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Deconstructing Two Roads: Applying the Psychology of Regret to Resolve the Mystery Surrounding Robert Frost's Most Beloved Poem

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Abstract: In the lifetime anthology of Robert Frost's poetry, one poem consistently stands out as the most beloved and recognizable of his works. To the average reader, for over a hundred years "The Road Not Taken" has engendered images of individuality and the need to avoid following the crowd; this despite clear evidence within the verse that contradicts that reading. Most Frost scholars would agree the poem is the most misunderstood poem in Frost's collection, and the academy has presented several intelligent and deeply introspective alternatives. However, none of these have garnered enough of a consensus to displace the initial misunderstanding. Through an interdisciplinary approach that makes use of the added epistemic approaches of historical research and the psychology of regret, this paper will uncover a hidden creation story for "The Road Not Taken", and through a fulsome review of the poem's origination, reveal a more basic axiom as to the purpose behind Frost's two roads.

Keywords: Robert Frost; T.S. Eliot; Ezra Pound; diverged; modernism; regret

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1. Introduction

In surveys conducted in the United States and around the world, Robert Frost's much-loved poem, "The Road Not Taken" consistently ranks at or near the top for popularity and recognition. Driving that reputation is a supposition that most literary scholars have come to realize is a misinterpretation of the poem's meaning. Frost scholar and author David Orr has stated, "Most readers consider 'The Road Not Taken' to be a paean to triumphant self-assertion ("I took the one less traveled by"), but the literal meaning of the poem's own lines seems completely at odds with this interpretation" (Orr 2016, p. 8). While this misreading is well documented in academic circles, hundreds of thousands of high school English teachers and millions of Madison Avenue marketing dollars have ensured this popular misunderstanding has remained firmly entrenched within the broader public. Literary scholars have offered several alternate readings for the poem, but to date, none have garnered enough of a following to dislodge the original misunderstanding. This is due in large part to the generally accepted restrictions the literary community places on attempts to discern meaning from a piece of literature from sources outside the text. In the case of "TRNT", those limitations have forced blinders upon literary researchers that block out what might otherwise be comparatively straightforward conclusions. By expanding beyond those limitations to an interdisciplinary approach, the research undertaken will be used to enrich the experience of textual inquiry, not replace it.

This paper will incorporate the lenses associated with deep primary source historical inquiry and the discipline of Psychology, specifically the study of regret and disappointment, to frame Robert Frost's state of mind at the time he authored "TRNT". While not abandoning the concept of text-based research, this new viewpoint will produce a novel perspective, one that will point to a more elementary explanation. Aligning Frost's work

from the period with his emotions and reactions of the time, will produce evidence that suggests the answer to the author's "why" can be found in the manifestations of the psychology of regret. Additionally, from within this sub-set of psychological research, the most critical lines driving the misinterpretation of "TRNT" will be measured against a tendency toward counterfactual behavior that is often associated with the psychology of regret. In this context, a close read of "I took the road less traveled by | And that has made all the difference" presents a solution to the ambiguities of the poem, rather than the source of the scholarly debate. It is believed that both the research and the new close reading will support a conclusion that Robert Frost concealed a much more personal motive for crafting "TRNT", one that is perhaps interconnected with the poet's more rudimentary reactions to congruent events.

2. Background

In the spring of 1912, a thirty-eight-year-old Robert Frost made the type of impetuous decision normally associated with younger men. Unhappy with teaching and even less enthused about farming, Frost decided to give up everything, literally sell the farm, and move his family to England to pursue a new vocation. Frost intended to invest the funds received from the sale of the family's Derry, New Hampshire home in himself, and he was prepared to burn through all of it while he made his way to this new life. A very risky proposition on its own, but one made even more pressing by the reality that the funds from the sale of the farm would not last long. From the beginning, it was a race between an almost impossible road to quick commercial success as a working poet and just how long the Frost nest egg would sustain the family while they waited. The risk Frost took to travel to England and fashion a new life was an immense gamble, and one that he was betting the well-being of his entire family on. This key element of the situation Frost created for himself is important for a fulsome understanding of the intensity of emotion that will be evaluated. The force of the potential regret associated with failure for Frost would color the decisions he would make during his sojourn in England.

In the summer of 1914, T. S. Eliot also set out for England, undertaking a journey that would eventually help to refashion the world of poetry as it was then comprised. Connected as they were as hopeful American literary prospects seeking destiny in the same foreign land, the reasons for each to embark on such a journey were far less similar. Eliot went to England to find something of the self he had been in search of, while Frost went there to change careers. Though Frost would leave just a few months after Eliot's arrival, a critical decision point was in the making that would impact the creative development of both writers. That decision point had been fashioned by fellow American author and literary critic Ezra Pound. Pound would try his hand at mentoring both emerging poets in the principles of modernism, anchored in his then-preferred movement of imagism. For Eliot, the choice to accept Pound's tutelage was not a difficult one. Shortly after meeting Ezra Pound, Eliot shared an early version of what would become his breakthrough poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Pound immediately declared that Eliot "...has actually trained himself and modernized himself" (Pound 1971, p. 40). Eliot would go on to proclaim "...I sincerely consider Ezra Pound the most important living poet in the English language" (Eliot 2011, p. 813). This combination produced what may well have been the most successful literary collaboration of all time, culminating in the trailblazing and critically revered epic "The Waste Land". In short, Eliot and Pound traveled down a road to reimagine modern poetry in ways that would shake the very foundations of the art form.

Frost's road took him in a very different direction. In 1913, having just brought out his first publication, *A Boy's Will*, Frost was perilously teetering on the cusp of financial reward. All but one of the thirty-three poems contained within his first book were overtly traditional in form and flushed with lyric qualities. As the predominant money-making poetry of the time was found within the covers of Georgian anthologies, this is not surprising. Much of the verse found within these popular volumes was remarkably similar to Frost's first book,

so the author was essentially providing the market with what it was already buying. The question that arises from this period of Frost's development is to which of these groups, modernist or Georgian, should Frost's work be cataloged. While by the fall of 1913 Frost had thoroughly rejected the tutelage of Ezra Pound and had taken to regular disparagement of modernists such as Eliot, literary historians often disagree which label best applies to Frost's work. In his book, *A History of Modern Poetry*, literary historian David Perkins, for instance, considers Frost "the finest of Georgian poets though American. . ." (Perkins 1994, p. 33). In the same work, Perkins describes Frost as belonging to the second phase of the development of the modernist movement, a period of "Popular Modernism" between 1910 and the end of the First World War (p. 4). This would suggest that, as many others have, Perkins believed that the choice of which road to travel was Frost's to make, and that with one foot in each camp, he might just as easily have discarded his Georgian friends and traveled the road to esteem with Eliot and Pound.

This was also a time when Ezra Pound was pressing hard for Frost to abandon the lyric and traditional form. The break between Frost and Pound would be accelerated by Frost's refusal to adopt the modernist principles as Pound saw them. In a letter to Thomas Mosher in 1913, Frost details a shift from encouragement to intimidation by Pound. "He says I must write something much more like vers libre or he will let me perish of neglect. He really threatens" (Frost 2014, p. 132). By the time of Eliot's arrival in 1914, the relationship between Frost and Pound had moved beyond an artistic split and had begun to morph into one of derision and scorn. Ironically, it was Pound's admiration for other poems Frost had shared, such as the unique and nearly modern "Death of a Hired Man", that roiled Pound to a point of utter frustration. Based on Frost's sense of pride and intrinsic stubbornness, there is little doubt that a conversation between the two regarding Frost's need for immediate financial reward did not occur. It is also very unlikely that Pound would have understood Frost's point anyway, as for him, writing was about a total sacrifice for the art. What Pound never understood, and what Frost likely never admitted, was that the road Frost needed to travel to start his career was a road to commercial success. Corresponding with his friend and former student, John Bartlett, in early 1913, Frost contrasts Pound's guidance with a more immediate need. "He has found me and sent a fierce article to Chicago denouncing a country that neglects a fellow like me. . .All this ought to satisfy me for the time being you would think. But dear dear. The boom is not started yet. And then there is the money question. I am going to run short and have to go to the American Consulate for assisted passage. There is little money ahead" (Frost 2014, p. 98). While Eliot and Pound had chosen an aggressive road to remake the world of poetry in the image of modernism, at this important time in his life Frost's road was oriented to the pressing need for commercial success. While risk aversion was certainly a high priority, we can read in Frost's words to Bartlett a clear understanding of the stakes at play.

The realities in the summer of 1913 were that Frost had a family to feed, had sold his farm back in Derry, New Hampshire to finance his English adventure, and his family would be without means should his gamble to produce a financial reward come up short. For Frost, it was a choice between chasing the esteem and acceptance of the gaggle of innovative modern poets milling about in the UK, and the better economic prospect of continuing to write for the masses. The choice between the two roads Frost presents in the "TRNT" during the spring of 1915 is an uncanny reflection of the same choice the poet made in the summer of 1913. Was the idea for "TRNT" germinating in Frost's mind for the entire intervening two years? Perhaps, but it is more likely that a very important triggering event set him to the work of explaining the choice for the road he took through the writing of "TRNT" two years later. At a time when his career was still in its infant stages, Frost grew bitter over what he perceived as an abandonment by Ezra Pound, and his replacement ad hoc by the newly arrived Eliot. There is evidence of this in his correspondence, and in a very curious letter in verse he wrote about his relationship with Ezra Pound sometime in the summer of 1913. While he never did send the poem-letter to Pound, he did forward a copy to his friend and literary critic F.S. Flint sometime in June of that year (Frost 2014,

p. 118). The first two lines of that stanza speak of a Robert Frost who longed for a kind of acceptance from Pound.

All I asked was that you should hold to one thing
That you considered me a poet.
That was [why] I clung to you
As one clings to a group of insincere friends
For fear they shall turn their thoughts against him
the moment he is out of hearing.
The truth is I was afraid of you

Having been introduced by Pound to the nascent society of modern poets, and after receiving from him an early and significant review for *A Boy's Will*, Frost had reasons to worry over the loss of this important sponsorship. The second half of this stanza would seem to bear that out, when Frost expresses concern that Pound might "turn their thoughts against him". In this instance, Frost refers to the likes of Yeats and Hulme, whose company Frost had come to directly through his relationship with Pound. One interesting aspect of the poem-letter Frost sent to Flint is that while it does not indicate a pattern of Frost turning to verse as an outlet for his emotional frustrations with Pound, it does present a precedent. It is possible that like the ruminating poem-letter stirred by his disintegrating relationship with Pound, containing a poem his friend urged him never to send let alone publish, Frost may not have created "TRNT" without an explicit intention of releasing it to the public. As with the poem-letter, the circumstances around which Frost sent the initial draft of the "TRNT" to his friend, Edward Thomas, are remarkably similar.

Despite Frost's concern about the impact any blowback the break with Pound might have on his still budding career, as early as June 1913, he wrote to Flint, "But I'm blessed if I came all the way to London to be coached in art by the likes of him. He can't teach me anything I really care to know" (Frost 2014, p. 14). Later that fall, Frost would write to John Mosher about what he believed was the final rift. "I am out with Pound pretty much altogether and so I don't see his friend Yeats as I did. I count myself well out however. Pound is an incredible ass and he hurts more than he helps the person he praises" (Frost 2014, p. 152). Adding insult to injury, Pound had promised Frost that he would intervene on his behalf with Harriet Monroe, the publisher of the popular *Poetry* magazine, to ensure Frost's poem "Death of a Hired Man" was included in a summer 1913 edition. Instead, Pound pulled a switch on Frost, and without informing him, arranged for the poem to be brought out by a small New York publication, *The Smart Set*. Frost was furious with Pound and dashed off a scorching letter of rebuke, ultimately going so far as to demand that Pound retrieve the manuscript from the New York publisher and return it to him (Hoffman 2001, p. 27).

By the end of 1913, the two were no longer communicating and the road through Pound's growing society of modern poets was irreconcilably closed. What once had seemed a providential path to having his name stamped alongside those to whom Pound considered the only "true poets" of the era, suddenly that road was no longer an option for Frost. Despite Frost's private turn against Pound in correspondence with friends and supporters, we see in the first two lines of this final stanza of the poem-letter what may be the cause for an even greater disappointment and regret over the break. As Tyler Hoffman observed in his book, *Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry*, "These are not the words of a man unconcerned by the opinions of the 'critical few,' but rather those of a man intent on winning for himself the respect of a modernist literary elite committed to the task of 'making it new" (Hoffman 2001, p. 17). If Frost had simply been using Pound to gain introductions and ensure positive reviews amongst the influential critics of London, which he most certainly was, why then was it so important for Pound to recognize him as a poet? Knowing, as Frost surely did, that for Pound the only poets were modern poets, is this by extension an admission of a desire to be recognized as a modern poet himself? It is perhaps a deliberately suppressed longing to travel down that road with Pound, Eliot, and the other modernists.

3. A Triggering Event

In the June 1915 edition of Harriet Monroe's prestigious *Poetry* magazine, the other major protégé of Ezra Pound did manage to get a poem published. Once again, it was Pound pulling the strings behind the scenes to get Monroe to agree to publish a poem she originally did not like. The poet, of course, was T.S. Eliot, and the poem Pound submitted was the enigmatic and utterly groundbreaking "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Although immediately hailed as the quintessential modern poem by those on the bleeding edge of the modernist movement, many others reacted to this disruptive and deeply contemplative verse much as Monroe had. In "Prufrock" Eliot lays waste to traditional poetics, and in Eliot, Pound finds his man to help soundly break the pentameter. While the exact date Frost sent his draft remains uncorroborated, based upon what remains of the six-letter exchange he had with Thomas over the draft, it can be pieced together that the poem was likely forwarded in March or April of 1915 (Orr 2016, p. 66). While this timeline would seem to eliminate the publication of Eliot's "Prufrock" as a motivation behind Frost picking up his pen in response, the reality is that Eliot's enigmatic poem had been passing through literary circles in London for some time.

As early as the spring of 1914, Eliot's Harvard classmate and fellow poet, Conrad Aiken, had been circulating "Prufrock" and other poems with London editors in the hope of helping his friend get published. As one of the first to have read the original "Prufrock" back at Harvard in 1911, Aiken held Eliot's work in high regard (Crawford 2015, p. 234). Like Frost, Aiken had traveled to England with his wife to work on expanding his emerging career as a poet. While there is no firm documentation of Aiken and Frost having met or spent any time together in London, upon his return to New England in 1915, Frost would cofound The New England Poetry Club with Aiken and fellow poet Amy Lowell. The two were also connected through a web of fellow American authors then toiling in London, so it is hard to imagine they were not at least conversant beforehand. One firm connection between them comes by way of the proprietor of what was, at the time, one of the most significant gathering places for emerging poets in London.

The popular meeting place Poet's Bookshop was run by publisher and poet Harold Monro, and both Aiken and Frost were known to frequent Monro's establishment. In the spring of 1914, Aiken approached Monro about publishing "Prufrock" in his magazine, *Poetry and Drama*. After his first reading, Monro returned it to Aiken, famously responding that the poem was "absolutely insane" (Grant 1967, p. 101). Congruent to Aiken's failed attempt to persuade Monro as to the merits of "Prufrock", Robert Frost was successfully negotiating with him to have four of his poems brought out in the magazine. In the process, Monro and Frost had become close, so much so that in a letter to Sidney Cox in March of 1914, Frost relayed that in lieu of payment for the poems, he was instead planning for Monro to apply part of the royalties to one of the rooms above his bookshop for a week's stay (Frost 2014, p. 191). Fresh off the rejection of the "insane" Eliot poem, Monro would have had much to say about it and its author. Conrad Aiken was also responsible for urging his former classmate to go see Ezra Pound in the late summer of 1914, the results of which Eliot was proud to report to Aiken in September that, "Pound has been on n'est pas plus aimable, and is going to print 'Prufrock' in Poetry and pay me for it" (Eliot 2011, p. 62). As the foreign correspondent for *Poetry* magazine, Ezra Pound was authorized to make such a decision. What he could not control was when editor Harriet Monroe would choose to publish the poem.

Much to Pound's consternation, after sending a copy of "Prufrock" to Monroe in early October of 1914 (Pound 1971, p. 81), the editor would make him wait nine months before including the poem in the June 1915 volume. While very little remains from Harriet Monroe's letters to Ezra Pound, and therefore it is not certain when Ezra Pound was officially notified by her of the issue in which "Prufrock" would be included, in a later letter to Amy Lowell, Pound complains, "And it took me six month's struggle to get her to print Elliot's Prufrock" (Pound 1971, p. 210). This would suggest that Monroe gave Pound word of publication intent somewhere in the March to April period, a timeline that would fit the publication

and distribution requirements of the time. While the blusterous and self-aggrandizing Pound would no doubt have been sharing the impending publication with others from the moment he informed Eliot back in September of 1914, confirmation by Monroe in the spring of 1915 would have sent the promoter in Pound into full communication mode. While "Prufrock" may not have made it into print until June of 1915, the literary community in London, including Robert Frost, would have known it was coming months in advance. For Frost, a man who did not let go of enmities easily, advanced word of Eliot's appearance in *Poetry* through Pound's sponsorship would almost certainly have raised the ire in him. Privately, he may even have felt some degree of melancholy for what might have been had he, rather than Eliot, accepted the tutelage of Pound to move his writing in the direction of modernist precepts. Alas, it was a road he did not take, but if his reaction contained a tinge of regret over a missed opportunity, it would be a fitting response for Frost to have taken up his pen to explain why he did not travel that road with Eliot and Pound.

4. Key Elements of the Psychology of Regret to Be Applied

Much of the recent literature on the psychology of regret acknowledges a difference between the emotions of regret and disappointment. Understanding which of these might apply to Frost's reaction in 1915 is an important step. Psychologist and researcher Marcel Zeelenberg defines these in more depth when he writes, "...regret is assumed to originate from comparisons between the factual outcome and an outcome that might have been had you chosen another action; disappointment is assumed to originate from a comparison between the factual outcome and an outcome that might have been had another state of the world occurred" (Zeelenberg et al. 1998, p. 121). Stated more directly, regret is generally a result of a decision made by the individual, while disappointment is the result of an outcome where the situation is the key determinant of the choice. The results of studies undertaken by Denise R. Beike and colleagues also suggest a rationale behind Frost's level of intensity and the length of his enmity toward Eliot and Pound. "Additionally, a lack of closure regarding the lost opportunity (the nonrepeatable outcome) was associated with more intense regret. Thus, the inability to let go of a lost opportunity appears to have been a significant contributor to regret intensity" (Beike et al. 2008, p. 391). Intensity and the inability to let go will be used to examine the one-sided feud Frost conducted with Eliot and Pound. From his correspondence with others, there is a virulence that seems to go beyond mere disappointment.

Psychologists have likewise split regret into two distinct categories. There is the sense of regret a person feels from inaction relating to an event, and there is that which is experienced as a result of a specific action taken (Zeelenberg et al. 2002, p. 314). Anger is the most common response to action regret. Hostility toward oneself or others for the actions they may have taken is typical for those regretting the result of a decision taken. However, there are personality types for whom it is a challenge to place blame upon themselves, and in times of pending regret, will instead lash out at the role others played in the eventual outcome. Psychologist Daniel Jacobson suggests that those who believe they have suffered a perceived slight are often driven to retaliate (Jacobson 2013, pp. 103–4). This scenario might ignite what Daniel Kahneman describes as "hot regret", or a sentiment he suggests has a blazing, intense quality to it (Kahneman 2012, pp. 391–94). Psychologist Carolyn Price adds what she describes as "bitter regret" to the discussion, which she states is an "especially ruminative" form of regret (Price 2020, p. 153). This, Price supposes, leads the subject to the belief that they have been deprived of something they rightly deserved, leaving them worse off than before the action.

A defined fear of failure can also play a role in the psychology of regret. In a study performed by a group of Dutch psychologists, their results indicated that there are two components to a fear of failure, finding that, "it can lead people to try to undo the effects of their regretted choice, after the decision is made...Second, it can affect people's choices before the decision is made, when they anticipate the regret they may feel later" (Zeelenberg et al. 1996, p. 148). It is the latter of these two elements, also known as regret aversion, that

will play an important role in a key decision Frost would take that would eventually spur the writing of "TRNT".

5. The Application of the Psychology of Regret and Disappointment

Following his decision in 1913 to avoid the modernist path, Frost appeared to conduct a one-sided feud with Eliot and Pound. Frost scholar Jeffrey Hart speaks to this when he contends, "In his poems, Frost conducted a long-running war against T.S. Eliot. . ." (Hart 2012, p. 10). Frost's own words on Pound and Eliot would seem to support Hart's assertion, when he wrote to his daughter Lesley to complain, "From Pound down to Eliot, they have striven for distinction by a show of learning, Pound in Old French, Eliot in forty languages. They quote and you try to see if you can place the quotation" (Parini 2015, p. 64). Frost's derision of them and other modern writers of the age at times suggests a deep-rooted jealousy, perhaps born of frustration. Much of the recent literature on the psychology of regret acknowledges a difference between the emotions of regret and disappointment. Understanding which of these might apply to Frost's reaction in 1915 is another important step.

The application of Zeelenberg's definitions to Frost's decision in 1913 would at first seem to suggest disappointment as the emotion engendered, as the financial condition of the Frost family negated any other option. Exposed as he was to the Georgian poets of the era, and more importantly to the wildly successful Georgian anthologies flying off the shelves at bookstores while he was in London, Frost may have been disinclined to experiment with radically different forms of verse. These anthologies were selling as many as 15,000 copies by the time of the 5th edition, while in contrast, Eliot's first edition of "The Waste Land" sold less than 500 copies. For Frost, the need to reach "the general reader who buys books in the thousands" far outweighed the chance to be recognized as "caviar to the crowd" (Frost 2014, p. 154). It is evident from Frost's experimentation within the confines of traditional form that there was some level of desire on his part to be a groundbreaker of sorts, but circumstances of the time dictated a more practical path forward. This would put Frost's reaction into the disappointment category, as there was no real option. What causes pause to this straightforward conclusion is the intensity of Frost's reaction to Eliot and Pound following his decision in 1913, and to the triggering event of 1915.

As Beike suggests, intensity and the inability to let go would perfectly describe the one-sided feud Frost conducted with Eliot and Pound. From his correspondence with others, there is a virulence that seems to go beyond mere disappointment. That by 1915, two years after the decision on the direction his poetics would take, the resentment he harbored was still in full bloom suggests that Frost had not yet experienced closure over his decision. Considering that it was not until very late in his life that a small reconciliation with Eliot would take place, and even then, at Eliot's instigation, would support the idea that it would be decades before the intensity of Frost's reaction would allow him to let go. Eliot was never the real target of Frost's enmity, however. It is more likely that T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were simply caught up in Frost's counterfactual behavior designed to deflect.

Zeelenberg provides an excellent summary of this type of counterfactual thinking when he states, "Counterfactual thinking involves mentally mutating one or more aspects of a past event. It includes thoughts in which current reality is changed into what might, could, would, or should have been" (Zeelenberg et al. 1998, p. 118). To show how this description fits within the framework of Frost's poem, one needs only examine the final stanza, placing a special emphasis on the controversial two lines that bring the poem to a close.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

At the end of this stanza, we read what is perhaps Frost's manifestation of Zeelenberg's notion of "mentally mutating" a past event. Though by 1915 Robert Frost was starting to experiment with more innovative poetics, such as the use of blank verse or narrative forms, these were not necessarily found along a road less traveled. When one considers his first publication, *A Boy's Will*, published around the time of Frost's decision in 1913, the accuracy of Frost traveling "the road less traveled" is even more dubious. It would seem to represent a model of counterfactual thinking on its own, as the traditional reading of "I took the more difficult, less traveled path" does not connect with the reality of Frost's published work at the time. If we assume Frost's two roads were reflective of the road he chose and the one he did not, Eliot, Pound, and the other modernists clearly had better qualifications to claim the less-traveled road. This type of counterfactual narrative was not uncommon for Frost, as while he did not hold on to it for long, the first origination story Frost delivered around "TRNT" was that it was simply about walks in the woods he took with friend and fellow writer, Edward Thomas. Frost would often adjust his explanations over the intent or perceived meaning of his poems to the audience he was addressing, responding with complexity to academic or learned groups while reverting to home-spun simplicity when addressing others.

The first of the origination stories surrounding the birth of "TRNT" is documented in several letters Frost exchanged with Edward Thomas in the summer of 1915. After forwarding what was perhaps the first known copy of the poem, he solicits Thomas' opinion. Responding to Thomas's first reply, Frost suggests that the poem is about Thomas himself, and is simply, and perhaps unbelievably, about walks the two would take together and the indecision Thomas would exhibit over which path they should have taken. Was the explanation as easy as that? If Thomas were the inspiration for "TRNT", it would seem more likely that the emphasis would have been a reflection on the indecision he often presented to his friend Frost over whether to focus on writing poetry or stick to the fiction and literary criticism that was then paying his bills. What is clear from Thomas' responses is that he did not see himself within the poem. Responding to a second letter from Frost suggesting that he missed the mark on his interpretation, Thomas wrote "You have got me again over the Path not taken & no mistake . . . I doubt if you can get anybody to see the fun of the thing without showing them & advising them which kind of laugh they are to turn on". (Orr 2016, p. 66). Thomas, at least, just did not get the connection. In support of this idea, David Orr reminds us that ". . .even Thomas needed explicit instructions—indeed, six entire letters—in order to appreciate the series of double games played. . ." (Orr 2016, p. 66). Considering that Thomas was one of the more exceptional literary thinkers of his time, one can understand why Frost was unable to push this weakly constructed narrative on his friend. However, a bigger question might be why he wanted to do so in the first place. What was the motive behind Frost sending his friend Edward Thomas the first issuance of "TRNT", with no other correspondence or words of instruction? If, as suggested, Frost had written the poem with a veiled personal meaning locked inside, it would seem a prudent move for him to send his friend a copy without commentary, if only to see if Thomas would be able to decipher it. Along with his reputation as a reliable literary critic, Thomas was as informed on Frost's personal opinions regarding Ezra Pound and the modernists as anyone would have been. Had Thomas spotted the connection between the two roads and Frost's personal decision in 1913, it is conceivable that "TRNT" may have met the same fate as the author's poem-letter excoriating Pound.

Within the letters the two men exchanged, in addition to being unable to convince Thomas of the walks together in the woods origin, Frost makes a remarkable confession. Immediately after writing that he had never been sorry for anything, Frost admits, "I may have been sorry for having given a certain kind of people a chance at me: I have passionately regretted exposing myself" (Frost 2014, p. 321). This is a very rare self-insight by Frost, and was given to the man he once suggested was as close to a brother as he had ever had. Frost trusted Thomas implicitly, and if there were to be a confession regarding the real origination story by Frost, it most certainly would have been to Thomas. The irony

cannot be overlooked that this admission of regret comes within a sequence of letters in which the topic is primarily "TRNT". Nor should it be discounted that the letter in question was written on 26 June 1915—the very same month as the release of Eliot's "Prufrock" in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine.

Counterfactual thinking, consequent to a sense of regret for not choosing the road that led T.S. Eliot to instant modernist stardom, explains part of the ambiguity of "TRNT". What is left is the mystery surrounding the opening to the final stanza. Lines one and two move the speaker ahead in time. Not that he is older, but rather the speaker is predicting what he will be saying "ages and ages hence". The sigh in line one has been the subject of a great deal of speculation as to Frost's intent. In one of the six letters to friend and critic Edward Thomas about the poem's meaning, Frost wrote that it was "a mock sigh, a hypo-critical for the fun of the things" (Frost 2014, p. 321). Once again, as with so many of Frost's explanations around "TRNT", this is a difficult thread to imagine. As David Orr explains, "One of the essential elements of a parody is that it is recognized as such: a parody that is too obscure has failed its basic purpose" (Orr 2016, p. 81). How should the sigh be read through our new lens? First, one must take the leap and understand that this stanza has nothing to do with what happened in the first three stanzas. This stanza is no longer about the decision the speaker made—it is about what he is going to say about it somewhere far off in the future. If we accept the premise that the counterfactual delivered at the close of the poem is what he intends to say, regardless of the truth, the sigh in line one takes on a whole new texture.

With this reading, we also solve the mystery of the apparent contradictions in "TRNT", as there are two very distinct parts to the poem. In the first three stanzas, we have a telling of the difficult choice that was made to continue traveling the road to commerce rather than divert down the road to esteem. In the final stanza, the speaker lets us know that he is not going to admit he made that choice. In fact, by the time he wrote "TRNT", Frost had already begun to push the mutated narrative of how innovative his poetics were to reviewers and critics, offering up fragmented theories of innovation and urging those same reviewers to write about them. Frost would spend a good deal of his time during the years after his initial success with the very lyrical *A Boy's Will*, convincing or cajoling editors, reviewers, and members of the literary community that he was much more complex than he seemed. For example, in a letter from July of 1913, we find Frost working friend and critic Thomas Mosher for a review of *North of Boston* that would reflect his supposed complexity. "At least I am sure I can count on you to give me credit for knowing what I am about. You are not going to make the mistake that Pound makes that my simplicity is that of an untutored child. I am not undesigning" (Frost 2014, p. 131). As in Zeelenberg's study, the results appear to confirm the idea that Frost was working to manipulate perceptions of his early work, when he concludes that the impact of regret can cause some to attempt to undo the results of a decision (Zeelenberg et al. 1996, p. 146). Once again, we find in psychological studies of current times results that can be used for insight into Frost's actions of a century earlier.

Returning to the psychology of regret and disappointment as it has been examined here, line two of the final stanza could indicate that Frost may not have seen his situation as unchangeable, at least in the beginning. Frost might have been looking ahead with an understanding that he could still lay claim to traveling the road to esteem one day once his financial situation had improved. A reading of the line "Somewhere ages and ages hence" could be Frost stating that while it may not have been true when he wrote the piece, that he took the road less traveled, in the future he would lay claim to it. The future opportunity principle applied within the psychology of regret indicates that the sensation of regret is less severe when it is viewed as still a possibility at some future date (Beike et al. 2008, p. 385). Perhaps Frost believed that at some point he would have an opportunity to travel the road to esteem Pound had urged him to take in 1913. While possible, the speaker in "TRNT" would seem to shoot this idea down earlier in the poem, when in lines four and five of the third stanza he states, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, | I doubted if I

should ever come back". Yet, deep in the back of his mind, Frost may well have harbored thoughts of a reconciliation with the coterie of modern poets whose company he enjoyed when first introduced in London.

6. Conclusions

Limiting an analysis of "TRNT" to the text is a narrow guidance that produces contradictions and misinterpretation of the poem. It is the source of most of the questions that today's literary experts labor to answer. Did Frost's speaker take "the road less traveled by" or will he just say he did "somewhere ages and ages hence?" Was it less traveled, or had both roads been worn "equally the same?" These and other questions have been debated within the discipline of literary studies for over a hundred years, and, lacking some miraculous discovery of a long-lost explanation from the Frost archives, will likely remain so for another century and beyond. However, if one moves outside the epistemic boundaries of the literature and explores Frost's relationships, personality traits, and frame of mind through a lens of psychology and a deeper historical inquiry, potential answers to these questions can be found. Frost's emotional reaction in 1915 to the sudden success of T. S. Eliot, a success made possible through the efforts of the short-lived Frost mentor and would-be foil Ezra Pound, heightened a sense of regret over his decision in 1913. A corresponding increase in the intensity of that regret can be foreseen through an analysis that incorporates the psychology of that emotion. Brought on by Eliot's sudden success, the sense of finality of a road no longer open to Frost simply heightened the regret that might have accompanied his earlier decision. In their study, psychologists Bieke, Markham, and Karadogan found that "Regret should, therefore, be most intense when people perceive limited opportunities to remedy undesired outcomes but cannot suspend their ruminations about how those outcomes could (and should) have been better" (Beike et al. 2008, p. 389). Ruminating over a long period, with little closure, would help to explain Frost's mysterious and long-held enmity toward Eliot and Pound, a hostility not even the prickly Pound deserved.

Clearing the ambiguities and contradictions found through close study of the text of "TRNT" is made possible when the catalyst that sparked its authorship is examined as closely as the text. Though at first disappointed that he could not travel the road to modernist acclaim and innovation with Pound and the emerging modernists of London, after being replaced upon that road by T. S. Eliot, a sense of disappointment became tinged with a distinct bitterness. When Eliot was immediately celebrated as the quintessential modern poet with his very first poem published through his collaboration with Pound, disappointment morphed into a deeper sense of regret and anger. If the poem is seen as a vehicle for Frost to provide a general explanation of the choice he made in 1913, hidden perhaps by enigmatic poetics so that, as he confessed to close friend Louis Untermeyer, "...not a half dozen people can tell you who was hit and where he was hit by my Road Not Taken", the reader can easily imagine those he had "hit" were Eliot and Pound (Frost 2014, p. 351). Despite the many deep and speculative textual evaluations of "TRNT", there is a very real possibility that Frost simply wrote the poem as an explanation in verse of the decision he made in 1913, or perhaps even as a counterfactual pronouncement to assuage the jealousy and regret he felt over his replacement's success. Though perhaps disappointing for literary purists who enjoy the work of attempting to solve the seemingly deliberate riddles within the "TRNT", the actual origin story may not be all that complicated. Jealous of the amazing poetic treasures found by Eliot and Pound at the end of a road Frost himself had been offered, "TRNT" may, as the title of the poem pointedly suggests, be nothing more than an outlet for the author's ruminations and regret over the road he did not take.

7. Materials and Methods

This paper utilized an interdisciplinary approach to the research presented, drawing upon the epistemologies of history, psychology, and literary studies.

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