



Robert Frost

(1875-1963)

After Apple-Picking (1914)

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

ANALYSIS

1. Any writer educated in the western tradition knows that an apple has been an emblem of knowledge since *Genesis* and that the myth of the American Adam and Eve in the New World Garden is pervasive in American literature. An agrarian pastoral poet, Frost in particular would be especially attuned to the connotations of "apple."

2. Further, anyone familiar with Christianity or the *Bible*, as Frost was, would recognize in the first two lines of this poem a parallel to the story of Jacob climbing his ladder toward heaven: "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still..."

3. The two points of the ladder introduce the thematic dualities in the poem: real/ideal, etc. He climbs on crosspieces that connect the two sides of the ladder, a metaphor of his life in balance, which depends on both sides. In the real world the ascent is hard work and up and down rather than ideal.

4. Adam and Eve initiated western civilization by eating only one apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Frost, or the farmer speaking his poem, harvests 'ten thousand thousand.' No wonder he is 'overtired.' He affirms the view traditional since the Puritans, epitomized in Benjamin Franklin, that life is an ongoing education. He desired a 'great harvest.' He picked (learned) all he could, but there 'may be two or three' apples (truths) within reach that he missed, 'And there's a barrel that I didn't fill.' By now, though, he has 'had too much / Of apple-picking.'

5. His 'instep' aches with the pain of his labor. Since he is 'drowsing off,' he could fall off his ladder. If he goes on picking while overtired, he will drop more apples 'as of no worth.' Juxtaposition implies that dropping apples is 'what will trouble / This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.' If there is an afterlife he will be troubled then by his mistakes and failures, just as he is in this life. In fact, apples will be 'magnified.'

6. His 'strange' vision through a pane of ice is analogous to the idealistic vision expressed in his poem: His ladder pointed 'toward heaven still' is the metaphor of his Platonic or Christian faith in a spiritual dimension and an afterlife that will take many of the forms of this life. This life emerges from Nature like the stem end of an apple and the afterlife is like its 'blossom end.' The coldness of his ice vision connotes objectivity as well, the objective study of Nature necessary in successful farming. His faith is based on Nature and derives from intuition and analogy. That faith nourishes his Art, which in turn inspires the faith, a circularity expressed in the image of the 'ladder-round.'

7. Through the pane of ice, and by analogy in a possible afterlife, 'every speck of russet' shows clear. In their analysis, Brooks and Warren call the russet 'desirable,' carrying an 'agreeable, decorative, poetical flavor.' On the contrary, russet on an apple is a blemish. You do not want to bite into that. But in an ideal afterlife, all is redeemed and blemishes would turn into parts of an aesthetic whole transcending the

perception that they are negative, which is the nature of Art. Frost agrees with Hawthorne that God is the artist of Nature.

8. The poem expresses faith, even though rationally it takes an agnostic position at the end. No atheist would write such a poem. Though he has learned 'ten thousand thousand' truths, the poet has to admit that as to what happens after death he knows less than a woodchuck. Unlike a human, a woodchuck does not have visions of the ideal, nor is it troubled about dropping apples. In the last line of the poem—'Or just some human sleep'--the apple picker humbly subordinates himself to Nature, represented by the woodchuck and by the apples. Frost's poems are apples that grow out of him.

Michael Hollister (2015)

"As a realistic account of apple-picking in New England, this poem yields a great deal. The student may well feel that there is little to be gained by going beyond that reading. The poem is an admirable piece of description; the farmer who speaks the poem is simply 'overtired' and turns away with a bit of whimsical humor and with an honest weariness to thoughts of sleep.

But...a really fine piece of even 'realistic' description--a piece of description that engages our feelings and stirs our imaginations--tends to generate symbolic overtones. Such a description is more than an account of physical objects: it suggests, if only vaguely, further experiences. All of this is true of 'After Apple-Picking.' Furthermore, a second glance at the poem reveals elements that cannot be readily accommodated to a merely realistic reading of the poem. The first of these elements obtrudes itself in line 7. Up to that point everything may be taken at the literal descriptive level.

With line 7 we are forced to consider nonrealistic readings. For one thing, and merely as a kind of preliminary, the word *essence* comes strangely into the poem. It is not the kind of everyday, ordinary word characteristic of the vocabulary of the previous part of the poem. We may have observed how sometimes in poetry the unusual word, unusual in the context if not absolutely, may be a signal, a sign-post. But what of the word here? Here the word *essence* most readily brings in the notion of some sort of perfume, some sort of distillate; but it also involves the philosophical meaning of something permanent and eternal, of some necessary element or substance. The word scent (as contrasted with synonyms such as odor or smell) supports the first idea in *essence*, but the other meanings are there, too, with their philosophical weighting; and the assonance makes a further tie, suggestive and subtle. The scent of apples is a valuable perfume, as it were, but it is also to be associated in some significant way with the 'winter sleep.' Does the poet merely mean to say that the odor of apples, in a quite literal way, is a characteristic of the harvest season? It is a characteristic odor, but the word *essence* hints at something more fundamental.

We notice that a colon comes after the phrase 'scent of apples' to introduce the statement, 'I am drowsing off.' The scent of apples, as it were, puts to sleep the harvester. The next line implies that this is scarcely a normal, literal sleep. The sleep, in fact, had begun that morning with a 'strangeness' got from looking through the pane of ice. So somehow the scent of apples and the strangeness of the ice-view combine to produce the 'winter sleep.'

Then comes the dream. It is true that when we are overtired we tend to repeat in dream the activity that has caused the fatigue, as when after driving all day one sees the road still coming at him. There is thus a realistic psychological basis for the nature of this dream, but at the same time we must remember that the dream had been pre-arranged that morning, and dreams that are literal in a literal world don't begin that way. So even before we have got through the poem we are forewarned that it is not to be taken literally, even in the way that Frost's 'Desert Places' can be taken literally. In that poem, for example, all the details are in their own right directly descriptive of Nature; the snow falling into the dark field does become a kind of metaphorical rendering of the observer's loneliness in the world, but it also remains literal. But the details of 'After Apple-Picking' are not like this: they are constantly implying a kind of fantasy.

To go back and take a fresh start with the poem, we see a set of contrasts gradually developing: the world of summer and the world of winter; the world of labor and the world of reward; the world of wakefulness and the world of sleep; the world of ordinary vision and the world distorted by the ice-view; the world of fact and the world of dream. And we understand that these various pairs are aspects of a single

contrast. But a contrast of what? A contrast of two views of experience, of the world in general, of life, if you will.

In other words, we take a broad, simple, generalized view of apple-picking and harvest--the end of some human effort in the real world, which is followed by reward, rest, dream. To go one step further, we may say that the contrast is between the actual and the ideal. Now we can look back at the very beginning of the poem and see that what appeared to be but a casual, literal detail--the ladder sticking through a tree--initiates this line of meaning. The ladder is pointing 'Toward heaven still.' It points, not toward the sky or even the heavens, words that carry merely a literal meaning and in this context would merely say that the ladder was pointing upward; but toward *heaven*, the place of man's rewards, the home of his aspirations, the deposit of perfection and ideal values....

The apples of reality had been a 'good'; now in dream the apples become magnified. Furthermore, though the apples of reality had been a good, they had been a good in a practical sense; now in the dream they come as a good for contemplation--we see them bigger than life, every aspect, stem end and blossom end, every tiny fleck of russet. In the dream there is emancipation from the pressure of work; there can be appreciation of the object as object. Let us consider the words *russet* and *clear*. They are smuggling some kind of plus-value into the dream. *Russet* carries an agreeable, decorative, poetical flavor, and *clear* has all sorts of vague connotations of the desirable, opposed to the turgid, the murky, the dirty, the impure, the confused, and the like. Suppose we paraphrase the line: 'And every spot of brown now visible.'

We have lost the plus-quality, the sense of the desirable in the apples. To proceed with the passage, if the ache of the instep arch remains, there is also the line 'I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.' The experience described may be taken in itself as an agreeable one, and in addition the line is euphonious and delicately expressive. Notice how the swoop of the anapest *as the boughs* is caught by the solid monosyllabic foot *bend*, and brought, as it were, safely to rest. Also notice that though the first three feet are regularly iambic...the phrase 'the ladder' gives a kind of sweeping, then falling, movement across the iambic structure, a movement which, again, is brought to rest by an accented monosyllable, 'sway.' So the rhythmic structure of the line falls into two parts, each with a sweep brought to rest.

Thus we have the sound of apples rumbling into the cellar bin. Is this part of a nightmare or of a good dream? We can say that the sound may 'trouble' the sleep, but at the same time we must remember that the sound was the signal of the completion of labor, the accomplishing of the harvest. So it brings over into the dream the plus-value of reality. This is not to deny, necessarily, the negative aspect, the troubling effect. It is merely to affirm that both elements are present. Immediately after the poet has said that he is overtired because there were 'ten thousand thousand' fruit to handle, he used the word *cherish*. This word, too, smuggles a plus-value into the dream. If the picking was labor, it was a loving labor, not a labor simply for practical reward. It is true that the word is applied to the work in the real world and not to the dream, but it appears in the context of the dream and colors the dream.

We may conclude, then, that though the dream does carry over the fatigue in a magnified form, satisfactions now freed from the urgencies of practical effort--the apples may now be contemplated for their fullness of being. The ideal--if we have accepted the whole cluster of notions on one side of the contrast to amount to that--is not to be understood as something distinct from the actual, from man's literal experience in the literal world. Rather, it is to be understood as a projection, a development, of the literal experience. When the poet picks his apples he gets his practical reward of apples and gets the satisfaction of a job well done, the fulfillment of his energies and ambitions. But the rest, the reward, the heaven, the dream that come after labor, all repeat, on a grander scale, the nature of the labor. This is not to be taken as a curse, but as a blessing. The dream, as we have seen, is not a nightmare.

We have not finished with the poem. We still must account for the woodchuck. We notice that here the poet is still working with a contrast, the contrast between the woodchuck's sleep and 'just some human sleep.' The woodchuck's sleep will be dreamless and untroubled. The woodchuck is simply a part of the nature from which man is set apart. The woodchuck toils not, neither does he dream. Man does work and does dream. He is 'troubled,' but the trouble is exactly what makes him human and superior to the woodchuck. The word *just*, in the phrase 'just some human sleep,' gives a faintly ironical understatement to

the notion of man's superiority, but this is merely whimsical, a way, not of denying the fact of man's superiority, but of avoiding the embarrassment of making a grandiose claim; the whimsical understatement is a way of indicating a continuing awareness of the real as context of the ideal--of the natural as context of the human.

Some readers may be inclined to say that we have pushed matters too far. They are willing, perhaps, to admit that the poem is not to be taken with absolute literalness. They say that the poem is not merely about apple-picking, but is about life and death as imaged in a set of contrasts: summer-winter; labor-rest; ordinary view and the view seen through the pane of ice. They go on to say that the dream is an image for life-after-death, and indicates the kind of immortality the poet expects and/or wants. They support this notion by reference to the word *heaven* in the second line, and perhaps to the contrast between man and woodchuck (the woodchuck does not dream, that is, is not immortal).

This reading is still too literal. It takes the ideas of heaven and immortality at their face value, and does not comprehend the broad basic theme. It is true that *if* the poet did believe in immortality, he would by the logic of this poem want an immortality like the dream, and would recognize a continuity between this world and the next. It is conceivable, to be sure, that the poet does accept the idea of immortality, but there is no evidence in the poem that he does (nor, as a matter of fact, elsewhere in Frost's work). And even if the poet did accept the idea of immortality, that fact would not limit the theme; it would in itself be but *one application of the theme*, one illustration of it. All sorts of other applications of the basic idea which is the theme would still exist in relation to the human life of the here and now, a life involving both the real and the ideal.

What would become of the other and more secular applications of the root-idea or fundamental attitude of the poem? The idea would apply to any ideal that man sets up for himself. An ideal to be valid must stem from the real world, and must not violate it or deny it. For instance, a certain theory of poetry, or of any of the other arts, is implied here. By this theory, poetry should develop from, and treat of, ordinary experience; it should reflect life and the needs and activities of life--it should present the apples magnified, but yet as apples. Or a theory of morality is implied: the ideal of conduct should not deny the human but should fulfill the human. Or a theory of labor and reward is there: reward and labor should not be distinct, the reward coming after, and distinct from, the labor; the reward should be in fulfillment through the labor. These examples are intended merely to point us back into the poem, to the central impulse and root-idea of the poem. It is a root-idea that we can find developed in certain other poems by Frost, and lying behind many more [as in 'Mowing'].

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry
(Holt 1938-1961) 363-69

"There is no question here of tones playing against a traditional form; rather, an original rhythmic form grows out of the dramatic setting and the initial commitment in tone. Pre-sleep and sleepy reminiscence of the day condition all that is said, and the speaker's first words show what form his dreamy talk will take. His 'ladder's sticking through a tree'—which is accurate and earthy—but 'through a tree / Toward heaven.' As the apple-picker drowns off, narrative of fact about the ice skimmed from the trough gets mixed with dream... The meaning implied by the self-hypnosis and dreamy confusion of rhythm is finely suggested in the image of 'the world of hoary grass,' the blurred seeing of morning that anticipates the night vision. This blurring of experience focuses in the central metaphor of the poem, 'essence of winter sleep.' 'Essence' is both the abstract 'ultimate nature' of sleep and the physical smell, 'the scent of apples'—a metaphysical image in T. S. Eliot's sense of the term. Fragrance and sleep blend, as sight and touch merge in 'I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight'....

The closing metaphor of the poem, the woodchuck's 'long sleep,' adds to the strangeness of 'winter sleep' by bringing in the non-human death-like sleep of hibernation. We are finally quite uncertain of what is happening, and that is what the poem is about."

Reuben A. Brower
The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention
(Oxford 1963)

“He knows what will trouble his sleep but is uncertain about the kind of sleep overtaking him. Arranged in the order most convenient for answering them, two questions emerge in ‘After Apple-Picking’: What is the nature of the sleep? What is the nature of the trouble?...

The season of the year emphasizes Nature's death, while the woodchuck's hibernation suggests a pattern of death and resurrection.... Intriguing though these references are, a reader familiar with Frost's playful ways (‘I like to fool,’ he said) knows better than to take them hastily at face value. The most popular reading rejects the possibility of death. Since the speaker's dream, according to this account, represents an ideal rooted in the real world, his ability to dream about a job well done represents his heaven on earth. His capacity for contemplation sets him apart from the inferior woodchuck, though he does not affirm that man has an immortal soul.

Insofar as this reading rejects death and immortality as one possible form of sleep in ‘After Apple-Picking,’ the commentary is consistent with a general [Atheist] opinion that Frost is nontheological in his thought. Since he neither affirms nor denies that the emergence of mind suggests ultimate meaning in the universe, Frost would necessarily remain neutral in his attitude toward immortality. But if the speaker's dream and sleep exist in life, then to assert that, after his labors, the speaker ‘is now looking not into the world of effort but the world of dream, of the renewal,’ is to oversimplify the poem. This view identifies the dream (interpreted as pleasurable) with the sleep (seen as a time for contemplation as well as renewal) and in the process limits both. Such a reading qualifies the word ‘trouble’ into insignificance (to be troubled by a lovely dream is to be superior to the woodchuck, who cannot dream) and oversimplifies the speaker's attitude toward his experience. Given the feats of association that he makes, given the fact that he speaks in contraries, the speaker's attitude toward his sleep is far more complicated than at first seems clear, and his trouble far more real than might be supposed.

The speaker's attitude toward his sleep is complicated because of the possible kinds of sleep overtaking him. To be sure, this may be a night's sleep from which the speaker will awake, refreshed, ready to turn to those ‘fresh tasks’ mentioned by the puzzled speaker of ‘The Wood-Pile.’ This possibility is supported by the reference to ‘night’; it is at ‘night’ that he is ‘drowsing off’; the speaker, having completed the last of his labors as best he could, may be about to go to bed.

But the association of night with ‘essence of winter sleep’ gives ‘night’ a metaphoric context and so expands its meaning. Indeed, a simple night's sleep seems an improbable meaning, since the speaker was ‘well’ upon his way to sleep before he dropped the ‘pane of glass’ in the morning. Perhaps, then, his drowsy state may be part of the ‘essence of winter sleep’; that is, perhaps it is a sleep similar to Nature's. Enough correspondences between the human and natural worlds exist to dictate this as one possible kind of sleep. The speaker's apple-picking ceases as the year nears conclusion, and his ‘drowsing off’ is associated with “essence of winter sleep”:

If his sleep is to be like Nature's, what then is the point of the reference to the woodchuck? Since the woodchuck surely could not ‘say whether it's like his / Long sleep, as I describe its coming on, / Or just some human sleep,’ the speaker's avowal to the contrary apparently reduces the conclusion to mere whimsy. Presumably woodchucks do not dream and do not desire great harvests. Men do. Presumably men do not go into physical hibernation for months. Woodchucks do. But the point of the reference to the woodchuck is not simply to create a contrast between a human and an animal sleep but also to introduce an implied comparison—an inexact analogy between the speaker's sleep and the sleep of Nature. If only man has the potential to desire great harvests, his desires may follow a cycle similar to Nature's. They may wax and wane like (or with) the seasons; they may emerge, as the woodchuck does in the spring, or lie dormant for months, as the woodchuck does in winter.

For the man who is ‘overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired,’ such an analogy carries with it its own measure of reassurance. Assuming that the desire for harvests and the act of harvesting together are an emblem of man's creative spirit working its will on the world, a reader can see that implicit in this situation is the question: Will my desire, my will, my talents be resurrected, directed toward reaping new harvests? Although he would find it more comforting to think that ‘just some human sleep’ is a single night's sleep which will restore his powers so that he can turn to ‘fresh tasks,’ he can be reassured by the analogy

between man and, the seasons nonetheless. His desires will lie dormant longer, but they will surely be revived, as Nature is.... The speaker himself is uncertain of the analogy, speculating whether his sleep is like the woodchuck's... As he has described that sleep coming on, indeed, the speaker clearly has been speaking contraries. The analogy with Nature which his associations establish are, in the process of his speaking, undermined by suggestions that the sleep will be different from Nature's.

Those suggestions become explicit in the contrast between the sleep of the woodchuck and 'just some human sleep.' Precisely because the implied comparison between the speaker's sleep and the woodchuck's is undone by the power of the contrast (men can only have a human sleep), the assurance offered by the comparison with Nature is also retracted. The contrast between the two kinds of sleep, furthermore, has been anticipated from the beginning of the poem, thus providing the fullest impact to the concluding line, 'Or just some human sleep.'

From the outset, Nature seems to have become alien to the speaker. The first section concludes with the speaker's commenting that he is no longer interested in picking apples, in appropriating nature to his own uses: 'But I am done with apple-picking now.' The parallel between his drowsiness and the 'essence of winter sleep' is, at best, tenuous, held together by an uncommitted colon in the last line of the statement, 'Essence of winter sleep is on the night, / The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.' The 'essence,' in short, is more directly associated with 'the scent of apples' than with the speaker's sleep. The parallel tenuously established by the colon breaks down in the next section, which describes the strange sight of the winter world through a sheet of ice. Perhaps he does see through this 'glass' 'the world of hoary grass,' but even that is not certain, and no other object in the external world he views is mentioned. Before he describes the 'form' of his dreaming, he significantly lets the pane of ice fall and break, an action in stark contrast to his behavior during the harvest, when he took special pains to keep the apples from falling. Of course, since the ice is melting, the gesture is perfectly normal. Deliberate mention of the detail, nonetheless, suggests his alienation from Nature. Once he could handle it (in the literal and metaphoric senses of that term); now he cannot.

If the speaker is divorced from Nature, then what would 'just some human sleep' be? One can concede that the speaker is physically and mentally fatigued, his desire for a 'great harvest' satiated. In that case it is possible that he is entering the world of renewal, that his sleep will be composed of pleasant dreams, a contemplation of the ideal based on the real; and it is possible that his trouble will be minimal, composed of the physical aftereffects of too much apple-picking: the 'ache' and the 'pressure' retained by his 'instep arch'; the feel of the swaying ladder; the 'rumbling sound' of apples. But it is not at all certain that his is the sleep of renewal. Indeed, to argue with certainty that this is the sleep of renewal, a reader would have to rest his case on the analogy between man's cycle and Nature's, an analogy that seems to fail in the poem. Such an analogy, furthermore, would not be consistent with Frost's point of view, one which sharply differentiates man from Nature.... Both Frost's habit of speaking contraries and his point of view toward Nature militate against a simplistic view of sleep and argue for a darker side of 'just some human sleep.'

That darker side can be discerned by recalling what is lost by the failure of the analogy between man and Nature. If Nature can renew itself automatically, man, viewed as distinct from Nature, cannot be assured of such renewal. Nature has her unknown source of creative revival. What is man's? The source of his creativity is the assumption that his harvest has value, that the activity is worthwhile. If the speaker questions the purpose of his activity, doubts the value of his harvest, then indeed his may be a sleep of the creative powers, one which will last until the doubts are removed....

The exhausted speaker, in short, is in doubt about his values.... He has literally lost sight of all the values of the harvest. If this is a happy sleep of contemplation, the happiness is highly qualified.... Hardly an allegory either supporting or denouncing Christian doctrine, the work nonetheless relies on overtones of the Fall to enrich its complex meaning. When man first picked the apple, he was expelled from Eden to labor by the sweat of his brow, a consequence of his newly found knowledge of good and evil. The speaker lives in a fallen world where he has labored and sweated. But he gains no sure knowledge as Adam did. His ladder is pointed toward heaven only, and he has had to descend from it. Man can climb the ladder toward heaven, toward certainty, but when he returns, he discovers how little he has learned with certainty. He cannot even know the nature of his sleep, although the possibilities seem clear.... A good rest, a night's or

a month's, will settle the matter. Thereafter, he can turn to 'fresh tasks' with no need to investigate his values. Given Frost's larger poetic world, this meaning is the most likely. The will to live and to create provides the ground for man's values....

What will trouble the speaker's sleep, whatever sleep it is? He is only falling asleep in this poem, and he does not yet know which sleep his will be. Its duration will determine its nature. It is his uncertainty as to when (or whether) he will awaken which will be carried into his sleep, troubling it. Ironically enough, only when he awakens will he know what sleep it is—or, rather, was."

John J. Conder
"After Apple-Picking': Frost's Troubled Sleep"
Frost: Centennial Essays
(U Mississippi 1973)

"The poem has become so familiar and revered that it is difficult to recognize its strangeness. But it would probably seem familiar in any case; it is a prime example of how even the very great poems of Frost can induce a kind of ease about their deeper intensities.... The 'dream' that 'labor knows' in Frost's poems of work is often 'sweet' because it frequently involves images of the birth or rebirth of the self, of redemption offered those who try to harvest reality....

'After Apple-Picking' is a dream vision, and from the outset it proposes that only labor can penetrate to the essential facts of natural life. These include, in this case, the discovery of the precarious balances whenever one season shifts to another, the exhaustions of the body, and the possible consequences of 'falling,' which are blemish and decay. When the penetration of 'facts' or of matter occurs through labor, the laborer, who may also be the poet, becomes vaguely aware that what had before seemed solid and unmalleable is also part of a collective 'dream' and partakes of myth. This is in part what is signified by Emerson's paradigm at the beginning of 'Language' in *Nature*: '1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.'

The penetrating power of labor can be evinced in 'apple-picking' or in writing or reading about it, and any one of these activities brings us close to seeing how apples and all that surround them can be symbolic of spirit. The easiness of voice movement and vocabulary in the poem will seem at odds with deeper possibilities only to those who do not share Frost's perception, following Emerson and Thoreau, that the possibilities are simply there to be encountered.... Thinking in Frost is metaphoric or 'two-pointed,' and it directs us at last to what is beyond the metaphor, to things we cannot 'know'... The progress...of analogy brings us to something beyond it, like faith or a belief. Metaphor, that is, both controls us and propels us into exaggerations, into the idea of God, for instance, with whom we enter into a relationship, as Frost says at the end of 'Education by Poetry,' in order 'to believe the future in--to believe the hereafter in'....

By a relationship to God, about which we cannot say very much and have little to show, we can, however, try, as in 'Carpe Diem,' to bring the future and the hereafter 'in' close, to bring it 'in,' as by climbing ladders for the picking of apples, from remoteness or abstraction. In this same talk--it was stereographically recorded and printed first in 1931--Frost seems to have borrowed the image of the ladder and the sky from 'After Apple-Picking' in order to talk about metaphor, about thinking, and about the hereafter or the future, the sky which waits at the end of the ladder. 'We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties, but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them that it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky'....

There is both daring and genius in the lines that follow: 'But I was well/ Upon my way to sleep before it fell.' So confused are states of consciousness here that perhaps we are to think that he slept all through the day of work, perhaps he dreamed the day itself, with its 'hoary grass.' This grass could be real, 'hoary' in the sense that it is coated white with morning frost; or it could be other-worldly grass, 'hoary' in the sense of 'ancient,' part of a mythic world derived from the Bible and Milton. We are not to decide which is which; we are instead meant to equivocate. The larger possibilities are made inextricable in our, and in his, experience from smaller, more detailed ones. Thus, 'essence' can mean something abstract, like an

attribute, or even a spirit that is fundamental to winter nights, and it is also something very specific to apple-picking, the perfume of a harvest....

To speak of apples is to speak of the Fall and the discovery of the benefits from it that both require and repay human toil.... His sleep will be human precisely because it will be a disturbed, dream- and myth-ridden sleep. Human sleep is more than animal sleep for the very reason that it is bothered by memories of what it means to pick apples. After that famous picking in the Garden, human life, awake or sleeping, has been a dream, and words are compacted of the myths we have dreamt of the fall and redemption of souls.”

Richard Poirier
Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing
(Oxford 1977)

“Several of Frost’s finest poems through the years reflected his fascination with the myth of Adam and Eve and his preoccupation with the human consequences of their fall: what he called, in ‘Kitty Hawk,’ ‘Our instinctive venture / Into what they call / The material / When we took that fall / From the apple tree’.... In ‘After Apple-Picking’ the matter is handled a bit differently. There the poet-farmer describes his concern regarding the ‘coming on’ of sleep which will end his long day’s labor. For he knows that troubled sleep and repetitive dreams, resulting directly from the daytime activity which has brought him to the harvest and the ‘wealth’ he covets, are his need.... In sum, Frost knows not whether that sleep will be like the animal hibernation (the ‘long sleep’) of the woodchuck or, as the poet puts it ironically, ‘just some human sleep.’

The country details of ‘After Apple-Picking’ only partly mask the poet’s concern with the mythic consequences of the Fall. If Eve’s curse, after she tasted of the fruit from the forbidden tree, was that she would ‘bring forth children,’ Adam’s curse, after joining Eve in the risk, was that he would live henceforth by the ‘sweat’ of his ‘face’—that is, he would sustain his life by his own labor. The irony beyond this curse is Frost’s subject. Adam’s curse was to labor, but another way of putting it is that Adam and his descendants were doomed to live within, and at the mercy of, the senses. Significantly, Frost defines the curse still further: man will not cease to labor even in rest.

In the very desire to profit from his long hours of work, the poet has made himself vulnerable, in a wry sense, to the dictum that ‘the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep’ (*Ecclesiastes* 5:12). The rub is that the poet is both laborer and ‘rich’ man. He has the ‘great harvest’ he desired; but he has labored long and faithfully in bringing about that harvest—certainly too long and possibly too faithfully to enable him to reap the reward of peaceful, untroubled rest that is promised to the diligent laborer.

The poem can be seen as an elaboration of *Genesis*: Adam’s curse was not merely that he was doomed to live by the ‘sweat’ of his ‘face’ but also that the curse to labor would follow him into his rest and his dreams. Such, inevitably, is the way after apple picking—and such is the paradox of Adam’s curse, even as it extends to the poet-farmer of New England.”

George Montiero
Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance
(U Kentucky 1988)

“On the simplest narrative level, the poem describes how, after a strenuous day of apple-picking, the speaker dreams dreams in which his previous activities return to him ‘magnified,’ blurred and distorted by memory and sleep. On a deeper level, however, it presents us with an experience in which the world of normal consciousness and the world that lies beyond it meet and mingle. ‘I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight,’ says the narrator... As usual, in this poem Frost hovers between the daylight world of commonsense reality and the dream world of possibility, the voices of sense and of song, the visions of the pragmatist and the prophet, the compulsions of the road and the seductions of the woods. This time, however, he appears to belong to both realms, rather than hold back from a full commitment to either. Dualism is replaced by an almost religious sense of unity here; and the tone of irony, quizzical reserve, completely disappears in favour of wonder and incantation.”

Richard Gray

American Poetry of the Twentieth Century
(Longman Group UK 1990)

“In Frost’s poetry any deviation, not only from the iambic foot but from the iambic pentameter line as well, is an important marker of the speaker’s state of mind, his control, and his capacity for irony. ‘After Apple Picking’ keeps resolutely returning to pentameter lines, but the speaker is drowsy, and the opening twelve-syllable line--‘My long two-pointed ladder’s sticking through a tree’--is like the last murmured words before sleep. Of course, it also represents, as does the whole masterful structure of the poem, Frost’s own precise control of tone, as he creates a speaker who is precariously ‘upon [his] way to sleep.’ This fatigued vulnerability manifests itself in an escalating slippage of control from ten-syllable lines to foreshortened lines like ‘For all / That struck the earth,’ or eleven-syllable lines like ‘No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble.’

And as the speaker moves toward an increasing intuition of the symbolic underpinnings of his exhaustion, which is the result not just of his picking apples but of other more visceral frustrations and fears, the frequency of these variations increases. (Lines 1, 2, 14, 16, 18, 19, 25, 27, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, and 42 vary from the pentameter; only lines 18 and 34 are extra-syllabic.) His awareness and fear of this loss of control are manifested in the final lines: ‘The woodchuck could say whether it’s like his / Long sleep, as I describe its coming on, / Or just some human sleep.’ What he fears is not so much death as the very state the poem has mimicked--that is, a suspension between not-life and not-death where language is narcotized toward incoherence and uncontrol.... The speaker is moving toward a hibernatory trance.”

Katherine Kearns
Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite
(Cambridge U 1994)

“‘After Apple-Picking’ has often been compared to Keats’ ‘Ode to Autumn,’ as if it were primarily a celebration of harvest. But its elevated diction (quite distinct from anything else in the book) as well as its images, mood and theme, all suggest a greater affinity with Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale.’ In that weary, drowsy poem the speaker longs to escape through art, symbolized by the nightingale, from the pain of the real world and wants to melt into the welcome oblivion of death.... Frost’s narrator, standing on the earth but looking upward, is also suspended between the real and the dream world...”

The long and short lines, the irregular rhyme scheme, the recurrent participles (indicating work), the slow tempo and incantatory rhythm all suggest that repetitive labor has drained away his energy. The perfume of the apples--equated through ‘essence’ with profound rest--has the narcotic, almost sensual effect of ether. Frost’s speaker, like Keats’, is suffused with drowsy numbness, yet enters the visionary state necessary to artistic creation.... The glassy piece of ice--which distorts, transforms and makes the familiar seem strange--is, like Keats’ nightingale, a symbol of art. In his dream state (the word ‘sleep’ occurs six times in the poem)...and he rhythmically sways on the ladder when the boughs bend with his weight. As the apples are gathered--and the poem written--he becomes both physically and mentally exhausted... He needs to regenerate himself, like the hibernating woodchuck, by a long, deathlike winter sleep, so he will be ready to reenter the poet’s dream world and achieve another spurt of creativity. In ‘After Apple-Picking’ Frost achieves a perfect fusion of pastoral and poetic labor.”

Jeffrey Meyers
Robert Frost: A Biography
(Copyright by Jeffrey Meyers 1996)

“‘After Apple-Picking,’ one of Frost’s greatest lyrics, blends the myth of the Fall with consequences of modern science. The ‘two-pointed ladder’ figures as both the instrument and the technology of tropism toward ‘heaven’ that ultimately leads to the onerous hell of uncertainty and of waste and struggle. Order, progress, and the harvest of knowledge are as much a part of the inextricable order of the garden as the great tree upon which we sway precariously...”

The image of the ladder will evoke that of Jacob’s dream as well as Emerson’s more metaphysical use of that ladder in ‘Experience.’ We also see the ladder failing as a human construct by which to transcend

Nature.... Unlike Jacob's, this ladder is a human construct that rests and depends on the tree and is left to Nature as an artifact of human effort. And the speaker's oncoming dream is not of angels but, rather, of the details of apples and of labor. If anything is retained in the allusion to Jacob, it is the sense of an impending struggle.... And what are wasted apples for humans who select for beauty and perfection become food for a hibernating woodchuck or further the spread of apple seeds....

The apple tree evokes the loss and displacement of the Fall—the Tree of Knowledge. But it also becomes the dominant metaphor of life and death in the new scripture of Darwin. Darwin's Tree of Life represents both Nature's diversity as well as the common descent and destiny of all living creatures including man. In his emphasis on survival no creature or branch is given certain privilege in the hierarchy; no future is certain. It is therefore not surprising that, after considering, the apples 'as of no worth,' the apple picker wonders about the relation of his own 'sleep,' a metaphor for loss of control and death in our self-consciousness, to that of another creature, 'the woodchuck,' for whom sleep hibernation is at least protection against the environment."

Robert Faggen
Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin
(U Michigan 1997)

Michael Hollister (2015)