so many American writers, from Poe to Hemingway? These questions?good ones, I think?are no more rhetorical than the question which closes Frost?s chilling sonnet.

There is a footnote to the story of "In White" and "Design." It involves Frost?s dealings with the Independent, particularly with Susan Hayes Ward, the literary editor of the publication edited by her brother William Hayes Ward. She was one of the people he later singled out as having had so much to do with his career that he would name her as one of those "to whom I owe my existence." In 1894 Frost sent the poem "My Butterfly" to the Independent because two years earlier he had recognized the journal as a place where poetry might be published.
The discovery was, he revealed, one of the two most crucial poetic experiences in his life as a student. (The other was his discovery of Palgrave’s Golden Treasury.) Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant quotes Frost.

I happened into the old library and found on the magazine rack a copy of the Independent, with a poem on the front page. It was a sort of threnody called “Seaward,” by Richard Hovey, a friend of Bliss Carman and a celebrated Dartmouth graduate. The subject was the death of Thomas William Parsons, translator of Dante’s Inferno, friend of Longfellow.

This experience gave me my very first revelation that a publication existed, anywhere in my native land, that was a vehicle for the publication of poetry. There was even an editorial about this poem, which I read with rapt amaze. So when later I had a poem, “My Butterfly,” I of course sent it to the Independent.

The issue of the Independent containing Hovey’s poem appeared on November 17, 1892. Almost two decades later, on about January 15, 1912, Frost sent Susan Hayes Ward a copy of “In White.” By this time she was no longer associated with the Independent and was, in fact, retired. (She died in 1916.) Therefore, why did Frost choose to send her this particular poem? My guess is that it had something to do with poems he had read in the Independent years earlier, in an issue published on December 15, 1892, four weeks after the issue publishing the Hovey poem that had so favorably impressed the young would-be poet then studying at Dartmouth. In this, largely a Christmas issue, Frost would have read a twenty-two-line poem by Julian Hawthorne

As when a traveler, toiling over a hight Heaped of huge bowlders, all at random hurled, Like fragments of a ruined world, Whose desolation doth the spirit affright? Rebels at seeming chaos come again, And longs for level reaches of the plain, So I with hardship spent, And foiled of mine intent, Complained that life was less than kind, That silver clouds were leaden-lined. And chance, not justice, did o’er mortal fortunes reign.

But when the traveler to the valley came, And, turning, gazed at that dim-towering hight, Glorified now by sunset light,? Lo! the confusion that had won his blame Assumed sublime and awful grace? The mighty semblance of a God-like face Even, so as I look back Upon my weary track, I see its hostile features change, By some divine enchantment strange, Till God’s design through all, in all, at last I trace.

Frost’s “My Butterfly,” written two years later, would also touch on the “awful grace” of God’s power and design: “It seemed God let thee flutter from his gentle clasp. / Then, fearful he had let thee win / Too far beyond him to be gathered in, / Snatched thee, o’er-eager, with ungentle grasp.” Along with Julian Hawthorne’s “Design,” however, the Independent for December 15, 1892, published a forty-line poem by Lewis Morris entitled “From an American Sermon.” I shall quote not the entire poem but only two stanzas from the middle and the two at the end.
So every human soul Set here betwixt its twin eternities Stands open to heaven, ay, rolls on to doom Mid opposite mysteries.

And tho indeed it seem By narrow walls of circumstance confined, Shut from Heaven?s face, closed to all vital airs, Is open to God?s wind

No soul so cold or calm But underneath it burns the infernal fire No state so mean, so vile, It may not to the Heaven of heavens aspire.

Above, beneath, around, Dread destinies encompass great and small, One Will, one Hand, one dread all-seeing Eye Surveys and governs all.

The second of these stanzas Frost would echo dramatically (with a hint from Emily Dickinson) in "My Butterfly" "Then, when I was distraught / And could not speak, / Sidelong, full on my cheek, / What should that reckless zephyr fling / But the wild touch of your dye-dusty wing!"
The last stanza of Morris?s poem was later echoed in "Design." It is curious that when Frost revised "In White" he changed the poem?s last line from "Design, design! Do I use the word aright?" to "If design govern in a thing so small," thereby echoing the last lines of both Hawthorne?s and Morris?s poems. Small wonder, then, that, when Frost came upon William James?s naturalistic and anecdotal critique of the argument from design, he was well primed for it?from reading Hawthorne and Morris no less than from writing "My Butterfly."

One last point is noteworthy. When Frost sent his trenchant criticism of the argument from design ("In White) to his old benefactress, Susan Hayes Ward?especially since she was by then no longer in a position to help him with publication?was he not formally, if belatedly, answering poetic voices heard nearly two decades earlier (a settling of the score, so to speak)?