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Robert Frost: The Poet and the Craft

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Abstract:

Robert Frost is considered as one of the important voices in both, British and American literary tradition. His poetry is traditional as well as modern, making it a brand in itself. Traditional because he doesn't really experiment with style as do the major modernist poets and his contemporaries and modern because his themes are pretty much the same as that of the other modernists involved in the loss and the subsequent quest for some meaning in the world. The paper is a humble attempt at evaluating the poetry and the person of Robert Frost. It aims at tracing the underlying philosophy of his work that gives it a distinct quality. Further, the paper tries to locate the work of Robert Frost in the tradition of dualistic philosophy. Strangely Frost shares a lot of attributes with the nineteenth century British Romantics, especially when it comes to the choice of themes and people in his work. However, what markedly separates him from the romantics is his basic philosophy of dualism. While romantics were monists and saw reality as an organic whole, Frost relied heavily on dualism thereby ruling out the possibility of achieving anything akin to that. Frost thrives on binary oppositions held together with equal force by a conflict that he never tries to resolve. The paper further attempts to analyse with examples from his poetry how Frost cleverly situates his poem on multiple levels of interpretation with each reading taking us into a more complicated theory behind.

Keywords: Robert Frost, Modern Poetry, Dualism, Monism, Binary Opposites, Organic Whole.

Born at the crossroads between nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Robert Frost is considered to be one of the most important and popular voices in the American poetry who has been able to secure critical respect for himself over the years in the world literary circles. His poetic canvass spans over a wide range of human experience thereby, giving his work a universal and timeless quality. His poetry will never be outdated and that it will be relevant eternally like the other greats like Shakespeare, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and others. In times when every artist was trying to secure for himself a way through which one could express ones response to the major intellectual developments in science, politics, religion, social and educational theory, and art, Frost's mind focussed on the complexity of human philosophy through his art. Frost's own initiation into poetry began in San Francisco where he was born in 1874, but it is only when his family moved back to Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1884 following his father's death, he

discovered the poet he was going to become. The region was particularly conducive to the writing of poetry as within the next five years Frost had made up his mind to be a poet.

In one of the crucial early discoveries, Frost learned that poetry should not be reduced to a medium by way of which a poet would unburden his purely subjective autobiographical response to life or record certain events empirically. Instead poetry is meant to act as a vehicle carrying philosophical wisdom eternally. In poetry he discovered a way to perceive universal truths revealed in symbols and metaphors. Similarly, Frost realised, at the age of twenty-one, that he wanted to write "talking poems." By talking poems he meant poems that dramatized the constant tension between voices, people and ideas in an irresolvable open-ended dialectic. In such poetry one can discover a clarification of life holistically in all its duality. Frost's poems are therefore rooted in human conversation. Underneath the actual words, one can capture all the contentious forces at play, seriously as well as humorously.

As far as the underlying philosophy of Frost's work is concerned, every poem of Frost is a philosophical doctrine that could be developed into a theory. He was so well read and so well versed in all spheres of life and was deeply reflective by temperament. Further he was shy and an introvert and therefore confined himself and loved to be in solitude. His interest in Latin, Greek, Astronomy, Sociology and Politics secured him an in-depth knowledge of every field of learning. His wisdom combined with the knowledge that he acquired informed and enriched his work as well.

Critics seem to be divided when it comes to placing Frost in the main tradition of modern poetry. He wrote at the time when symbolism and imagism were the representative poetic techniques. His contemporaries like, Eliot, Yeats and Pound expressed modernist angst in the form of allusions and references. Language was twisted and turned and some poets went to the extent of labelling language incapable of expressing their points of view. However, Frost adopted a totally different technique which is neither innovative nor truly experimental. Moreover, he did not depart from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century. Public domain became the source of his poetic symbols and developed an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. In style as well as his choice of themes, Frost competed well with the rest of the poets of his time. He was certainly their intellectual equal.

Frost comes across as a skilled craftsman consciously and carefully weaving complexity from simplicity and vice versa. He seems to strike a fine balance between the complexity of style and the simplicity of style and between complexity of content and simplicity of content. His poetry exhibits clear duality comprising of nineteenth century traditionalism and the twentieth century modernism where he again tries to hit a mean. A cursory reading of his work brings forth a Frost writing simple and obvious truths of life but a deeper analysis of his work reveals a complex whirlpool of ideas and emotions that make up the world and its people. His philosophy is

mundane as well as extraordinary, each holding its own ground without one over-writing the other and both exhibit equal relevance. So he could be read shallow as well as deep.

It seems Frost has deliberately situated his work on two levels indicating thereby that the general truths of the world and its people have a dual interpretation. Frost's use of lucid language should be seen as one of the constituents of his poetic craftsmanship to strengthen this duality. In other words, there is a method in the perceived simplicity of style as well as content found in Frost's poetry. The lucidity of language tends to mirror the simplicity of human experience but both are a hoax and are deconstructed with each reading of the poem. On the face of it, life appears simple and too obvious, however, when we zoom in on a particular, yet a mundane event, complex and deep truths about life having universal significance are revealed. John T. Napier calls this Frost's ability "to find the ordinary a matrix for the extraordinary."¹ In this respect, he is often compared with Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, in whose poetry, too, a simple fact, object, person, or event is transfigured to take on greater mystery and significance.

Such symbolic import of mundane facts informs many of Frost's poems, and in "Education by Poetry" he explained: "Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, 'grace' metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.... Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere."² [1111] [SEP:SEP]

Robert Frost was simply a nature poet, an extension of the Romantic sensibility who cleverly put deep thoughts to verse. In him we find the perfect example of a cheerful country wit and a moral preacher. Frost was an immensely learned, a genuine didactic philosopher and constantly preoccupied with the search and propagation of wisdom. He combined in his unique personality a conventionalist, iconoclast reactionary against modernity. In the face of turbulent cultural changes that took place in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Frost fashioned his own independent thought while absorbing the prevailing ideas of his time. His work reflects the development of his personal and poetic responses to the rapidly-changing current of ideas.

In some ways, William Wordsworth seems to have had a deep impact on the Frost's choice of content in his work. Both focused their poetic lens on the ordinary and common rural populace whose behaviour as well as mannerisms are not influenced in any way by the 'civilization' that characterizes those living in the urban set ups. These common people are simple and naïve having a very close affinity with the nature around them. Their language is not made up and their thoughts are raw, unpolished and absolutely in their purest form. It is among these people that Frost discovered the simple but at the same time not so simple truths that characterize life. He extolled the New England virtues of self-reliance, personal freedom, and courage. He believed that the strength of character was best cultivated in a rural atmosphere. Similarly, Frost's use of colloquial language, further, adds naturalness to his poetry. The interface of these men and women with the processes of nature is also an important part of Frost's work. He seems to be

especially interested in showing what kind of reaction these processes of nature evoked from them.

Frost's tryst with the ordinary didn't go too well with some of his critics. For them poetry demanded a decorum and discipline to be followed strictly. For example, in "The Function of Criticism", Yvor Winters brutally criticized Frost for his "endeavour to make his style approximate as closely as possible the style of conversation."³ However, what Yvor Winters failed to see was that Frost's aim was not just a mere imitation of the New England farmer idiom. Frost defended his stance by stressing on the fact that the import of a statement made vocally is distinct from the same statement made in written word. Hence, the poet's ear should be more sensitive than his ink, that is, the distinctive talent of a poet could be seen in his ability to capture in verse the nuances and significance of the sound used in the spoken form. Frost, to a large extent was successful in his aim of restoring to literature the "sentence sounds that underlie the words," the "vocal gesture" that enhances meaning. He successfully achieved in his poetry such a level of complexity which even some of the great minds of time failed to understand.

Therefore, as a part of his strategic workmanship as a poet, ordinary events happening in nature received an extraordinary treatment in his hands. For example, events as common as apple-picking, falling snow, mending walls post winter and snow-loaded bent birches take him to the questions of life and death and in the process reveal complex philosophical truths. It may sound too obvious with our first reading of the poem but it is not that simple actually. In this respect, Robert Frost's virtues as a poet are extraordinary. Deriving philosophical truths from the mundane is not an easy job. In this context, critic Randall Jarrell writes:

"No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, rhythms of actual speech."⁴

However, in principle, Frost was a dualist while as Romantics like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and others were monists. Monistic philosophy, be it idealistic or materialistic stresses on the belief that existence in all its infinite parts and aspects is absolutely one and more so indivisible and that reality comprises of one element, either spiritual or material. Moreover, all realities and processes in existence are therefore organically interconnected and interdependent. Monistic philosophy comes with the sole purpose of harmonising, reconciling and amalgamating these opposites so as to bind them into an organic whole. Frost, however, believed that this unified organic whole is impossible to achieve. Though Frost was not a systematic philosopher yet he unequivocally affirmed the standing ground behind his views of man, God, nature, and history when he wrote a letter to Lawrence Thompson, pronouncing that, "...I am a dualist..."⁵ Therefore, his political and social philosophy is shaped by dualism. Dualism hence is the underlying philosophy of Frost's art as well. It is this dualistic philosophy that always made him keenly conscious of the "two-endedness of things" and impossibility of resolving complex

religious, moral, intellectual, and social problems through well-intentioned and neat monistic assumptions, methods, or conclusions.

Like Aristotle, Frost saw reality as a composite of matter and spirit having their individual existence standing against each other in everlasting opposition. His poetry also constantly tries to give expression to matter through spirit and spirit through matter. Therefore an austere and tragic view of life emerges in so many of Frost's poems. He makes use of the details to substantiate and modulate this view in a metaphysical sense. In his constant search for meaning in the modern world, Frost chooses to focus on those moments in life when the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the spiritual intersect. For example, a poem like "Birches" contains the image of slender trees bent to the ground temporarily by a boy's swinging on them or permanently by an ice-storm. Apparently the bent is caused by few ordinary causes but gradually as the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that the speaker is more concerned about complex philosophical problems of life and death. Child's play and a commonplace natural phenomenon become merely an agency to take the poem to a level where the physical and the spiritual reality merge. Here, the narrator wishes to climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood. He writes:

"It's when I am weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs...
... I would like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over." ⁶

The upward thrust is an attempt to escape the rational world and go back to carefree childhood. The bent in the birch trees is a symbol for load of responsibilities that one bears once adulthood is attained. Frost appears to be carried away by a strong desire to leave this earth due to its anxieties and burdens to make a heavenward journey. However, he doesn't want a permanent escape. In this way the poem is an illustration of fine balance between impulse and carefulness. He writes:

"May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better." ⁶

Frost takes the same theme tragically forward in another poem, "Out, Out" in which a young boy is forced to abandon his childhood to work for a living and he eventually dies in the process. "Birches" derives its power from the binary opposites, literally translated into downward and

upward thrusts each characterized, respectively, by truth and imagination, earth and heaven, control and abandon, flight and return, the concrete world and the life of the spirit. Frost makes no attempt, what so ever, at resolving any of the conflicts that develop between these binary opposites. He refrains from taking sides and in fact each of the outlooks stand out equally valid. This becomes the main attraction to all his readers. This attitude has granted him universal readership as it caters to the mind sets of different people.

Similarly, “Mending Wall,” the leading poem in *North of Boston*, again picks up an ordinary event when two otherwise friendly neighbours argue on how important it is to keep a wall between them as they walk along their common wall replacing stones having fallen due to snowfall in winter; their differing stances towards the presence of walls and boundaries offers symbolic and metaphysical significance to this poem. Being a philosophical poet, Frost has cleverly intertwined the literal and metaphoric meaning into the poem using the wall as a symbolic representation of barriers that separate neighbours in their friendship. Further, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” is a brilliant poem in which a reader artistically travels from the mundane to the philosophical. Frost’s skill at conveying how life is always surrounded by death is a treat in itself. The poem is very short and apparently very simple but Frost is himself reported to having said about the poem that it is the kind he would like to print on one page followed by “forty pages of footnotes.” It is about a speaker who stops his cart in the midst of inviting snowy woods that cast heavy gloom on him. However, the recollection of practical duties calls him back to life and its constituent anxieties. The essence of the poem lies in the following verses:

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”⁷

Another example of how Frost brings out the extraordinary out of the ordinary is his poem “West-Running Brook”. This poem refers to a brook that, with a mind of its own, flows west instead of east to the Atlantic like all other brooks. The brook becomes the mouthpiece for the poem’s speaker who trusts himself to go by contraries, rebellions and extreme individualism. Out of a natural phenomenon, Frost develops themes of resistance and self-realization. In some respects the poem deals with same theme as dealt in “The Road not Taken.” The title itself is metaphorically used to mean the choices made in life, taking a right decision at the right time and never regretting the decision taken. He writes:

“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 travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.”⁸

Such poems invoke in the reader the sense of hope as well as loss that such choices entail. Babette Deutsch reviewed the collection in which the “West Running Brook” appeared in the New York Herald Tribune, with the following comment: “The courage that is bred by a dark sense of Fate, the tenderness that broods over mankind in all its blindness and absurdity, the vision that comes to rest as fully on kitchen smoke and lapsing snow as on mountains and stars—these are his, and in his seemingly casual poetry, he quietly makes them ours.”

Frost in his poetry concretized his philosophy and ideas to the extent that each of his ideas and also the way he has executed every single idea has secured for itself a space not only in the British and American literary tradition but throughout the world as well. When he writes, that a “poem is a thought-felt thing” he actually asserts his belief in reason. Robert Frost celebrates life whole-heartedly. He does not advocate a rejection of life, but an acceptance of it with all its limitations. Here he seems to be in line with the humanistic philosophy of Walt Whitman. Both love the world and the life in it, even though they often find faults in it, and they occasionally resort to quarrels with it. Sometimes, Frost portrays man alone in an ultimately indifferent universe and takes the help of metaphors from the natural world to define that condition. Further, Frost highly respects diversity. He is fully aware of the distances between one man and another and he is also always aware of the distinction and the ultimate separateness, of nature and man. He treats this distinction as a concrete reality. In fact, this could be seen as one of the reasons whereby he debunks his own generalizations about life and nature. He doesn’t stick to a single idea. His philosophy is the philosophy of flux and fluidity. This flux is concrete and real and the breeding ground of his work.

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