



## “Biosthetics” in Robert Francis’s *Traveling in Concord*

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the presence and action of a multi-moded, environmentally-tuned participatory art form, or “biosthetics,” in Robert Francis’s tragically unpublished book, *Traveling in Concord*. The article seeks to introduce readers to Francis and argues that, given current concerns over economic and environmental devastation, his book (a product of post-WWII industrial “progress”) should be published and read in the twenty-first century. A marginal but prophetic twentieth-century American author, Francis lived for most of his life at or below the poverty line outside Amherst, Massachusetts.*

It is difficult to exhume a manuscript such as *Traveling in Concord* because to do so requires familiarity with its author, and its author remains as obscure as the book he wrote but never published. “Elusiveness,” observes Andrew Stambuk, “is a hallmark of Robert Francis” (*The Man* 7). Robert Francis (1901-1987) was born in Upland, Pennsylvania, but “became a New Englander” at the age of ten when he moved with his mother, Ida May, and his Baptist minister father, Ebenezer, to Dorchester, Massachusetts, where his father became assistant pastor at the Clarendon Street Church in Boston (*Trouble* 148). In 1926, Francis moved with his family to Amherst, with two Harvard degrees to his name (a bachelor’s in history and master’s in education), but he soon discovered that teaching did not suit his shy, introspective nature and that Harvard’s “great gift” to him had been a “negative one” (*Trouble* 183). Before leaving home in 1932 to teach violin lessons and labor as a live-in odd-job man for elderly Amherst widows, Francis resided for six years with his father—a period he describes as “a little disgraceful” but also as a “second boyhood” that granted him “emotional equilibrium” (*Trouble* 197). This equilibrium grew from Francis’s gravitation toward writing and nature. From his secluded writer’s “bailiwick” (three private rooms upstairs in the parsonage), he gradually recognized that the woods and “wilderness at the back door” began to grow “more luminous and alluring” and that he had become “a nature observer in a rudimentary way, a sunbather, a man of peace opposed to war, even something of a poet” (*Trouble* 189). Though he drifted from Baptist theology (while remaining close to his father), over the arc of his nearly ninety years Francis appears to have exchanged devotion to institutionalized religion and education for a homespun, hands-on outlook achieved in his one-man academy of the outdoors, a practical philosophy that fused the art of living in close company with the earth and the habit of literary creation.

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Francis's obscurity, and by extension his manuscript's obscurity, resulted partly from his choices, partly from circumstances dealt to him. His well-documented thirty-year association with Robert Frost shows him eager to receive technical direction from the elder poet in the 1930's but, later, even more eager to distance himself from the American icon. On March 14, 1932, Francis's journal records, "I have not yet met Robert Frost. But I feel his influence in anticipation"—then three short years later, as if he's already straining away, "Robert Frost has pulled my orbit a little nearer his. . . . But the stuff in me is still my own stuff" (*Travelling* 10; *Frost: A Time* 75). Louis Untermeyer and other Frost devotees labeled Francis a Frost copycat (given the two poets' Amherst residence and nearly identical names and writing styles) and effectively banished Francis from the national literary scene but did not prevent him from flourishing as a "local poet," as Francis dubs himself in *Pot Shots at Poetry*, a poet "confined to that locality, unknown beyond it" (*Pot Shots* 218). "Though verbal echoes are few," Isabel Foster observes in 1936, comparing the poetry of the two Roberts, the "influence of Robert Frost, his humor and further range lacking, is to be seen in every thicket and field of this land, not far west or northwest of Boston" (11). The final time Francis and Frost met in 1959 (at Francis's home, Fort Juniper), four years before Frost's death, Frost brought his publisher, Alfred Edwards from Holt, to make Francis an offer on a book contract—a move Francis anticipated by announcing that his book, *The Orb Weaver*, would be published by Wesleyan University Press. "Oh, why did you do that?" Frost exclaimed on his way out then muttered, "Too late, too late" (*Frost: A Time* 47). The independent spirit that allowed Francis to turn down an offer from one of America's most recognizable poetry giants in favor of a local publisher drew the attention, letters, and support of other noteworthy authors, including Marianne Moore, Donald Hall, James Merrill, James Dickey, Richard Wilbur, and May Sarton. Even the immortal Allen Ginsberg, three years before he died, remembered meeting Francis and feeling favorably inclined toward his poetry (Meyers 451).

Francis's need for independence, a life balanced "between people and no people, between literary people and plain people," produced for him a kind of guiding eco-trinity listed in his autobiography as "nature," "leisure," and "solitude" (*Trouble* 18). According to his journal, his extraordinary solitude was such that frequently he would experience periods when for three consecutive days he wouldn't contact or speak to another person (*Travelling* 75). For company and inspiration, he adopted an organic "coat of arms," the common pasture juniper (*Travelling* 56). Francis named his home, Fort Juniper, for the hardy evergreen after having his home built with an insurance payment collected from his stepmother following his father's death. "Somehow I fitted into the ecology," he writes, explaining his identification with his surroundings and the resilient shrub. "I was part of the unspectacular landscape" (*Trouble* 30-31).

For three years before moving to Fort Juniper, Francis lived in a rented millworker's shack he refers to as "the old house by the brook"—without electricity or running water, but in the company of a menagerie of wild interlopers. One letter written in 1937 to unidentified "fellows" in "New York apartments" preserves vivid accounts of invading ants "Egyptian in their persistence and cunning"; the bones from a skunk trapped in his cellar; tribes of mice that infest his sofa; nesting phoebes, pheasants, great blue herons, and hummingbirds that come "every day to the trumpetvine"; wasps on windowpanes that move with "the exaggerated slowness of a slow-moving picture"; and, beneath a flight of unused stairs, "pyramids of sawdust—reminders of the mysterious wood borers that work there." At the letter's

terminus, the philosophical dissident in Francis emerges. "It sometimes comes over me what a small part of creation man is," he writes. "Perhaps the insects in this hulking house are aware of me as of some arbitrary and inscrutable Allah or Jehovah" (Letter). Similar contemplative language pervades Francis's published autobiographical writings. "Outdoors," he reminisces, borrowing the rogue phraseology of Walt Whitman, "I had the whole landscape to explore—country road, wood road, wood path, pasture, meadow, marsh, stream, hill. I could go wherever and whenever I wished. I strolled, I sauntered, I rambled. I sunbathed and water-bathed. I loafed and invited my soul" (*Trouble* 195-96, 197). This life of freedom had its price, however. For decades, Francis subsisted at or far below poverty levels. His most soul-straining economic straits occurred during the time he composed *Traveling in Concord*. In 1953, for example, if we factor in inflation and official poverty threshold statistics for 2009 (about \$10,830.00 for a household of one), Francis lived on a meager 2009 equivalent of \$2,829.00 annually! To compensate, Francis found a luxurious liberation in stripping his life down to the bare essentials. He became a connoisseur of country walks and avoided eating fish, flesh, and fowl while resisting unnecessary amusements and technologies—preferring to drive a 1931 Chevrolet in 1948; to postpone learning to ride a bicycle until after his forty-first birthday; and, on returning from a year in Rome at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1958, to allow his telephone to remain unconnected for eleven years until his health required him to reconnect it for safety reasons.

While openly reclusive and progressively backward, Francis did not go completely unnoticed and unrewarded, nor did his artistic wellspring run dry. He was named Phi Beta Kappa Poet at Tufts and Harvard. He received The Shelley Memorial Award, Brandeis University's Creative Arts Award, The New England Poetry Club's Golden Rose, the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Prix de Rome, an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship, and a fellowship in the Academy of American Poets. In 1970, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst made him doctor of humane letters, *honoris causa*. He taught regularly at the Chautauqua Writers Institute and, in his later years, was invited to give readings around the country. In all, Francis published nine books of poetry of varying sizes (some self-published with independent presses), a novel, two books of satirical essays, criticism on Dickinson and Frost, a memoir about his association with Frost, his autobiography, and over 160 nature-centered essays in *Forum*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and other magazines. In 1976, the University of Massachusetts Press published *Robert Francis: Collected Poems 1936-1976*, and in 1986, Rowan Tree Press published *Travelling in Amherst: A Poet's Journal 1930-1950*. After his death, *Painted Bride Quarterly* produced a special Robert Francis issue (volume 35), which included original poetry and a tribute from Robert Bly. *Late Fire Late Snow*, a posthumous collection of poetry, appeared in 1993, also from the University of Massachusetts Press, whose Juniper Prize for fiction and poetry was created in Francis's honor and is still awarded today. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Francis became the subject of a growing number of scholarly studies at various graduate institutions, including the University of Bordeaux, New York University, and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. On July 14, 1987, Francis fell at home and was taken to Northampton's Cooley Dickinson Memorial Hospital, where he died. According to his wishes, he was cremated and had his ashes scattered at various locations, including Emily Dickinson's grave.

Those unfamiliar with Francis might ask why his work remains obscure in the company of more noticeable twentieth-century authors of "the middle generation," as Eric Haralson calls them, writers such as Roethke, Jarrell, Lowell, Bishop, and Berryman (1). A retrospective of reactions to Francis's work

suggests he may have been cut down in the cross-fire of contradictory critical appraisals and, at times, spun around in the current of cultural politics. Post-Depression era assessments of Francis's work are mostly laudatory, employing language that anticipates the pre-environmentalist vision of the quiet artist who could be called the Ursa Minor of American ecopoetics. In her reading of *Stand with Me Here*, Francis's 1936 breakout collection, Isabel Foster detects a "complete absorption in the joys of country life" and a "conviction that strength still lies in contact with the earth" (11). In reference to the same volume, William Rose Benét highlights Francis's "remarkable gift for identifying himself with natural things," the poetic gems that "reveal from original and attractive angles that collaboration between Man and Nature" (30). However, evaluations of Francis's verse become mixed and muddy in the World War II and Vietnam years. Andrew Stambuk's incisive "Learning to Hover: Robert Frost, Robert Francis, and the Poetry of Detached Engagement" highlights the moment Louis Untermeyer, in *The Yale Review*, famously "animadvert[s]" against Francis's aping of Frost (535). Speaking of Francis's poems, Untermeyer says, "They are admirably neat, they are playfully philosophical, they blend observation with imagination. But we know who wrote them first" (345). For every critic who accuses Francis of posing in a Robert Frost bear suit, there are others, such as David Graham, who detect the "shade of Dickinson" in Francis's work, or those, such as Alan Sullivan, who see moments in Francis's poems where "the ghost of Dickinson seems to peer over his shoulder" (86). Reviewers who saw Francis's predecessors influencing and therefore downgrading his work may have unjustly cast him as second-rate, along with those who provided cool reactions to his homoerotic meditations in *A Certain Distance*, published in 1976. Jeff Morris labels *A Certain Distance* an "ill-conceived project" characterized by "embarrassing sentimentality and simpering obliquity" (59). In reference to the same collection, Rudy Kikel asks, "Is Francis subtly homophobic?" while Alan Sullivan, years later, casts Francis as a "boy-smitten old queen" (Kikel; Sullivan par. 39). In his autobiography, however, Francis answers such misreadings, clarifying that his homoerotic verse did not constitute cultural flag-waving but personal striving for inner balance with himself and his natural surroundings. "Though eros might pervade my thought, it did not usurp control of my actions," he records. "I was above all determined to have . . . a good life in which no single element however urgent would dominate and distort the rest" (*Trouble* 211). Lacking a convenient category for Francis, and perhaps blinded by canonical bias, these and other critics may have subconsciously traded superficial summary for deep study and blocked Francis from receiving the attention his life and accomplishments deserve.

Others might ask that if Francis was marginalized—even unfairly—why publish manuscripts such as *Traveling in Concord* now? The answer to this question might be simply that extraordinary artists, especially those whose lives constitute unadvertised but heroic struggles in the face of opposition, are worthy of greater attention. Why did Francis persist when he received little financial reward or recognition for his efforts? A modest but growing volume of scholarship on Francis suggests that the poet-hermit of Amherst is someone scholars are beginning to see as worthy of more serious consideration. In the *Painted Bride Quarterly* dedicated to Francis, Fran Quinn argues that Francis's "lack of recognition should be rectified" (5). In 1981, David Young notes the "troublesome fact" that at eighty years old Francis was "so little known" (62). In *The Encyclopedia of American Poetry*, Karen Stein calls for a "reappraisal and reevaluation of the work of Robert Francis" (222). Robert Shaw agrees in his extensive entry on Francis in *American Writers*, saying that Francis's work "has yet to receive much close critical attention" (90). With literary professionals calling for more attention to Francis, I would argue

that now, the outset of the twenty-first century, is the most timely and valuable moment to bring Francis's books back, perhaps with the old revisited anew and, in the case of *Traveling in Concord*, some of the old visited for the first time. Those diligent enough to ply the Francis archives find insight tuned to current fields of ecocritical study. For example, Allan Burns, writing in 2002, sees in Francis's "Altitude," a meditation on a flock of crows and a hawk spiraling into the sky, a distinct "Thoreauvian ethos of individualism and withdrawal" in the speaker's "identification of the hawk's altitudinarian trajectory with the very source of wildness and preservation" (215). Elsewhere, anthologists and poets have joined the researchers in summoning Francis back from the dark corners of minor-author status. McGraw-Hill's *Twentieth Century American Poetry* includes a section on Francis, and a more generous helping of Francis's work appears in the second volume of *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*. Award-winning poet Wes McNair includes an entire chapter on Francis in his book *Mapping the Heart: Reflections on Place and Poetry*, and poet Stuart Frieber, in "Visiting Robert Francis with My Son," revels in the "sweet sweet time everyone / reports having in [Francis's] company" (lines 14-15). One of two books on Francis published in 2011, Andrew Stambuk's well-wrought *The Man Who Is and Is Not There*, approaches Francis's poems as "eco-critical inquiries" (146). Francis's poems, Stambuk argues, "fuse pastoral aesthetics with a delight in natural appearances that marks his kinship with Emerson and Thoreau" while at the same time speaking "to contemporary concerns about homophobia, global despoliation, and human suffering inflicted by war" (3, 25-26). As Stambuk suggests—and the proliferation of these other studies suggests—Francis's work arches from twentieth century historicity to current twenty-first century global challenges.

Such subterranean rumblings of scholarly curiosity about the unassuming sage of Amherst classify Francis as an author whose unpublished writing is ready for re-discovery. Publishing a manuscript such as *Traveling in Concord* now would provide a portal back to Francis's world view of simplicity and conservation. If nothing else, this hibernating treatise on nature and the nature of the self, if awakened, might help contemporary readers extricate themselves from the web of wires, step down from the post-human pulpit of concrete and steel, and see where they may have gone wrong.

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*Traveling in Concord* was the result of Francis's extended publishing dearth, a time he referred to as his "crisis" years. This period stretched roughly from the appearance of his third collection, *The Sound I Listened For*, in 1943 to his comeback book, *The Orb Weaver*, in 1960. During this phase, Francis appears to have undergone a personal and artistic struggle, wrestling with himself as to whether he should write poetry or prose. Two aborted novels, one completed novel, and *Traveling in Concord* arose from this inner furor, which would indicate that he felt prose was the answer to his publishing drought. "The poet is a spider, forever spinning," he notes in his journal. "The novelist is a caterpillar, eating, eating great slices of life. But the poet spins his poetry out of himself, out of next to nothing" (*Travelling* 25). A journal entry from August 1952, the "low point" that generated *Traveling in Concord*, reveals the particulars of Francis's fight with himself:

*Up till almost the present day I have preferred to be known as a writer (prose and poetry) rather than simply as a poet. I have resisted letting poetry become central in my life—except*

during the hours when I was actually writing or trying to write it. Instead of letting poetry suffer the stresses and strains of all my experience, I have let it stay about as it has been and used prose to express whatever poetry did not seem suited for. But I have had a change of mind recently. I am now trying to devote myself to poetry as unstintedly as mystic to God or as lover to beloved.

I am poor, I am unpublished, I am obscure. If I devote myself to what is most important (to me and to others) to do, my poverty and obscurity will not greatly trouble me, will not perhaps seem like failure at all. It is not that prose is ignoble or unimportant; it is only that poetry is nobler and more important. And more difficult. Since the likelihood of winning any of the prizes is small, I might as well aim at the great targets. (Travelling 74)

Later, in his 1980 book of prose, *The Satirical Rogue Rides Again*, Francis uses tongue-in-cheek self-reflexive humor to settle the debate in his short essay "Wordman." "So let me be called a wordman," he declares, "and let what I write be called word arrangements. Though this or that critic might deny that I am a poet, . . . he could scarcely deny that I worked with words. As wordman I trust I would not threaten or irritate anyone" (*Pot Shots* 166). For reasons unknown, nobody would read a word of the American Wordman's most absorbing and original prose rumination, *Traveling in Concord*. Francis barely mentions it himself in his autobiography, listing the table of contents, and remarking how Curtis Brown, the literary agent that published *The Sound I Listened For* with MacMillan, failed to place it anywhere. Without adding further details, Francis merely refers to it as an "exploration of the resources for 'wide living in small scope—the limited man's limitlessness, the obscure man's power, the fearful man's security, the poor man's wealth'" (*Trouble* 82).

A tragically forgotten masterpiece, *Traveling in Concord* remains an anomaly—but one that deserves an audience, especially in a cultural era notorious for technological overdevelopment and wasteful consumption of natural resources. Anachronistic in tone and substance, *Traveling in Concord* employs stark Thoreauvian directness and philosophical sublimity to produce a work of modernist prose ideally suited for a postmodern audience, a child of the twentieth century whose distinctive nineteenth-century ethos is ripe for twenty-first century adoption. In many ways, it functions as the twentieth century's lost Ur-text on experiential art.[1] Unflinching in tone and style, it anticipates postmodernist skepticism toward over-mechanization in the latter third of the twentieth century and depicts the ultimate artistic experience as a participatory act, an aesthetics of first-hand interaction in the web of all living things. In some respects, it joins the American tradition of the "literature of voluntary simplicity" in which Lawrence Buell identifies the "aesthetics of relinquishment" (156). Generally, *Traveling in Concord* contemplates two areas: art and life. And yet, beneath this seemingly simple focus, a complex and diverse commentary on life forms, art forms, and the ongoing processes and interrelationships shared by all things biotic, abiotic, and aesthetic informs Francis's project, producing a reading experience like no other.

*Traveling in Concord*, through sparse language and subtle transitions, fuses aesthetics and biocentrism to create an experiential art form: *biosthetics*. In contrast to Joseph Meeker's concept of the "bioesthetic,"[2] Francis's biosthetics differentiates between the poet who appropriates landscapes to produce poetry as a commodity (which Alison Byerly might call "picturesque"),[3] and the biosthete

whose writing exists *as a part of* the grander enterprise of participating first-hand in the action of the earth's abundant life forms. To the traditional nature poet, the written poem is the end for which nature is the means. To Francis's biosthete (or "traveler," as he refers to the reader in his manuscript), the endless activity of engaging the earth's teeming varieties of life *involves but is not limited to* the creation of literary texts. Biosthetics, then, becomes Francis's way of studying how written texts connect to nature's texts, and how the human presence acts as philosophical filter and/or magnifying glass in the ongoing formula of art.

Ironically, a biosthetic reading of *Traveling in Concord* remains just that—a reading. In attempting to study how Francis de-privileged textual production and simultaneously elevated the status of daily interaction with the earth's organisms, we can only read what he wrote, though we are still free to do what he did. With this admitted textual limitation in mind, however, *Traveling in Concord* remains a fascinating study of four interrelated modes that make an art form of interacting with the endless cycles of life on earth. Those modes are *notation, observation, reflection, and participation* (which culminate in the pinnacle stage, *transformation*). Biosthetics, in this sense, argues that writing about nature is not enough. For Francis's biosthete, or "traveler," writing about nature provides a fraction of the total life-as-art experience. According to Francis, in order to obtain a higher level of appreciation for the artistic wonder of all life, the writer must also think, observe, interact, and change in conjunction with all art and life forms around him.

Immediately, those who read *Traveling in Concord* encounter its disarming ahistorical outlook. Its future-primitive feeling casts it as a universalist genre that transcends time in its effort to reconcile a more anthropocentric past with a more eco- and biocentric future American culture.[4] Chapter ten, "On Living outside the Twentieth Century," entices readers to flee the twentieth century's age of mechanization, which, Francis observes, forces people to live "thinly all over the globe" rather than assume a local nineteenth-century devotion to harmony between human and non-human life forms. At times, Francis employs earth-centered images to advance his argument. "The present is sand," he writes; "the past is sedimentary rock. . . . The present is always over-populated. If I live in the past, I have all the space of the past at my disposal" (*Traveling* 107, 109-10). Generally speaking, Francis implies throughout his book that the organic art of living broadly in one's narrowly defined temporal constraints can contribute to the establishment of a biocentric aesthetic, or "biosthetic." [5]

Plain-spoken and not inclined to multiply abstractions throughout his book, Francis addresses the interaction between human and non-human life forms and how that interaction can constitute art as experience, rather than art as object. In chapter thirteen, "Inconspicuous Flowers," he introduces readers to his habit of using a "hand lens three-quarters of an inch in diameter and of the magnifying power of nine" to look at wildflowers (*Traveling* 135). While he proceeds with the expertise and specificity of a seasoned botanist, he emphasizes that his activity centers on the artistic pleasures of observation and not scientific categorization. "For pure flower pleasure," he notes, "the naked eye is generally thought sufficient. But my own use of the lens is frankly esthetic. . . . The scientific and the esthetic should and do stimulate and enhance each other. The difference is a matter of emphasis, and my emphasis, for the present at least, is on the direct pleasure to the eye" (*Traveling* 136). Then the chapter sedately ushers the reader through a magnified art gallery bursting with common wildflowers

whose markings Francis catalogs in delicious detail: “the light-lavender flowers of the spiked lobelia”; “the sheep sorrel with its amazing Christmas-tree balls, red, gold-dusted, glistening”; “the orange hawkweed which the lens makes into a bonfire of gold and vermilion”; and “spotted wintergreen” whose “twenty tan anthers” radiate “like handles on a helmsman’s wheel” and whose stamens “are precise and prim to the point of being funny” (*Traveling* 139-41). Here, the action of Francis’s participatory art form places the same value on the pleasure of looking that might apply to other artistic activities.

If the act of seeing constitutes art, feeling and touching can as well. In chapter two, “Weather and Sky,” Francis develops his philosophy further when he classes rain as an “aesthetic experience” for the man who “likes rain enough to like getting wet in it” and who can see that “dull weather makes brighter weather brighter” (*Traveling* 18). This active aesthetic reflects the way life and art mingled as one in Francis’s daily activities and thoughts. The way he lived and wrote effectively erased any lines of division between life and art. His work seems to ask, “Why merely write about or paint a landscape when you could physically inhabit it?” Such a philosophy emerges not only in his practice of sunbathing but rain showering. “My seclusion was such,” he recalls, “that sometimes during a heavy summer rain I would go outdoors completely naked except for a rain hat, and on the side of the house away from the road wander about among the dripping trees” (*Trouble* 55). While readers might smile and question the utility of Francis’s rain hat on his completely nude body, his insistence on total immersion in the natural world as part of the artistic experience remains undeniable.

The assorted chapters in *Traveling in Concord* demonstrate that the human subject’s part of the biosthetic experience comprises not a series of single events, but a complex cycle of ceaseless multiple happenings. In other words, Francis invites readers to look beyond the linear vector of the raindrop to the chaos of climate. His text transcends the channeled motion of the river in favor of the expanding event of the watershed. In chapter one, “A Traveler in Concord,” behind an arch postmodernist smile he introduces his biosthetic concept of artist as “traveler,” with obvious allusions to Thoreau, though he quickly clarifies that his book is “not about Thoreau,” “not about Concord,” and “not about traveling in any literal sense” (*Traveling* 1). In order to describe the figure of the traveler, however, Francis backtracks and adopts Thoreau as a model. He argues that Thoreau functions historically as an exemplary traveler because Thoreau’s subject, medium, and means became the act of participating in all forms of local life.

To Thoreau, Francis asserts, Concord as a name or township was not as important as Concord the “geographical area (of which Concord happened to be the center) within easy reach of his legs,” all “excursions” to Maine and Cape Cod being “extensions of his territory for special purposes,” after which Thoreau “promptly returned home to Concord and continued his intensive traveling there.” Francis dubs Thoreau the ultimate traveler-artist, someone who specialized not in a “subject” but “an area within which his purpose was to know everything possible,” so that in relating his “area to other areas,” Concord became “not merely part of the whole but, like synecdoche, part *for* the whole” (*Traveling* 3-4). “As a traveler,” Francis observes, “Thoreau stands for concentration, albeit a most inclusive concentration” to the degree that “Concord was precisely equal to any other spot on the earth’s surface” and that, in traveling the “same ground over and over,” Thoreau retrieved not surface first



impressions for his labor but “cumulative” knowledge, “layer on layer, like soil and rock” (*Traveling* 6). The notion of the local traveler as interactive artist, coupled with the influence of spatial and geographical synecdoche on the human capacity to foster all life, provides some of Francis’s most intellectually challenging and culturally liberating concepts.

Perhaps unsatisfied with mere historical allusions, Francis probes the experiential concept he pioneers. “What is travel?” he asks. In response to his own query, he provides a palette of options: One can be a traveler “within a township or country.” He insists that authentic travel involves “two factors,” the “outward motion” or “gross travel” and the “inward inexperience” or “net travel,” the implication being that either alone provides insufficient experience for the biosthete (*Traveling* 6). Francis’s insights about true travel strike readers as fresh and intellectually stimulating. For example, he defines a “stream of fresh impressions,” a “sense of newness, of discovery, and of self-renewal” as the “essence of travel.” He compares the effortless sense of newness and freshness gleaned from foreign travel to the effort required by those who stay at home to “see old things new” by exploring unfamiliar geographical locations and retreats as well as the “familiar in unfamiliar moods: by moonlight, in mist, during a drenching rain, after a deep snow” (*Traveling* 7). The goal of true traveling, he states, is to look at “the familiar so intently that it becomes unfamiliar, not because we imagine what is not here but because we observe exactly what is.” According to Francis’s innovative and economical standards, the truly and inwardly transported traveler makes “the least motion yield the most value.” “From a position of rest,” he writes, “we may command most of the great experiences of life. . . . In this sense certainly a man may travel without moving, may sometimes travel best precisely by not moving. The not moving can be a positive achievement. We learn to walk at an early age; some of us never learn to sit still!” (*Traveling* 8).

As a coda to his introductory chapter, Francis includes a re-typed draft of his poem, “Part for the Whole,” which debuted in *The Orb Weaver*. “Part for the Whole” discourses blithely on the artistic act generated by the traveler who remains still at the convergence of human and non-human life and whose participation, medium-like, acts as a necessary catalyst. [6] The speaker describes the central figure of the poem as someone who is content with any “segment” of sunlight “anywhere he sits” while “others run to windows or out of doors / To catch the sunset whole” ( 1-2). Rather than moving physically to accommodate the world’s motion, Francis’s speaker says, “I see more seeing less,” by sitting still and letting the earth’s natural light show revolve around him (6). As the beholder and reassembler of the natural phenomenon of the sunset, Francis’s ideal biosthete must participate in the event rather than remain a passive recipient. He must reconstruct the sunset’s “fragment of fragment” that is “dulled” and “distorted” in “window-glass” and “picture-glass” to discover that reflected nature gives “something unglazed nature cannot give: / The old obliquity of art, and proves / Part may be more than whole, least may be best” (9-12). Having oriented readers to the functional power of true traveling, Francis proceeds on a wonderfully heterogeneous foray through eighteen chapters of loosely connected but clearly related prose ruminations. Each chapter in Francis’s clear-as-water but philosophically sublime book of patchwork non-fiction, while capable of standing as a self-sufficient part, weaves into the symphonic layout of the whole work through textual ripples, echoes, reverberations, and refrains. In the same way that *Traveling in Concord* takes for its subject the relational integration of artist, writing, and life, its structure signifies the systemic processes that join human and non-human natures.

Observation, *Traveling in Concord's* first mode, operates in several places and in a variety of ways: visual, auditory, and olfactory. In chapter three, "Beetle on the Windowpane," Francis declares, "The very act of observation is a discipline." He casts himself as a true disciple of this discipline by describing the visual art of observing a ladybug as it crawls across his window, followed by the painstaking ballet of a praying mantis in the act of molting. "Almost anything," Francis begins, "if looked at intently and long enough, becomes interesting"; however, he claims that the "reason we do not live in a state of constant and absorbing observation is because . . . we are busy most of the time with our emotions: our fears, our loves, and greeds, our hates" (*Traveling* 25, 31). In the section on visual observation, he contrasts true looking and its bogus cousin. One on hand, Francis describes the preferable "free, casual, recreational sort of observation," the discipline of "sustained observation," and the "creative act" of looking. He contrasts this level to the "superficial way of looking at things." Knowing the difference, he contends, is "the difference between surface living and insight, barrenness and creativity, poverty and wealth. It is a small key unlocking a mighty door" (*Traveling* 26, 31-32). To demonstrate, with the detailed eye of a seasoned entomologist, he describes the locomotion and hues of a ladybug "now at [his] desk": "shaped like the longitudinal half of an egg three-sixteenths of an inch long," "burnt orange," "two black dots, symmetrically placed on the insect's back," "two smaller white dots on the . . . otherwise black head" (*Traveling* 27). With meticulous attention, he details the insect's action and connotations, drawing meaning from a simple bug the way a thirsty man draws water from a well: from the perspective of science, philosophy, and poetry.

The second half of "Beetle on a Windowpane" includes the extraordinary accounts of Francis's having watched the molting and hatching of praying mantises, from prelude to silent diapason. From the viewpoint of the stationery naturalist, Francis contrasts the "fidgety ladybug" to the "calm and contemplative" mantis. "So far as an observer can tell," he writes, "a ladybird pays no attention to you or me. . . . But the mantis, unmistakably and with a fine irony, observes the observer" (*Traveling* 33). The molting of the "immature mantis" on a nearby sweetbriar bush occurs "early one September morning, warm and with a fine mist." On spotting the insect's condition, Francis scurries inside and returns with a watch and magnifying glass. Equipped thus, he records the painstaking drama—which extends from 9:11 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.—with such devotion that the "Reader" (whom Francis apostrophizes in Brontë-like fashion) holds his or her breath. His patient description is as arresting as the event it renders: the mantis's disengaged leg that descends "in an arc with exaggerated slowness like a dancer's largo gesture"; the jettisoned chitin shell he catches in his palm; the "maroon" stroke along its "clear pea-green" abdomen; four wing-buds reminiscent of "the winged talaria on Mercury's ankles" that swell "full-sail, the outer pair standing parallel in a vertical plane, pale-green, gossamer-delicate, fluttering in the slight breeze" (*Traveling* 35-36). Francis's prose proceeds with such detailed deliberation that the act of reading it mimics the focused attention his observation exemplifies.

As a postlude to the molting section, Francis awards the mantis itself the title of superior traveler: "Judged by its disposition to stay home and its indisposition to waste motion, a mantis is a better traveler in Concord than I am. Yea, a better traveler than Thoreau himself" (*Traveling* 37). The mantis hatching section describes a mantis egg case—"a grayish, brown, roundish object an inch or so in diameter"—and the "amber, glistening, wiggling little bodies" of the infant mantids that emerge "unglued and disentangled" to assemble on leaves and dry "like squadrons of planes ranged along broad

decks of carriers" (*Traveling* 38). His hypnotic account concludes with his philosophy about the art of visual observation. He refers to an unnamed "great master of painting" who with "a single, free sweep of his arm he could draw a perfect circle." This metaphor, Francis claims, serves to communicate the power of the human eye. "To draw a charmed circle about some object . . . and to live within that circle till its meaning and value are deeply explored," he explains, is to "be like a god seeing within that circle everything to be seen." This process of drawing, seeing, and living within circles constitutes not one biosthetic moment but an endless ripple effect, a network of endless echoes and interlocking perceptions. "And then, at will, to draw another freehand circle," Francis concludes, "and another, around perhaps a segment of landscape, or a single person, or a blade of grass, or a drop of water, or a small beetle on a sunny window by day or a on a lighted lamp at night" (*Traveling* 39). As these passages suggest, the biosthetic blending of art with human and non-human life is the first thing readers observe in Francis's meditations on the art of observation.

The discipline of artistic observation includes listening. In chapter nine, "Forty Miles from Tanglewood," Francis contrasts the passive activity of indoor "concert going" to the more involving activity of "close listening" to both human-made music and the music of organic sound. He employs two classical pieces—Mozart's G Minor Symphony (No. 40), which he says he has "been playing," and Beethoven's Leonora Overture—to distinguish between listening to a symphony where "the performers do the rest" and reclining on the "more inclusive grass" at an outdoor festival amid the "loose organization of distractions," the "beautiful and noble" action of ongoing life: "the swaying and rustling of trees, the flight of birds, the pageantry of clouds, and on occasion the dramatics of thunder and lightning" (*Traveling* 98, 100). The latter, more rewarding variety of listening he calls "close" or "centripetal listening" because "the effort is directed always inward, center-ward," which, through continued applied practice, can evolve into "the knack of being centripetal and centrifugal at the same time" (*Traveling* 101). In his description of close listening, Francis sees himself as a subordinate and receptive part of the ongoing auditory composition, as well as a conductor of sorts, someone who arranges naturally occurring sounds in harmony with human-generated music.

This focused brand of auditory observation favors the relation of every sound to every other sound and prefers not to separate human-made music from naturally occurring music. The chapter's central anecdote centers on Francis's debate between attending the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood concert in the Berkshires and listening to it forty miles to the east from his roof-deck. "So still can the evening air about my home be," he notes, "so flawless the acoustics of the great open-sided concert shell among the Berkshires," that he hears a hybrid symphony of natural and human-made music. "I do not say I hear every note," he admits, but then describes the whippoorwill that "drowns out a bar or two" and a "stir of leaves on the black oak momentarily blurs the melodic line," which together creates the "essence of music" that reaches him "etherealized and purified of all dross by the intervening distance" (*Traveling* 105). Instead of a clear line or note, Francis's biosthetic bent prefers a blurred one. Maximum movement for the biosthete means a mixture of music, birdcall, and human action, a traveling Concordian *concordia discors* of din and discourse whose accordion-like arrangement transports the observant listener from superficial experience to total participation and transformation.

In addition to sound, Francis explicates smell as an observatory sense that partially comprises the biosthetic experience.[7] *Traveling in Concord's* chapter eleven, "Ashem el Howa," considers the sense of smell's "ambiguity of status" and claims the "fragrant world is richer both in range and in meaning than most of us are aware" (*Traveling* 115-16). In compact array, Francis assembles an encyclopedia of aromas for the "nose-deaf" individual interested in understanding the "human meaning of fragrance" (*Traveling* 119). The meanings and connections he assembles comprise a pungent potpourri: the "summer-apple scent of sweetbriar"; "the watermelon sweetness of ripening corn"; the "exhilarating breath of white pine" that "comes . . . by way of hot sunshine and gently moving air"; and "curious duplications, such as the wintergreen smell of blackbirch twigs, the bitter-almond smell of wild black cherry, the cucumber flavor of the herb burnet, and the artificial-raspberry scent of the little bog orchid, rose pogonia" (*Traveling* 121). The lexicography of scents Francis's arranges invites readers to develop a greater sensitivity to the boundless array of smells that envelopes the globe.

At times, his description includes arresting metaphysical and epistemological claims about the properties of smells and how they penetrate and engulf readers worldwide. He postulates the presence of "hovering and drifting fragrances caught in aerial pockets or in slowly moving veins," much like levels of atmosphere, that bring to the sensitive walker's nose the distinct "pleasure in knowing without seeing": the vibrant odors of "locust or linden blossoms, honeysuckle, mock-orange, roses, or late-season clematis, or fresh-cut grass . . . red maples, apple blossoms, clover, elder blows, hawthorne, flowers of grape, and then the grapes (wild) themselves, apples themselves, and woodsmoke from a farmhouse chimney" (*Traveling* 121). The delight of this olfactory experience, which derives from "detecting every fragrance as it becomes available, then in identifying it, and finally in letting the mind go wherever the fragrance leads," appears to have come to Francis during his time as a teacher in Beirut. In Arab countries, he points out, people do not "go strolling in the evening" to get a breath of fresh air. Rather, when asked about their destinations, they reply, "Oh, just to smell the air. Ashem el howa" (*Traveling* 122). In passages such as these, Francis demonstrates that in the same way that biosthetics as a participatory art form involves multiple modes (observation, notation, reflection, participation, and transformation) within those modes—in this case, observation—smaller sub-modes based on the senses guide people through a complex series of sensory incidents, none of which comprises the whole experience without its sister components.

Chapter eight, "The Soybean," qualifies as a section on the biosthetic process of notation, since, for the most part, it is a cookbook. In it, Francis expounds on how the act of preparing and consuming this natural staple food qualifies as an artistic experience, characterized by elements of beauty, simplicity, and technique. Here he seems to ask, "What more direct way to involve one's self in the organically artistic processes of the earth than to consume them—literally?" "Essential simplicity (behind the processing)," he writes, in reference to the soybean, "is lost sight of as an aesthetic and ethical consideration" (*Traveling* 96). He contends that as a naturally occurring artistic subject, the soybean proves an ideal focus for the biosthete on a budget. It is an "unrationed food with all the nutrients of meat at a fraction of the cost of meat, a food untainted by the brutality of the slaughter house, . . . a food from Heaven" (*Traveling* 91). On one level he is talking shop in the kitchen, on another he selects his words and thoughts about the soybean's place in the world and his life with all the deliberate patience of a painter daubing pigments on his canvas.

The bulk of the soybean chapter covers fourteen complete recipes that range from instant, to quick-to-prepare, to slow-to-prepare. Sandwich fillings, patties, mock meat loaf, sauces, succotashes, main dishes, and side dishes hot and cold are included. An example of the most international recipe—"China in New England"—combines tomatoes, caraway seeds, and rice "impregnated" with the flavor of sautéed onions (*Traveling* 94). In writing about the soybean, though, Francis clearly wishes to feed not only the body, but the mind, soul, and senses. He confesses to having "flourished physically and spiritually" on his soybean diet for years, classes the soybean as "mostly symbolic . . . of the philosophy of traveling in Concord," and paints a detailed sketch, as if his humble subject were sitting for its portrait: "It is rounded, rather oval, slightly flattened, its longest diameter 5/16 of an inch. . . This one passes for yellow, though its color is much closer to what the paint charts call 'cream.' So far as my eye can judge, it is an exact match for what one chart calls 'warm buff'" (*Traveling* 95). This chapter's focus on the importance of notation in the biosthetic process provides a recipe for survival that approaches the status of mythopoeisis. "The Chinese," Francis concludes, "have a legend that Hou Tsi, an agricultural god, wishing to bestow upon man an ideal food, planted the first soy bean" (*Traveling* 97).

Throughout *Traveling in Concord*, the third biosthetic mode, reflection, intersperses itself among notation and observation. In "Beetle on the Windowpane," Francis traces the reader's shift in mental action at the point that the focal ladybug sparks neither scientific nor poetic thoughts. "Your observation has started you thinking," he writes, listing the reader's possible thoughts as "the importance of the insect to itself contrasted with its relative unimportance to a human being" and "the importance of a human being to himself contrasted with whatever importance or unimportance he has to the universe." In a way, Francis joins two supposedly independent activities, writing and thinking, into a single stream of energy. "For the moment at least," he notes, "you have become a philosopher. . . . your observations having dissolved into an unattached and delicious mood. Observation has shifted to contemplation. Whether or not you like the designation, you are, at least momentarily, a mystic or a dreamer" (*Traveling* 29).

In "A Place in the Sun (and Moon)," Francis mulls over the meaning of the sun as if extracting nuances from a line of poetry. "The intensity and constancy of the sun's embrace could stand for love," he writes. "Or for the love of God. Or for freedom: freedom from clothes, freedom from worry, freedom from being watched, freedom from being investigated by dogs or man, freedom from insects, freedom from clocks, freedom almost from time itself." Like the sun, the moon also invigorates one's mind into action. In underscoring the "philosophical importance of the moon," he observes that "[o]ur greatest good from the moon depends on our imagination and initiative" (*Traveling* 70-1). And in "The Soy Bean," he insightfully laments the absence of a human "philosophy of food." His answer to this humanistic shortcoming is to consider the transformative power in the simple soy bean. Though the soy bean is "a fact before it is a philosophy," he admits, it is "something to eat as well as something to think about" (*Traveling* 89, 96). Beans, ladybugs, the sun and moon—the intriguing everyday natural events that surround Francis provide him with endless material for engaging, edifying thought. Through his re-directing gaze, the unschooled biosthete learns to more intently think about things about which he or she has never thought before.

And penultimately, I turn to mode four: participation. *Traveling in Concord's* major credo appears to be that art requires the human being to perform the function of the brush against nature's canvas, and vice versa. Though the medium of writing requires Francis to transform nature into linguistic abstraction, those same writings capture topophilic moments when he directly involved himself in the life processes surrounding him—like a minor character in a novel or a secondary figure in a painted landscape. [8] Only in Francis's case, the actual landscape functions as text. In "A Place in the Sun (and Moon)," the relative distance between moon and biosthete produces *acte d'art* rather than *objets d'art*. "The art of arranging the moon is simple enough if you keep moving," he writes. "You can make it hide or come out into the open. By running you make it flicker through foliage. . . . If you go uphill, it goes up too, and comes down with you. You can make it glide up or down the limb of a tree. You can even make it travel along a telephone wire like a large brass button on a string" (*Traveling* 73). Francis's "traveling" constitutes a poor man's art form, to be sure, but one rich in capacity to transform the life of the human participant and his view of his surroundings. In "Weather and Sky," he describes how "a walk in fog—the early-morning fog of late summer or early autumn"—assumes the properties of an ongoing composition, as if the walker-artist were arranging tiles in a mosaic or dabbing watercolors on paper. "In clear weather," he points out, "the world lies around us a painted and finished panorama: in fog we take part ourselves in the creative process, calling forth or banishing the shapes of trees and houses and people, as we move" (*Traveling* 18). In instructing his readers this way, Francis says that when canvas and typewriter fail to meet one's needs for an immediate artistic experience, or when they fall to the level of Plato's bed thrice-removed from reality, we should trade them for a jacket and comfortable shoes and stroll into the work itself.

As I mentioned earlier, the practice of biosthetics captured in *Traveling in Concord* advocates the ongoing change of the individual and the individual's view of his or her surroundings through the constant acts of notation, rumination, participation, and observation. To a certain degree, to discuss these modes in isolation, as I have attempted to do here, defeats the book's central message. Strictly and purely speaking, the biosthetic experience Francis approaches in his book requires the tumbling interplay of all four modes simultaneously, each one functioning as an energized segue into the next. The linear nature of reading and writing stands in stark opposition to a clear understanding of this phenomenon. Despite textual limitations, however, throughout *Traveling in Concord*, key leitmotifs and experiences connected to writing, thinking, watching, and acting in concert with the natural world resurface from chapter to chapter, like echoes or the reverberation of waves. The most intriguing demonstrations of the biosthetic experience occur when Francis works with mixed modes.

In the mantis episodes, participation joins observation and notation when, after watching a mantis shed its chitin casing for two hours from his indoor seat, Francis darts outside: "The shell, having been jostled in the process, was dangling by one foot, looking as if a breath would unhitch it. In a few moments it slipped its mooring, and as it floated down, I caught it on my palm" (*Traveling* 35). As he witnesses the hushed drama of hatching mantids, Francis joins the action and records the moment: "The last mantis to become free and equal might not have become so without help. It had broken away from its thread, but had caught one leg in another thread. Having burst its bond once, it seemed unequal to bursting it again. At 8:42, to complete the hour of continuous observation, I broke the thread and set it free" (*Traveling* 38). With little or no fanfare (perhaps because the entire operation proceeds

subconsciously), interacting with nature blends with the acts of watching and writing. In “The Weather and the Sky,” with extraordinary accuracy and freedom of expression, he describes a New England thunderstorm and appears to question the ethics of natural disasters in terms of the economic and sometimes fatal cost they exact on human and non-human life. In doing so, he combines notation, observation, and reflection. He labels a New England thunderstorm “our biggest celestial show,” and his jagged passage matches the action:

Towering thunderheads whose countless curves are carved in white cloud-marble like curls in the beard of Jove—the dark sky map with sudden river systems flashing on and off—the hush and listening for the wind, and then the wind’s answer—the first big drops spattering on pungent dust—the hesitation, and finally the rivers of rain downward and windward rushing—the deep salaams and obeisance of trees—the flash and crash and cool freshness in the air. For such magnificence it is too high a price that the electricity is off for an hour, a tree down, and a cow killed in the pasture? (*Traveling* 14)

Without apparently thinking about it, the thoroughly engrossed and infused biosthete combines thinking, writing, and watching.

In a word, *Traveling in Concord* is about transformation. As a treatise on achieving contemplative simplicity from a perspective of revolving involvement in the endless work of life-as-art, it draws on the malleable mystery of human and non-human biotic communities and exhorts readers to follow Francis’s example. As high minister hermit of change, Francis encourages readers to slough off civilization’s chitin shell, cling upside-down to the nearest twig, and let the rain scour the modern world from their backs. A scholar of dawn and dusk, he would have those drunk on mechanized conveniences and the interior darkness of habitual human “progress” sip sobriety from the springs of the sun. And have them *perhaps* write about it later. This “traveling” that the biosthetic experience affords readers—in Concord, or anywhere on the globe—involves writing, thinking, watching, and acting but does not restrict itself to one mode at any moment. Together, this interplay of actions leads to stages of transformation in the reader’s life, with all stages of transformation acting as echoes and preludes to the stages that precede and follow them.

Simultaneously, this indirect prescription for change becomes personal and, by extension, universal. In the “Weather and Sky” chapter, Francis contrasts his boyhood “persistent fear of thunderstorms” and his youthful view of clouded skies as “flaw[ed]” to his adult view of the sky: “Today I like to think that my range of taste includes everything: cumulus, cirrus, nimbus, stratus, and even the cloud that comes damply down to earth and wraps us, as it wraps houses, rocks, and gulls, in fog. On a fair summer afternoon I can take a chair to some open place and ask for no other entertainment that what the sky offers” (*Traveling* 23). He addresses this need for constant change when he isolates the “power of identifying the self with something outside the self.” “Of all the varieties of imagination,” he declares, “the most valuable is the power to put oneself inside another person or thing. If one were a flower bulb, for instance, just what would be one’s basic needs of food, rest, air, and the opportunity to rise?” (*Traveling* 43). To rise, flower-like, readers follow Francis’s invitation to ascend by example and precept.

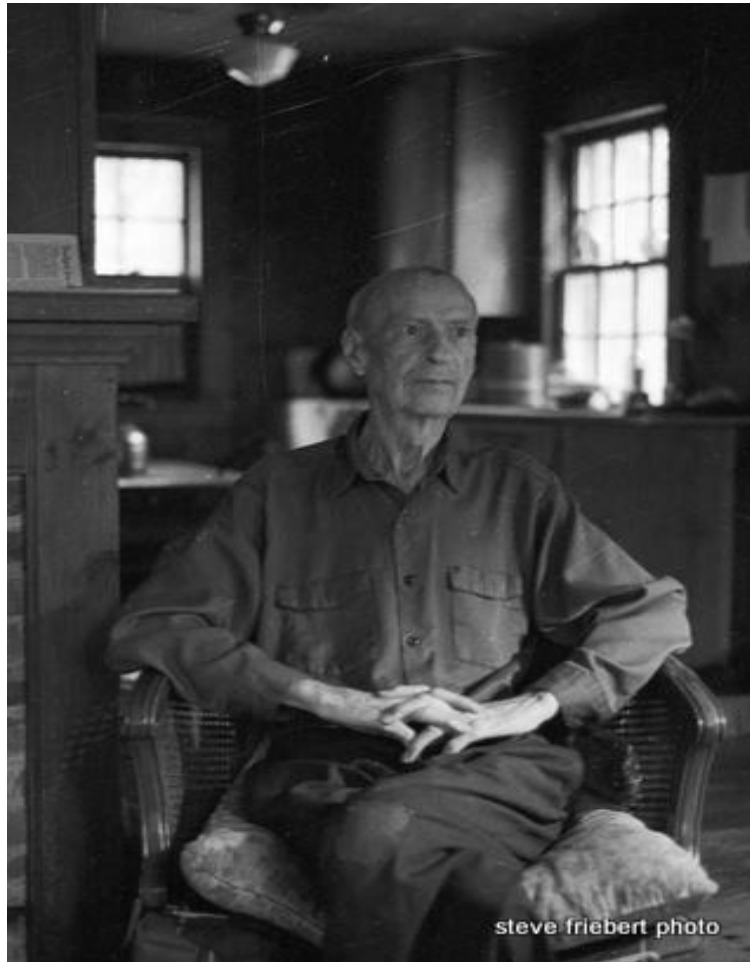
The concluding chapters, "A Game of Checkers" and "Center," resonate with the subtle thematics of movement, interior and exterior, literal and lateral. "If one has a disposition to travel in Concord," Francis finishes, "he will find that experience increasingly rewarding as long as he travels." He then lists the "inexhaustible experiences" that qualify as authentic traveling: "to sit in the sun, to observe intently what is at hand, whether an insect, a small flower, . . . or the whole sky, . . . to be creator one's self if only by the studied placing of a spray of flowers or leaves in a jar of water, . . . to search for and come ever nearer to finding one's spiritual center" (*Traveling* 179). The biosthete's travel vector, then, represents not a vector at all but a multi-dimensional expansion, a flood of dawn, a scattering of starlings. "Centripetal" travel, Francis calls it—drawing one's self toward greater inner consciousness while embracing a more capacious view of one's external environment, a search for the "center of things," a "working philosophy, applicable to almost everything we think or do." He concludes, "The better we comprehend our world, the better we comprehend ourselves. Like the orb-weaving spider, we sit at the center of our web-world and feel every impulse that impinges on it" (*Traveling* 185, 187-88).

Even a surface appraisal of *Traveling in Concord* gives readers cause to lament that it has remained unpublished for half a century. The biocentric awareness Francis cultivates and advocates gives twenty-first century audiences much to consider, given the lack of environmental sensitivity and the shortage of sensible resource stewardship that characterizes many global cultures. Though Francis dodges the theoretical and jargon-laden language of scholarly analysis, he reveals in his autobiography how art and life, biocentrism and aesthetics, blended together indistinguishably in his activities and consciousness. In one section, Francis recalls the period during which, in his mid-thirties, he achieved long-sought-after independence outside Amherst in his "old house by the brook" previous to moving to Fort Juniper in 1940. In this account, though he questions whether his memory depicts his experience as "too idyllic," he reveals how the aesthete and biocentrist in him recognized early on that "experience itself was an idyl." With the relish of a landscape painter, he describes the "rewarding pleasure" of walking alone through innumerable "out-of-the-way places," an experience he labels "a purer and more intense pleasure than going with anyone else." Explicitly, he ties this outdoor pleasure to the feeling that his paths would "choose" him, rather than the other way around, and that he had only his "impulse to obey" on his daily rambles. "With eyes and ears and nose I feasted in forest or meadow or hillside pasture," he recalls. "I browsed, I brooded. It was a blend of our and inner worlds, of observation and contemplation. Observation itself varied from the merely curious to the esthetic to the utilitarian." Most of his rapturous interactivity with the simple but absorbing dimensions of his immediate environment stemmed from collecting things. "For I loved to gather things," he remembers, "summer berries for eating, winter berries for decoration, wild grapes, wild apples, wild herbs for salads or seasoning, aromatic twigs of spicebush and cherry birch, nuts, mushrooms, rare flowers and fall leaves and curious stones" (*Trouble* 17). A reading of this passage in the context of *Traveling in Concord's* biosthetic framework casts Francis as someone who, as Andrew Stambuk notes, saw "landscape as composition" (28). Robert Francis's greatest life work might be that the artistic record of his past experiences still exists with the power to guide the future.

Twenty years after failing to publish *Traveling in Concord* and stowing it "away in a bedroom closet," Francis asks, "Was I too easily defeated? Reading the manuscript . . . makes me wonder" (*Trouble* 83). For my part, I am inclined to agree with him. His unique volume deserves to be printed and read, not



just for its potential contribution to current schools of environmental theory, place studies, and ecocriticism, but for the enlightenment of the general reader. If the natural world is the canvas on which the artist paints or the paper on which the poet inscribes his rhapsody, then it would seem counter-productive to exploit that foundational resource, to squander it and render one's artistic enterprise obsolete. For now, Francis's text, like the artful process of traveling in tandem with one's biotic communities that it advocates, continues to travel by standing still in advance of an undetermined moment of fruition.



**Figure 1 – Robert Francis (Photo Courtesy Steven Friebert)**

### **Endnotes**

1. This excludes Francis's two self-published volumes, *The Sound I Listened For* (1944) and *The Face Against the Glass* (1950). For additional details concerning Francis's publishing history, see his autobiography, *The Trouble with Francis* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1971)

2. Meeker writes, "Temporal art resembles an ecosystem more closely than it resembles an organism. . . . Literature and music offer an experience of time itself in its manifold process of change and growth. . . . The appeal of temporal art is thus partly attributable to human curiosity about how things are going to turn out, and the final satisfaction is a recognition that process has been fulfilled in time (128).
3. Byerly challenges, "At what point does the act of appreciation become an act of appropriation in which [nature's] intrinsic qualities are sacrificed? . . . The aestheticization of landscape permits the viewer to define and control the scene, yet fosters the illusion that the scene is part of self-regulating nature" (52-4).
4. In *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschläger sees "anthropocentrism as commencing with the rise of agriculture, biocentrism as beginning in the nineteenth century with Charles Darwin, and ecocentrism as originating recently, after World War II (292-93).
5. See Elizabeth Dodd's "Green Places: James Wright's Development of a Biocentric Aesthetic" (ISLE, Summer 2006) for a discussion of biocentric aesthetics. "Biocentrists," Max Oelschläger observes, "take life rather than the human species as the central verity and thus assign value to all other things relative to life. Protection of a single organism (as distinct from a species) is therefore important to a biocentrist" (293). David Gilcrest's *Greening the Lyre* lists the "corrals all "environmental poetry" into three subcategories: "aesthetic," followed by "epistemological," and "ethical" (4).
6. In this statement of poetic philosophy, Francis appears to anticipate Gary Snyder's observation concerning the platonic associations that define relationships between human and non-human communities: "[T]o know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in" (qtd. in Thomashow 126). Francis discusses this organic sensibility toward one's place in the overlapping overgrowth of biospheres in the first chapter of his autobiography: "[F]or the nearer one comes to grasping his life as an integrated whole," he writes, "the nearer he is to saving himself from mere flux and fragmentation" (Trouble 1).
7. Michael McGinnis calls for an "acute awareness" of one's place in the community of life that includes the "human and more-than-human world" as well as the "smell of the air" ("A Rehearsal" 8).
8. Yi-Fu Tuan defines topophilia as "the affective bond between people and place or setting." The topophilic "response may be tactile, a delight in the feel of air, water, earth. More permanent and less easy to express are feelings that one has toward a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood." "The most intense aesthetic experiences of nature," Tuan writes, "are likely to catch one by surprise (4, 93-4).

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