

# “The Trial by Existence”: Frost’s Early View on the Soul

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This essay explores Frost early philosophical view on the soul in “The Trial by Existence”. This poem combines Plato’s The Myth of Er in *Republic* Book X with the story of the Incarnation in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, manifesting that firstly, one’s soul symbolically shares the divine character; secondly, the destiny of one’s soul is chosen by oneself; thirdly, soul and body are inextricable, which means that the material world or the body is the trial of soul’s existence. The greatest merit of the soul is “plunging into matter” and risking it in substantiation while maintains its completeness.

*Keywords:* Frost, “The Trial by Existence”, soul, life

## Introduction

Robert Frost’s “The Trial by Existence” is one of the most important early poems in *A Boy’s Will*. According to Frost’s biographer, Lawrance Thompson, Frost started writing the poem in the spring of 1892 and not finished until 1906. Thompson relates the influence of Frost’s mother’s religious faith on this poem at the very beginning: “she had taught him that all human souls come to this earth from heaven” (Thompson, 1966, p. 290). Thompson also assumes that Frost draw some images from Plato, “as he returned to his work on the unfinished poem... during his brief stay at Dartmouth he had read for the first time in the dialogues of Plato and may have been attracted by Plato’s repeated references to the old myth that after death each soul is permitted to choose a new life; that after the choice, each soul drinks of Lethe and then shoots away like a star to its new birth” (Thompson, 1966, p. 294).

Even though Thompson presents the background of Platonic tradition and religion in this poem, critics seldom pay serious attention to them. Joe Pellegrino in his “Frost, Schopenhauer, and ‘The Trial by Existence’”, finding evidence from Frost’s letter to Susan Hayes Ward in 1906 in which Frost mentions that he grafts Schopenhauer upon Christianity in “The Trial by Existence” (*Selected Letters*, 1964, p. 38), argues that “Frost takes from Schopenhauer an eastern, Buddhist stance towards the world, framed by the recognition of the pain of earthly existence in this illusory world” (Pellegrino, 1993, p. 93). However, Pellegrino’s reading dismisses Frost’s profound world-view of dualism as well as his particular view of the soul which is interlaced with the body, yet it has deeper values and meaning than the body. This essay aims to analyze Frost’s early philosophical view of the soul in “The Trial by Existence” and its connections with Platonism and Christianity, arguing that the meaning of one’s existence is the trial of one’s soul in the material world, if one’s soul passes the trial it will have the chance to return to heaven.

### **"The Trial by Existence" and Its Platonic Tradition**

As Thompson speculates that the story of "The Trial by Existence" is akin to Plato's The Myth of Er in *Republic* Book X. "The Trial by Existence" mainly presents the images of the souls that make their choices for birth and that they drink the water of the River of Forgetfulness, which doesn't manifest there is a moral connection between the souls' former life and the new life as Plato does in his *Republic*. "Even the bravest that are slain / Shall not dissemble their surprise / On walking to find valor reign, / Even as on earth, in paradise" (*CPPP*, p. 28). The bravest ascend to heaven only to find that their fate is to descend into the earth, the material world, which is named "the trial by existence". As Allan Bloom says, like Cephalus's choice in The Myth of Er suggests that the soul can "learn nothing in the afterlife; there is apparently no philosophy in the afterlife for those who did not practice it on earth; the soul is not perfected by the separation from the body" (Plato, 1991, p. 436). Frost's poem shares similar idea. The souls arrive in heaven only to discover that "the utmost reward" is bravely going back to earth again, which is the trial of souls' existence. To descend into earth is the only way to ascend to heaven again, which is the necessary step or process of purifying and perfecting the soul.

However, the life on earth is so painful, "crushed" and "mystified" that it requires heroic courage to choose such life as the final stanza goes: " 'Tis of the essence of life here, / Though we choose greatly, still to lack / the lasting memory at all clear, / That life has for us on the wrack / Nothing but what we somehow chose; / Thus are we wholly stripped of pride / in the pain that has but one close, / Bear it crushed and mystified " (*CPPP*, p. 30). Robert Faggen claims that the title of this poem "is an alteration of the Darwin phrase 'struggle for existence'" (Faggen, 1997, p. 255), and the final stanza suggests "life is a form of dying and pain", "and a continual participation in the process of suffering" (p. 258). Joe Pellegrino holds a similar view that Frost recognizes that human life is painful, but that recognition owes to Schopenhauer not Darwin (Pellegrino, 1993, p. 96). Actually, the speaker in "The Trial by Existence" highlights the pain and the sufferings of human life in order to indicate that it is not easy to achieve the soul's harmony or reach the likeness to divine spirit. In *Republic* Socrates also implies that even though the souls try very hard and carefully to choose their new life in order to avoid sufferings but it seems inevitable. No matter what kind of life they choose they will encounter pain or sufferings which are only different in kinds and degrees.

Both Frost's poem and Plato's myth of Er show that the way of life and destiny of the soul are chosen by oneself. Socrates says that "your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him"; and "The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none" (Plato, 1997, p. 1220). The speaker in Frost's poem makes it clear that "none are taken but who will", and "nothing but what we somehow chose". In other words, the choice that one makes is a challenge as well as a trial not a reward, because souls must drink the water of Lethe so that no one knows what will become in the new life.

There is a big difference between Frost's poem and Plato's myth that the background of "The Trial by Existence" is in paradise but the myth of Er is in hell. Therefore, "The Trial by Existence" is not simply brought from Plato, but Frost's deep thinking of the soul's modern meaning and values.

### **"The Trial by Existence" and Its Religious Dimension**

Richard Poirier subtly observes, "The Trial by Existence" is a "magnificent Dante-esque poem" (Poirier, 1990, p. 50), which also implies that "the glory and possibility of life exists, the open chance (to quote the last

line of Herbert’s ‘Our life is Hid with Christ in God’) (p. 263). It is not hard to find the similarities between the descriptions of the bravest in “The Trial by Existence” and Milton’s son of God in *Paradise Lost*. There are at least two apparent resembling images.

Firstly, in “The Trial by Existence” when God proclaims “the gathering of the souls for birth”, “a white shimmering concourse rolls / Toward the throne to witness there / The speeding of devoted souls / Which God makes his especial care”, but after the bravest lose the memory of choice and find that “the last choice is still the same”, “the awe passes wonder then, / And a hush falls for all acclaim” (CPPP, p. 29). The reason why wonder and acclaim become the awe and a hush is that the new choice or life is still the painful, obscure life on earth. Similarly, in *Paradise Lost* Book III, when God asks if anyone in heaven is willing to be mortal in order to “redeem / Man’s mortal crime, and just the unjust to save”, but “all the Heavenly choir stood mute, / And silence was in Heaven” (Milton, 2005, p. 85). They keep silence because they know that “on man’s behalf / Patron or intercessor none appeared, / Much less that durst upon his own head draw / The deadly forfeiture, and ransom set. / And now without redemption all mankind / must have been lost, adjudged to death and hell / by doom severe” (Milton, 2005, p. 85). Both in “The Trial by Existence” and *Paradise Lost* the other divine spirits who choose to keep quite have the same reason that they may never have the chance to go back to heaven, what’s worse they may fall into hell forever, if they choose to be mortal.

The second similarity is the image of “a flower of gold”. The speaker in Frost’s poem relates that after the bravest have made their choices, “God has taken a flower of gold / And broken it, and used therefrom / The mystic link to bind and hold / Spirit to matter till death come” (CPPP, p. 30). In *Paradise Lost* after the Son of God has chosen to be mortal to save man, there are fourteen lines describing amaranth and gold: “Their crowns inwove with amaranth and gold / Immortal amaranth, a flower which once / In Paradise, fast by the tree of life / Began to bloom, but soon for man’s offence / To Heaven removed where first it grew, there grows / And flowers aloft shading the fount of life/.../Then crowned again their golden harps they took” (Milton, 2005, p.89). Frost’s “link of flower of gold” is indebted to Milton’s crowns of immortal amaranth and gold which symbolizes circle and eternity as well as divinity. Frost uses the golden flower as a ring to bind spirit and matter in order to show that the souls who choose to descend into earth share the divine spirit and will have the chance to go back to heaven.

Frost skillfully depicts the bravest in “The Trial by Existence” as the Son of God in *Paradise Lost* which indicates the glory and possibility of human life as Richard Poirier claims. What’s more, the bravest could be anyone who is willing to pass the trial of life on earth. Frost not only grafts Schopenhauer upon Christianity but also combines Platonism to Christianity in “The Trial by Existence”. However, that Frost brings Schopenhauer into this poem is not because of the philosopher’s Buddhist tradition which proposes “the renunciation of the world” as Joe Pellegrino argues. In 1956 Frost recounts the impact of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* on his “The Trial by Existence”: “my own existence was an act of my own will”; “I’d have to live it out, in spite of the fact that I’d forgotten—live it out mystified about what it all had come from and what might have done it, though I had chosen it myself” (*Speaking on Campus*, 2009, p. 87). From Schopenhauer Frost learns that life is chosen by oneself as well as how to live. For Frost, human life is neither pessimistic nor very optimistic, but if life is one’s own choice, then one can bravely choose to live like Christ, the Son of God, “to risk the spirit in substantiation, in plunging into matter” while keeping strong will of returning to paradise triumphally (*Speaking on Campus*, 2009, p. 113). Such idea echoes profoundly in “Kitty Hawk”: “God’s own descent / into

flesh was meant/ As a demonstration / That the supreme merit / Lay in risking spirit / In substantiation. / Westerners inherit / A design for living / Deeper into matter—" (CPPP, pp. 446-447).

### Conclusion

The bravest in "The Trial by Existence" is Er in Republic as well as the son of God in Paradise Lost, and the combination of these two characters profoundly shows that the human body and soul are a complicated unity in which the body or the material is not an obstacle of the soul's pursuit of perfection and divinity, but a trail or an ordeal of the soul; Even though life on earth is full of pain and suffering, but the human soul shares the divine quality, which endows the soul with a possible lofty future. However, whether one's soul can regain its divinity or lose it, it all depends on one's own choice during the mortal life. From early "The Trial by Existence" to later "Kitty Hawk", Frost never stops thinking of the meaning of the soul in modern world, and what he ultimately concerns in these poems is how to live meaningfully as human beings in a time pervaded with nihilism and materialism but lack of faith. Frost's solution to that problem draws more from Western cultural and religious tradition than the Eastern way.

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