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Man, Nature, and Art in Robert Frost's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Although Robert Frost's poetic output is prodigious,[1] three things or ideas predominate in his verse, namely: the love of man (or his fellow human beings); the love of nature and the physical world order; and the love of art, especially poetic art. These three areas are what this paper sets out to discuss, and it is along these three aesthetic trajectories that this essay will be divided and addressed. In discussing these areas, an attempt will be made to examine the diversity of Frost's lyricism, the poet's sense of Romanticism, and the particular rhetorical and poetic devices which he employs to elucidate or illuminate his work. Frost's aesthetic range embodies the employment of symbolism, paradox, the use of colloquialism and common speech reminiscent of Wordsworth's poetic style, the employment of the first person pronoun "I," as well as the use of the iambic pentameter lyrical structure.

INTRODUCTION

Frost views humanity from interesting perspectives: his strengths and limitations, his ability to recognize the forces of good and evil, and his capacity to use his free will and natural instincts to make his choices against a backdrop of a complex and complicated universe. Frost also sees Nature as comprehensive and infinite, encompassing the animate and the inanimate, and consisting of God and everything else, of which He is the Creator and the Supreme authority. Further, Nature consists of life, death, and immortality, the visible and the invisible and other variables. With regard to Art, it exists in the context of Man and Nature, and all three collectively define the range, scope, and compass of the universal cosmos.

[I]

Man in Robert Frost's Poetry

Robert Frost is a Romantic poet in the sense that he writes and celebrates those things that excite his soul, passions, and sensibilities. In a mode reminiscent of William Wordsworth, for example, the theme of Man or human relationships and their consequences, is a dominant aesthetic motif in his verse. In such lyrics as "Mending Wall" and "The Road Not Taken," Frost views humanity from various contexts and ramifications, and celebrates them -- although sometimes agonizingly and heart-wrenching -- with extraordinary grace, sincerity, and candor.

"Mending Wall,"[2] a poem which President John F. Kennedy quoted partly during his visit to the Berlin Wall, is set in a New England Yankee farmland. But it is not only the popularity which the lyric has gained by the President's citation of it that makes it remarkable, but the human drama which it evokes. Frost, along with his neighbor, argue in contrastive tones, about what to do regarding the frost's menace which annually destroys the wall that separates their common border. Interestingly, while Frost avers that "something there is that doesn't like a wall," his neighbor's response is diametrically opposite: "Good fences make good neighbors." The important thing about this dialogue is not so much the difference in human experience and conviction, but the variables which exists in human communications.

The central premise of the poem rests on the "iconoclastic" aversion to wall erection, as suggested by Frost on one hand, vis-à-vis the antithetical position offered by his farmer-neighbor on the other. We have here, then, a drama of wits. So many interpretations are possible as far as the dialogue between them goes. First, the poet, who doggedly insists that a wall is an imperative, may symbolize modernism, while his neighbor (described as "an old-stone savage armed") may symbolize traditionalism. Secondly, the vagaries of human life are dramatized vividly before our own eyes: while the neighbor, who insists on a wall, suggests a sense of fear and insecurity, Frost, the poet-persona who sees the fence as a barrier, displays a sense of maturity and the brotherhood of all humanity.

The colloquial language of common speech, which Frost employs to drive home his message, is not without effect: First, it is the most effective mode of communication among the common people of New England with whom the poet interacted almost on a daily basis during his lifetime. Secondly, it is appropriate that the poet-persona and his farmer-neighbor employ this kind of discourse in order to strengthen their friendship and loyalty to each other. And thirdly, it recalls Wordsworth's poetic dictum (as enunciated in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads) that it is better for the poet to employ the "language really used by men" because it is "a more permanent and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by the poets."[3]

Finally, although differences of opinion exist between Frost and his neighbor, the poem draws our attention to the need for dialogue and mutual

respect and understanding in any human relationships. The spirit of get-togetherness, which the poet articulates in order to avert any possible conflicts and disagreements, is a central element of the poem's didacticism. Consequently, for example, the poet-persona decides to "walk the line" with his neighbor so as to resolve the common issue at stake, that is, the need to repair the worn-out portions of the fence which are destroyed annually by the ravaging winter.

Frost expands the frontiers of the vagaries of human experience further in his masterpiece, "The Road Not Taken:"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear
Though as for that the passing there
Had worm them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.[4]

In the above poem, Frost is in a state of monologue, talking to himself on one level, and to all humanity on the other. On the personal level, he is in a state of quandary, trying to figure out if he has made the right choice in following his instants by threading the road "less traveled by." The dilemma and subsequent confusion, which the issue of making a choice raises for the poet and for all humanity, is suggested by the poet's repetitive employment of the first person pronoun "I:"

… I could not travel both
… Long I stood
… I kept the first for another day
… I doubted if I should never come back
… I shall be telling this with a sigh
… I took the one less traveled by. (NAMP, p. 196).

On the universal level, Frost is talking about the common problem which confronts all humanity: Man must accept the realities or challenges of this world, and sometimes must address them. In life, we must make our choice, sometimes between apparently diverse and compelling situations: love, marriage, profession, religion, etc. At times our judgment may be wrong, and at other times we may be right, but the occasion which precipitates the need to make a choice between alternative points of view cannot be easily forgotten or wished away. And, as Frost makes clear, the thought of what may or may not have been, lingers on forever ("for ages and ages hence").

What moral lesson does this poem teach us? The lesson is a symbolic one: it is not just the road, or path, or the ultimate choice in life which man must of necessity make that matters, but the inherent limitations in man's basic nature. Man is so limited in his abilities that he has no way of knowing the end result of the choices that he makes, or must make, or of understanding the full dimensions of his own choices. This is the fulcrum of the poem's argument and, perhaps, why the poem remains one of the most fascinating and memorable among Frost's lyrics. As Randall Jarrell rightly notes:

> This recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation, is very rare and very valuable, and rather usual in Frost's best poetry.[5]

Other Frost's poems discuss various human predicaments and experiences. For example, in "Birches," the poet ponders over the material world vis-à-vis the spiritual world, in which the rough and tumble of life is mitigated by spiritual salvation ("Earth's the right place for love… I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,/And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk/Towards heaven…"). In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost, in company with his horse, wonders as to why he should suddenly stop in order to appreciate the beauty of the "night," the "snow," and the thought of the owner of the "woods." And in the epigrammatic "Fire and Ice," Frost discusses the perennial fear of humanity as to how the universe will ultimately come to an end:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

(NAMP, p. 204).

[II]

Nature in Robert Frost's Poetry

Nature, as discussed in Frost's poetry, is expansive, inclusive, varied, and illuminating; its provenance is also encompassing and pervasive. We find all of these features and characteristics in such Frost's poems as "After Apple Picking," "The Oven Bird," "The Bear," "Desert Places," "Tree at My Window," and "Provide, Provide."

In "After Apple-Picking," we learn about several philosophical realities in Nature: first, that after exhaustive labor, fatigue and tiredness must necessarily set in. ("I am done with apple-picking now… I am drowsing off"); secondly, that Man must, by nature, be diffident or weary whenever he gets an abundance of what he wants or likes ("I am overtired/Of the great harvest I myself desired"); and thirdly, that nature has a way of furnishing the human race with critical and concrete reminders -- as when the "woodchuck" is brought into the last lines of the poem's narrative in order to perform its daily assignment ("The Woodchuck could say whether it's his/Long sleep, as I describe its coming on/Or just some human sleep").

In "The Oven Bird," we also learn about different things in Nature. As a philosophical specie, "The Oven Bird" symbolizes many things, especially the end of one season ("summer"), and the beginning of a new one ("autumn"); it also suggests life and death. The poem's rhetorical question, that is, about "what to make of a diminished thing," is significant: it recalls W.B. Yeats' poem, "When You Are Old," where the elder poet laments the "sorrows of your changing face." For Frost, apparently, a "diminished life" is old age, which Yeats characterizes in his "Sailing to Byzantium" as "A tattered coat upon a stick." Consequently, this question about what to make about life and death, and their interwoven interrelationship, is one of the fundamental questions in Nature, of which humanity has yet to find an answer.

The subtlety of Nature in the universal flux of things is what Frost explores in "Desert Places:"

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it – it is theirs
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with no desert places.
(NAMP, p. 211).

In this poem, we are presented with a sense of loneliness and emptiness in nature. The poem's title supports this interpretation, as are the negative images employed by the poet: "Snow falling and night falling fast," "the ground almost covered smooth in snow," "I am too absent-spirited," "All animals are smothered in their lairs," "that loneliness/will be more lonely," "whiteness of benighted snow," "With no expression, nothing to express," and "stars where no human race is."

The contrast and variables in nature, which Frost addresses in this poem, are interesting. On a superficial level, the state of hopelessness and loneliness presented seems irremediable and irredeemable. Yet within this state of emptiness, we are presented with positive images which are promising, such as the presence of "a few weeds and stubble showing last," and the fact that "I have it in me so much nearer home." If the interpretation of the poem is extended to the human level, the poem's symbolism is clear enough: Nature has a way of sustaining nature and of making up for our deficiencies.

A discussion of the theme of nature in Frost's poetry will be incomplete and unrealistic without a consideration of God's place in the universal scheme of things. This is the reason why Frost's "Design" is such as interesting poem. Frost's biographer, Lawrence Thompson, provides some notes to the poem which links the Creator to the content of the poem. He speaks of "a beautiful young woman who nursed King David in his old age."[6] David was the son of God; the relationship between Father and Son is very well known.

The poem's suggestive title, "Design," helps our understanding and appreciation of its thematic and stylistic structure. Symbolically, God has a hand in every human affairs. Everything that occurs in life is by design, and is an act by God. The poem is a petrarchan sonnet which, true to type, is carefully organized into fourteen lines, with the first eight lines serving as the octave, while the last six lines serve as the sestet. The poem's rhyme scheme is abba abba cdc cdd:

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth –
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth –
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth
And dead wing carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall? –
If design govern in a thing so small.
(NAMP, p. 212).

There are several interesting things about this poem: First, it has a one-word title ("Design") which is colorful and symbolic. Secondly, the image "the ingredients of a witches' broth," recalls the sinister utterances of the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Thirdly, the alternating employment of positive images in the poem with negative ones (e.g., "white heal-all" versus "Assorted characters of death and blight") suggests a balancing act in nature. Fourthly, the division of the poem into a two-part structure, that is, the octave and the sestet, suggests the dichotomy of the natural universe. Finally, the preponderant use of positive images in the poem not only suggests the complexity of life, but shows that, for Frost, Nature is the source of all truth and all reality. The sense of God and His wonders is woven into the fabrics of this poem.

[III]

Art in Robert Frost's Poetry

Frost believes strongly in poetry that employs simple diction to illustrate its message, not only because it is the best means of effective communication, but because, as Martin Heidegger points out, "language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man's being"[7]. Like William Wordsworth, who employs the language of the masses in his work,[8] Frost similarly employs the diction of the common man in his verse, especially the lyricism which is free from jargon and colloquialism.

In the poem, "Birches," for example, Frost employs such everyday words as "trees," "wood," "breeze," "summer," "winter," "swinger," "earth," "air," "hair," "cracks," "Truth," "learned," "broken," "climbing," "burns," and "snatch" in order to illustrate his message which centers on the white and graceful-looking birches, in contrast to the other trees of the country landscape that are dark or dull-looking.

Frost employs simple words like the above, moreover, because they relate to incidents and situations of which he is deeply familiar or has an abiding interest: especially regarding farming and poetic art. In other instances it could simply be a discussion of simple subjects, such as home burial (as in "Home Burial") or the loneliness of the country folks (as in "The Ax Helve"), or simply because such everyday subject matter provides him with the opportunity to employ simply diction to enhance or discuss his artistic vision.

Frost's sense of art -- highly individualistic in tone and mood -- is always to be seen or felt in his writings. He cares less about conventional or

traditional forms of expression (like the sonnet sequence with the iambic pentameter structure, for instance). And there are hardly any known literary influences in the mode reminiscent of Yeats or Eliot or Pound. Rather, the individualistic tenor of his lyricism is found in such poems as "The Wood-Pile" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," where his preponderant employment of the first person pronoun "I" defines his ethos and integrity. In "The Wood-Pile," for example, his unique individual voice is unmistakable:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I passed and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther – and we shall see."
The hard snow held me, save where now and then
One foot went through. The view was all in lines
Straight up and down of tall slim trees.
Too much alike to mark or name a place by
So as to say for certain I was here.
Or somewhere else. I was just far from home.
A small bird flew before me. He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought I was after him for a feather.
……(NAMP, p.195).

Frost's view of art can also be seen from the other poetic devices which he employs. Particularly noteworthy is his use of suggestive imagery. In the poem, "After Apple-Picking," Frost's employment of the word "Apple" is suggestive. The word "Apple" is a delicious fruit. The tiredness and fatigue, which the poet-persona experiences after apple-picking, symbolizes the waning of his poetic ability. Thus, just as Milton in his poem, "On His Blindness," laments his inability to continue with his pursuit -- as a result of his blindness -- Frost, in this lyric, laments the fact that the weariness and bodily pain which he now experiences may be a pointer to his own demise and ultimately his aesthetic pursuit.

For Frost, poetic art is eclectic and full of several insights and possibilities. Consequently, we find his use of the blank verse in "The Ax Helve;" his employment of the terza rima form in "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Acquainted with Death;" his experimentation with the Petrarchan sonnet sequence as in "Range-Finding;"[9] and his use of the Shakespearean sonnet form as in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." In all of these poetic devices, Frost highlights several qualities generally associated with poetic art: truth, beauty, universality and immortality.

CONCLUSION

What can we now conclude regarding Frost's view of man, nature, and art? Frost recognizes the strengths and limitations of humanity, and his ability to follow his own natural instincts and act in accordance with his independent free will. The poet understands the complexity of the universe: consequently, he looks at man in the context of several variables, including his unique emotions, his recognition of good and evil, his antithetical nature, and his place in the context of life and death. And he celebrates man objectively and profoundly: his neighbor (as in "Mending Wall"), the common man (as in "The Death of the Hired Man" and "Home Burial") and Biblical figures (as in "A Masque for Reason" and "A Masque for Mercy"). As Randall Jarrell says about Frost, "No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men."[10]

Frost believes in a universe that recognizes the existence of God in the general scheme of the natural universe. Consequently, his world view of nature is comprehensive, expansive, accommodating and encompassing. Much like William Wordsworth in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Frost recognizes and celebrates the most basic and infinitesimal elements in nature, including the snow, the wood, the fire, the ice, the common man, and the oven bird.

With regard to Frost's view of art, it is fairly safe to conclude that his artistic vision is boundless, and that it embodies the employment of diverse poetic devices, including dialogue, personification, and elaborate imagery. Furthermore, there is a synergy of purpose in his poetic spectacle which finds unity and harmony between man, nature, and art. As Longinus explains, "For art is perfect only when it looks like nature, and again, nature hits the mark only when she conceals the art within her"[11]. Frost unites all three disparate elements -- man, nature, art -- and herein lies his greatness as a poet.

NOTES

1. For example, his major poetical works include the following: A Boys Will (1913), North of Boston (1914), Mountain Interval (1916), New Hampshire (1923), West-Running Book (1928), A Way Out; The Cow's in the Corn (1929), A Further Range (1936), A Witness Tree (1942), Come in, and Other Poems (1943), A Masque of Reason (1945), A Masque of Mercy: Steeple Bush (1947), and In the Clearing (162). Frost is known to have acquired as many as forty-four honorary degrees during his long career.

2. This was the first poem in Frost's verse collection, titled North of Boston (1914). The work was highly successful and served as a source of inspiration to the young poet.

3. William Wordsworth, "The Subject and Language of Poetry," (in Preface to Lyrical Ballads), The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. 2, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), p. 157.

4. Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O' Clair (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 193-194. All citations of Frost's poems will come from this edition; subsequent citations will be abbreviated as NAMP, followed by the page number(s).

5. See Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p.39. Although Jarrell is referring to Frost's poem, "Neither Out Far Nor Deep," where he makes this statement, the comment applies appropriately also to "The Road Not Taken."

6. See the notes provided by Lawrence Thompson in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O' Claire, p. 212.

7. Martin Heidegger, Poetry Language, Thought, translated and introduced by Albert Hafsladder (New York and London: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), p. 189.

8. See William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. II, pp. 157-170.

9. Frost's Letter to Amy Lowell regarding this poem (see Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O' Claire, p. 199) notes as follows: "Would it amuse you to learn that Range Finding belongs to a set of war poems I wrote in time of profound peace (circa 1902)? Most of them have gone the way of waste paper. Range Finding was only saved from going the same way by Edward Thomas who liked it… he thought it so good a description of No Man's Land."

10. Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age, p. 28.

11. See Longinus, Classical Literary Criticism, tran. and introduced by T.S. Dorsch (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 131.

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