

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Neither out far Nor in Deep (1936)

The people along the sand  
All turn and look one way.  
They turn their back on the land.  
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass  
A ship keeps raising its hull;  
The wetter ground like glass  
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;  
But wherever the truth may be--  
The water comes ashore,  
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.  
They cannot look in deep.  
But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep?

#### ANALYSIS

In this poem Frost is a detached observer, whose description of a seascape is deceptively simple. We are shown people turning together toward the sea with their “back” to the land, watching the sea all day. That the people are to be thought of collectively as the human race is indicated by the singular noun “back” in line 3. A ship passes. Wet sand reflects a standing gull. The people are paralleled to the gull, likewise part of the natural order, but people are “gulled” by appearances, whereas animals such as the gull are comparatively unconscious yet paradoxically closer to the truth—symbolized here by the sea—as the gull is standing on “wetter” sand. Here as in Hawthorne, a reflection has a Platonic connotation of ideal forms in a spiritual dimension beyond material appearances.

The rather dull, monotonous atmosphere of the poem is created in part by deadening variations in the metrical pattern, calculated to level the rhythm. The short, simple sentences and plain, generalizing diction also contribute to flattening the tone, as in the line, “But when was that ever a bar.” The pun on “bar” evokes what is beneath the surface unseen by the people. The rhythm and tone are flat like the beach, expressing the attitudes and ideas in the poem, which are melancholy.

The central assertion in the poem is that people turn their backs on what is known to them and at their disposal, and look with minimal success for Truth in what is unknown to them and beyond their limitations. They are not content or satisfied with the mere land, or the known material world. They do not look for truth in what comes to them incessantly and is right before them like the water that “comes ashore” at their feet. Instead they look out as far as they can to sea. The sea is an archetypal symbol of the transcendent and eternal, as in Emerson, Whitman and Melville.

The ship in stanza 2 is a man-made link between the land and the sea. It suggests that people may undertake spiritual quests into the unknown, as in *Moby-Dick* or poems by Emily Dickinson, but such adventures, according to the conservative Frost, do not really produce absolute truths, such as the answer to the questions of immortality or the nature of God. Even aboard a ship, one can see neither out far nor in

deep. Frost no doubt would have denied that an hallucinatory drug is a submarine adventure taking one out far and in deep. For the sea of his poem is not the human mind, but the realm beyond the reach of the mind, beyond human life. The only way to learn the full truth of this sea is to drown.

Michael Hollister (2015)

“When we choose between land and sea, the human and the inhuman, the finite and the infinite, the sea has to be the infinite that floods in over us endlessly, the hypnotic monotony of the universe that is incommensurable with us—everything into which we look neither very far nor very deep, but look, look just the same. And yet Frost doesn’t say so—it is the geometry of this very geometrical poem, its inescapable structure, that says so....

There is no ‘primal fault’ in Frost’s poem, but only the faint Biblical memories of ‘any watch they keep.’ What we do know we don’t care about; what we do care about we don’t know: we can’t look out very far, or in very deep; and when did that ever bother us? It would be hard to find anything more unpleasant to say about people than that last stanza; but Frost doesn’t say it unpleasantly—he says it with flat ease, takes everything with something harder than contempt, more passive than acceptance. And isn’t there something heroic about the whole business, too—something touching about our absurdity? If the fool persisted in his folly he would become a wise man, Blake said, and we have persisted. The tone of the last lines—or, rather, their careful suspension between several tones, as a piece of iron can be held in the air between powerful enough magnets—allows for this too.

This recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation, is very rare and very valuable, and rather usual in Frost’s best poetry. One is reminded of Empson’s thoughtful and truthful comment on Gray’s ‘Elegy’: ‘Many people, without being communists, have been irritated by the complacency in the massive calm of the poem ... And yet what is said is one of the permanent truths; it is only in degree that any improvement of society would prevent wastage of human powers; the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply, and is the central feeling of tragedy.’”

Randall Jarrell  
*Poetry and the Age*  
(Knopf 1953)

“The power and charm of this poem lie in the discrepancy between, on the one hand, its tone and ostensible subject, and, on the other hand, its actual subject. The tone can be described as minimal, flat, even pinched, and perhaps as fatigued. The ostensible subject, an observation of the behavior of people at the seashore, is scarcely of great consequence and might even be thought rather trifling. The actual subject is the response of mankind to the empty immensity of the universe.

The discrepancy becomes manifest in the last line of the poem. Up to that point what ‘the people’ do by the seashore is denoted by the word ‘look.’ It is the verb that least *dignifies* the act, for in itself it carries no implication of purpose or of any intensity, as do, for example, such verbs as ‘gaze,’ ‘view,’ ‘stare,’ or even ‘see.’ In everyday speech it is often linked with the minimizing or depreciating word ‘just’—‘I’m just looking,’ or ‘I’m just looking at...’ Of course, linguistic circumstances can endow the word with one or another degree of force. Used by itself in the imperative—‘Look!’—it is intense indeed. To ‘look for’ something is very purposeful; but to ‘look at’ something may or may not convey the idea of intention, and it may even, as I have suggested, indicate an entire lack of purpose, a mere idleness, as it seems to do in the first stanza of the poem.

Yet as the word is reiterated through the poem, it grows in meaning and force. It is used five times, and the mere repetition is somehow impressive, as if the poet were obsessed by the idea of mere looking. The first time it is used ‘the people’ simply ‘look one way’—we are not even told that they are looking at anything. There is a degree of intensity implied by the phrase, ‘They look at the sea all day,’ but the looking is still idle enough. By the third stanza, however, the word becomes very intense indeed. This is partly because the looking is suddenly—startlingly—associated with a very large question, ‘Wherever the truth may be,’ and partly because ‘the people’ seem forever fixed in their looking: the last two lines of the stanza seem to say that just as it is a fact of nature that the water comes ashore and will come forever, so it

is a fact of nature that 'the people' look at the sea and will look forever. The last two uses of the word, in the last stanza, deny or limit the effectuality of the looking—'They cannot look out far, / They cannot look in deep--' but by doing so they suggest that the looking, which first seemed idle and then seemed almost a trance, was after all not without some purpose....

The word 'look' has suddenly yielded to the 'watch they keep'—the minimal word is replaced, and explained, by a phrase of great dignity and richness of meaning. It implies a strong intention, and the activity of the mind as well as of the eye. And the activity of the heart as well as of the mind. It is a phrase that may suggest the idea of danger, or of hope, or of solicitude, or of loyalty. What is more, it has an archaic character; it is not a phrase that we use casually or lightly in ordinary speech, and its effect in the poem, the language of which is in general colloquial and flat, is solemn and ceremonial. The people who keep the watch are doing what soldiers do, warders of the coast, or what the shepherds at Bethlehem did. They await some significant event.

The small observation which is the poem's ostensible subject first presents itself to our minds as a speculation in psychology or aesthetics. If the land varies more than the sea and is therefore presumably more interesting, why do the people at the shore turn their backs ["back"] upon the land to look at the sea? Why do the solitary objects that break the monotony of the sea—the nearing ship, the gull reflected in the wet sand—hold the attention so firmly? But the psychological or aesthetic speculation gives place to another of a more momentous kind. Partly because of the word 'truth' in the third stanza, but not only because of that, we come to know that 'the people' are looking, and waiting, for *something*. We are not told what they hope to descry on the vacant immensity of the sea, and they themselves seem not to know, but we do not doubt that the object of their silent expectation is of transcendent importance.

We are often told that poetry deals with the particular and the concrete, that this is its very essence. If this is so, how shall we account for the peculiar effectiveness of the word 'people'? Surely it is the most general and abstract word possible, yet it has, as used here, a strange pathos. It is because its generality proposes to us the ultimate generality of mankind: all people, all over the world, at all times ('When was that *ever* a bar...?') For some readers, it will have a reminiscence of the effect of naïve simplicity with which the word is used in the Bible, as, for example, 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' The word imputes a kind of humility: 'the people' all 'look at the sea' at the behest of something instinctual or innate, not at the behest of intellectual curiosity; there is something dumb, something of the animal, in the accord with which they turn their gaze in the one direction and keep it there. The imputation of an animal-like humility before the power of instinct is anything but contemptuous; on the contrary, it is tender. And the quiet anonymity which is suggested by the phrase 'the people' is matched by the unnamedness of the thing they watch for. The poem does not affirm that what is watched for will appear. It says no more than that it is the nature of 'the people' to keep watch, whether or not there is anything to appear."

Lionel Trilling

*The Experience of Literature: A Reader with Commentaries*  
(Holt 1967) 944-46

"The once-neglected but now much-admired 'Neither Out Far nor in Deep' focuses its nature symbolism so sharply on human concerns that its haunting picture tends to dissolve into a contemplation paralleling that of the people described. The initially detached speaker observes people by the sea who make a uniform mass as they gaze away from the commonplace shore toward the depth and mystery of the ocean. Few sights are visible; a ship rising on the horizon and a gull standing on the soaked beach provide contrasting images of hypnotic motion and uneasy stasis. Implied commentary having begun with 'They turn their back on the land,' the speaker now philosophizes consistently. The people turn from the varying sights of land towards the distances of water, representing mysteries they hope to grasp, though the water may not really possess any more such truth than does the land. But the people continue to prefer this attempt at further vision, just as they do at the poem's opening. Despite their determination and persistence, they cannot achieve a penetrating vision of reality--nature and human nature--or what lies behind it. But they will not stop looking.

In the last two lines, the speaker calmly withdraws, balancing admiration and skepticism, glad to see human speculation continuing but confident that it will not achieve much. The poem has been seen as a harsh commentary on human limitations, a charge Laurence Perrine answers by stressing Frost's insistence on the truly impenetrable depths that challenge human knowledge and the demonstrated capacity of the people to see part of the way as they strive to see farther. Similarly, Elizabeth Isaacs thinks the poet 'joins forces with the rest of the human race when he climaxes the deceptively flat, calm poem with a grandiose, dignified ascent at its end.' Randall Jarrell takes a middle position, granting the poem a certain unpleasantness but insisting that the conclusion shows 'careful suspension between several tones,' making 'a recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation.'

In an elaborate comment on the poem, Daniel Pearlman boldly asserts that it is a covert allegory expressing Frost's anger at the conformism of 1930s American radicals who turned away from the solidity and complexity of their native shores to the monistic simplicities of foreign socialist ideologies. Thus, the people Frost attacks do indeed fear to look out far and in deep. Pearlman supports this view with a close analysis of details and by citing parallels between the poem's message and conservative views evident elsewhere in Frost's writings."

Mordecai Marcus  
*The Poems of Robert Frost: an explication*  
(Copyright by Mordecai Marcus 1991)

"Robert Frost's cryptic little lyric 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep' remains as elusive as 'the truth' that is so relentlessly pursued in the poem itself. The poem is very much 'about' this search for truth, and scholars, for the most part, persistently maintain that such effort is both necessary and noble, adding slowly but inexorably to the storehouse of human knowledge. Suggestive though such an interpretation might be, it distorts Frost's intentions--as a close examination of the curious image of 'a standing gull,' located strategically at the very heart of this enigmatic work (lines 7-8, its literal and thematic center), will reveal.

As 'the people' stare vacantly seaward in search of 'the truth,' mesmerized by the mysterious, limitless sea, they closely resemble standing (as opposed to flying) gulls. Never directly stated, this comparison, so crucial to the poem's meaning, is clearly implied, and it works very much to the people's disadvantage. For the gull is doing what comes naturally, staring into the teeming sea that is its source of life (that is, of food), and it is merely resting from its life-sustaining labors. 'The people,' implies Frost, in literally and symbolically turning their backs on their domain, the land, to stare incessantly seaward, are unnatural. Their efforts are life-denying in the extreme.

Frost underscores the life-denying nature of their mindless staring by introducing not a flock of standing gulls, but a single gull only--surprising in that standing gulls (or, more accurately, terns, which typically station themselves en masse by the water's edge) are rarely found alone. The solitary gull points up just what 'the people' are doing and how isolating and dehumanizing such activity is. So absorbed are they in their quest for 'truth' that they have become oblivious of all else but their own solipsistic pursuit. They have cut themselves off from the land world and all that it represents (struggles and suffering, commitments, obligations, responsibilities) and from one another as well. They have become isolates, like the solitary gull that they resemble. Furthermore, Frost emphasizes not the bird itself but only its reflected image in the glassy surface of the shore; it is the reflected image that is the object of our concern, for it bears significantly on 'the people' themselves. In an ironic version of Plato's Parable of the Cave, these relentless pursuers of truth have willfully turned their backs on the only 'reality' they can ever know--the land world and all that it represents--and in so doing have been reduced to insubstantial images, shadowy reflections of true human beings engaged in genuinely fruitful human endeavor. Nameless, faceless, mindless, they have become pale copies of the real thing.

All of this adds up to one inescapable conclusion: 'The people' are indeed 'gulls'--that is, 'dupes.' In their search for ultimate reality they have been tricked, cheated, conned. It is all a fraud, insists Frost (for all that they do see is the occasional passing ship mentioned in lines 5 and 6), and he clearly holds their vain efforts in contempt. As the final stanzas make dramatically clear, they are wasting away their lives in a meaningless quest, for whatever it is and wherever it might be, 'the truth' is surely not here. In short, they can look 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep.' So why bother?

The poem cries out for comparison with Frost's most famous work, his personal favorite, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' wherein the seductive woods—"lovely, dark and deep"—recall the mysterious sea of 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep.' But the narrator of 'Stopping by Woods' realizes how dangerously alluring the woods are. He realizes that he has 'promises to keep,' that he can not 'sleep' in the face of his societal obligations, and so he shortly turns homeward. 'The people' of the present poem, however, continue to 'look at the sea all day,' seduced by its deep, dark, mysterious depths. Turning their backs on the land world, their world, they have violated their promises; they are asleep to their human responsibilities, as their comparison to the reflected image of a solitary gull suggests. For 'gulls' they surely are."

Peter D. Poland  
*The Explicator* 52.2 (Winter 1994)

Michael Hollister (2015)