184

ROBERT FROST'S THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POETRY

A THESIS

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PREFACE

Although Robert Frost occupies a unique position in modern poetry, he has not received the careful critical evaluation his work deserves. Anyone who has studied the numerous articles and books about him is quick to note that much has been done in the way of biographical sketches, regional vignettes, and appreciation, but little effort has been made to examine the poetry itself.

There are many reasons for this lack of serious consideration. The main cause, however, is to be found in the very nature of his art. The poetry he has written is of a type distinctly different from that of his major contemporaries. At first glance, his work has an unusual simplicity which sets it apart. Frost's poetry does not conform to any of the conventional devices characteristic of modern poetry.

Modern poetry often exhibits obscurities of style and fragmentary sentences, whereas, Frost's sentences are clear. In modern poetry the verse forms are irregular with abrupt shifts from subject to subject. Frost's language is conventional - close to everyday speech. Because he demands less erudition in the reader, his poetry may appear to lack the depth of thought that is found in the best modern verse. He is paradoxical, and he seldom meets the modern reader's expectations. In modern poetry, one expects an ironic view and finds Frost capricious; one expects a tension of feeling and finds Frost writing in quiet, flat conversational tones; one expects bold metaphor and finds him indulging in playful comparison. The illusion of simplicity is so dominant and his manner so familiar and easily comprehended that one is tempted to

assume that there is no need to examine his methods as a poet.

Since very little scholarly research has been done on the poetry of Frost, it is the purpose of this thesis to provide a synthesis of basic information that may bring a better understanding of his work. For convenience, this study has been divided into the following chapters: "Frost's Theory of Poetry," "Major Themes in Frost's Poetry," and "Frost's Language and Style." Chapter I will consider his poetic credo and practices as they are formally definable from a general discussion of some of his major works. In addition, this chapter will take into account the principles which he sets forth in relation to the function of poetry. In Chapter II Frost's major themes will be discussed, and explications will be made of several poems which have been carefully selected to represent some of the best of his works in lyric, dramatic and satiric forms. In the last chapter the writer will examine the language and style of Frost's poetry. An evaluative conclusion will attempt to define the position of the poet and his poetry in the literary world today.

I am eager to acknowledge my indebtedness and appreciation to the individuals who assisted in making the study a pleasurable task.

To Dr. Thomas D. Jarrett, for his guidance, loans of useful materials and wise counsel, I make foremost acknowledgement of appreciation and gratitude.

To the late Mr. G. Lewis Chandler, who helped me overcome difficulties in securing important information by giving me access to his library; this and other forms of assistance rendered by Mr. Chandler, are acknowledged with profound gratitude.

To my mother, without whom neither life nor work would bring

fulfillment. Long before I became acquainted with Frost, it was she who taught me that I had "miles to go" before I slept if I were ever to travel "the road not taken" by any other member of my family.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost's life, like his poetry is filled with curious contradictions. It would be strange indeed if any account of his life were given without some mention of them. In "West-running Brook," a dramatic dialogue by Frost, a farmer and his wife are presented as engaging in a playful argument on the contrary direction of a small New England stream. This small stream, though running westward, must in its course flow into the Atlantic. During the course of their conversation, they observe the motion of a white wave as it is flung counter to itself against the current of black water which is caught on a sunken rock. The husband says,

> Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
> In that white wave runs counter to itself.

Quite obviously, various contraries are interrelated to focus attention on the poet's dominant and recurrent themes. The present writer, however, will make temporary use of this wave image to suggest a possible approach to an interpretation of Robert Frost's life and art, in relation to elements that run counter to themselves.

First of all, though descended from a long line of New Englanders who had been rooted in New England since 1632, Frost was born in California. Although he is most typical of American poets, he received his first recognition in England. Consequently, his first two books were published abroad. He has never been of a competitive spirit and does

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[1]For this historical material, the present writer is indebted to Louis Untermeyer and his introduction to an anthology of Robert Frost's Poems /Robert Frost, An Anthology of Robert Frost's Poems (New York, 1966), pp. 2-13/.

not believe in prize contests, yet he has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize four times for the best book of poetry of the year. He has chosen to write his blank verse monologues in the flat, homely, rough and conversational tones of everyday speech, yet his lyrics are noted for their delicate and precise music. The titles of his books, North of Boston, Mountain Interval, New Hampshire and A Further Range seem local, yet this seemingly regional poetry has universal appeal.

His father was of a restless and sometimes rebellious nature. It had been the hope of the family that William Prescott Frost would be a lawyer, instead he became a teacher, then an editor, and finally a politician. He revolted against Republican New England and moved to California to work on the San Francisco Bulletin, a Democratic newspaper. During the Civil War, he was sympathetic toward the southern cause and was an avid supporter of states' rights. It would have been quite appropriate for his son, born on March 26, 1874, to have been christened Robert Burns Frost in honor of the great English bard, since he chose to write poetry. This was not the case, however. He was named after the great southern soldier, Robert E. Lee.

During the days of Frost's youth, San Francisco was a rough town. The elder Frost could not adjust to the strain and stress of an editor-politician in a boisterous community and succumbed to tuberculosis in his early thirties.

The fatherless boy was taken back to the New England of his ancestors by his mother. His mother began teaching school and reading to him. Nevertheless, he was fourteen before he read his first book, Scottish Chiefs, and he later read Tom Brown's School Days. He discovered poetry through his readings of Poe and Emerson. He admired the

beautiful music of Poe equally as much as the meaningfulness of Emerson. It was during this stage of his life that he began to compose his own verse. His first poem was long ballad about Cortez and the night he was driven out of Mexico City. It appeared in the Lawrence High School Bulletin. At the age of nineteen his first professional poem was printed in The Independent, a magazine of national circulation. He was paid fifteen dollars for this poetic endeavor. His mother was pleased, but his grandfather was disturbed. His grandfather said, "No one can make a living at poetry. But I tell you what," he added shrewdly, "we'll give you a year to make a go of it. And you'll have to promise to quit writing if you can't make a success of it in a year. What do you say?"

"Give me twenty-give me twenty," replied the nineteen year old Robert Frost.

Without a doubt, his muse overheard the youthful joking auctioneer and decided to punish him; for it was a full twenty years later that Frost's first book, A Boy's Will (1934) was published. The book was a tremendous success, and Frost was proved an accurate prophet.

He has always been more practical than academic. At the insistence of his grandfather he matriculated in both Dartmouth College and Harvard without taking a degree from either institution. Within two months of study at Dartmouth, he returned home. "I was mostly roughing around up there," he said years later.

After two years of his marriage, his grandfather gave him a farm near Derry, New Hampshire. He farmed for five or six years, but in the end he turned to teaching as a part time vocation. At thirty-five he sold his Derry farm and with that money plus the little he had saved by

teaching at Pinkerton Academy in Derry Village, he along with his family sailed for England. It was in England that his first book of poetry, A Boy's Will, was published.

In 1915 he returned to America and found himself suddenly and quite unexpectedly famous. Honors were heaped upon him. Within six months of his stay in America, he delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Tufts College, and immediately afterward he was invited to join the advisory board of the short-lived monthly, The Seven Arts. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; he became Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa poet. Harvard is one of the institutions from which he became a renegade alumnus.

His first book, A Boy's Will, was a stepping stone to continual success. Frost is the only poet to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the best book of poetry four times--in 1924, for New Hampshire; in 1931, for Collected Poems; in 1937, for A Further Range; and in 1945 for A Witness Tree. As time passed, he accumulated more honors. He was co-founder of a summer institution in the mountains of Vermont-the now famous Bread Loaf School of English. He was awarded honorary degrees by Columbia, Dartmouth, Yale, Harvard and other colleges and universities. He has the distinction of being one of the few authors to receive the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1961 he recited his patriotic poem, "The Gift Outright," at the inauguration of the late President John F. Kennedy. All this confirms his stature and status as a poet and public figure. No other poet in the history of the United States has ever been so honored.

Now that a superficial survey of Frost's life has been completed, in order to gain a comprehensive view, we can now focus attention on

problems of interpretation which might be phrased in questions such as these. What gains in our understanding of Frost's idiom can be achieved by noticing how some of his dominant themes run counter to each other? What essential elements of Frost's poetic theory can be deduced from his poetic practices?

CHAPTER I

FROST'S THEORY OF POETRY

Whether he states implictly or explictly, every poet has a poetic philosophy upon which his methods and techniques are based. In many instances, however, it is not always easy to pin-point the various aspects of a poet's credo; for quite often he will not set forth a theory of composition per se. Frost, unlike his contemporaries Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, for example, has made no effort to establish any definite or consistent theory of poetic art. Unlike his contemporaries, he has not written an essay on the function of poetry, nor has he attempted much critical commentary on the practice of other poets, thereby giving an explanation of his own. However, his basic views on his "ars poetica" or poetic theory may be discovered from fragments of his lectures, his readings, his introductions to his poetry, and his conversations.

To Frost, "poetry is a way of life." When he defines poetry in this manner, he is deliberately avoiding the use of the word "philosophy." He has never stated any systematic theory of poetry or of life, but he has made some epigrammatic statements which seem to summarize and encompass his many metaphoric musings about them.[1] To begin with, Frost has this to say about the genesis of a poem:

> It begins in delight, it inclines to
> impulse, it assumes direction with the first

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[1]Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver, 1962), p. 41.

> line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life.... It has denouement. It has an outcome that thought unforeseen was predestined from the first images of original mood and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for last. It finds its own name and it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in the same final phrase at once wise and sad-the happy sad blend of the drinking song.[1]

And again he says,

> A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found words...my definition of poetry (if I were asked to give one) would be this; words that have become deeds.[2]

Frost often draws an analogy between the course of a true poem and true love-they both begin as an impulse, a disturbing excitement to which the individual surrenders himself.[3] A poem, like love, has its origin in delight and inclines to impulse. This emotional tension finds its gradual resolution in the poem and the emotion finds its thought. In other words, within this emotional experience, the poem takes on a metaphorical meaning.[4] He further implies that he experiences a kind of recognition as part of his poetic impulse.

The recognition which Frost suggests as part of his poetic impulse

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[1]Lawrence Thompson, <u>Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost</u> (New York, 1942), p. 23.

[2]<u>Ibid</u>.

[3]<u>Ibid</u>.

[4]<u>Ibid</u>.

can be illustrated by his familiar poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.
>
> He gives his harness bells a shake
> To ask if there is some mistake.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promised to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.[1]

Within these lines the emotional tension resolves itself in the mental focus of a metaphor. The metaphorical plane of reference makes it possible for the poem to be considered on at least two levels of reference-literal and metaphorical. This dramatic lyric breaks into the middle of an incident; hence, there is a miniature drama unfolded, complete with setting, lighting, actors and property. Taken from a literal level only, the poem relates the story of a rural traveler whose short soliloquy describes the circumstances under which he has stopped his horse-drawn sleigh. As he talks, the reader discovers that he has stopped to enjoy the unusual beauty of the snowflakes falling against a background of dark trees. He should not remain there for many reasons, and even the little horse seems to know that the traveler should not

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[1]Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1949), p. 275. All subsequent references, unless otherwise stated, are made to this edition and are entered by title and page number only.

stop. But the rider is spell-bound and refuses to leave even though the woods are cold and lonely. Later on, however, he reluctantly moves on because he comes upon the realization of the duties and the distances confronting him. He has "promises" that he must keep and "miles to go" before he completes his journey.

If, on the other hand, the poem is considered on a metaphorical plane of reference, the rural traveler's journey is not just a pleasure trip, but it becomes the life of an individual whose life is frequently described as a journey on earth-a journey including happiness and hardship, duties and distances. In the light of these analogies, the other images offer valid correspondence. "The coldest evening of the year" when taken on a metaphorical plane of reference, does not refer to a decline in temperature; rather it has rather tragic implication. Within this bitter cold, an elementary revelation of beauty captivates the traveler. The traveler has now become a symbol and the reader may easily identify himself with the traveler. Yet, within this bitter cold, we are prone to tarry on our journey through life because of the paradoxically somber excitement and recompense. The reluctance to depart becomes an expression of the endless hunger for holding and making permanent a dark moment of enjoyable discovery in an evanescent experience. Nevertheless, we are impelled to move ahead because of other and inevitable commitments. The "promises" which we have made to ourselves and to others forbid us to linger. And too, there are "miles" that we must travel through other kinds of experiences before we surrender to that last and inevitable commitment in sleep-death.

However, we must be cognizant of the fact that there is much duplicity in the poem. To be more specific, though it never abandons its

pretense of being simple narration, the poem suggests larger meanings than mere surface reading will reveal. Here the poet pretends to be talking about one thing and all the while he is talking about many things. It is apparent that his poems are never about what they seem to be about. The incident of this poem, it is easy to conclude, is at root a metaphor.

Frost knew that this poem had been taken as a death poem and he said, "I never intended that, but I did have the feeling it was loaded with ulteriority."[1] What does he mean in this poem? This is a question he consistently declined to answer. His usual reply was, "You don't want me to tell you in other worse language, do you?" His purpose for responding to this kind of question was found in a preface that he wrote to Aforesaid, a published selection of poems given to persons present at his eightieth birthday dinner:

> The heart sinks when robbed of the chance to see for itself what a poem is all about.... Being taught poems reduces them to the rank of mere information.[2]

Thus, the incident of the traveler in the snowy woods may serve as an example to explain Frost's remarks relating to his own experience in analyzing that strange process which has to do with his poetic impulse. Wordsworth looked over his shoulder in a backward glance in order to find emotional excitement and inspiration. Paradoxically, Wordsworth's pursuit of ultimate reality in the impulse from a vernal wood becomes a

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[1]Wallace McPherson Alston, "Agnes Scott's Friendship with Robert Frost" (An address delivered on April 9, 1964, to the members of the South Atlantic Region of the American Association of University Women, meeting at Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia).

[2]Ibid.

form of escape from the unpleasantness of momentary passing actuality. Frost's method, on the other hand, is diametrically opposed. He deliberately ignores the ultimate reality of the religious and philosophic absolute and turns from the past until a momentary experience is illuminated with richer value by that which his experience is unintentionally brings to the present. Frost's quest of the present moment as the greatest reality becomes a pursuit in the Emersonian sense; it becomes implicit with newly perceived aspects of an evident design in the universe.[1] The past always transcends the present moment to reveal and illuminate the moment by transforming it into a metaphor which has for him both beauty and meaning. At this point, it may be valuable to reiterate his own statement:

> For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from a cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and rest fellows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere.[2]

However, between the process of that resolution and the moment of poetic impulse to the final completion of a poem, the persistent need for cunning and artistry presents itself. Since the poem does not write itself, it is the duty of the poet to establish a careful balance between the personal intimacy of the experience and the separation of the experience through statement which gains perspective without loss of

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[1] Thompson, op. cit., p. 27.

[2] Ibid., p. 21.

intensity. The thoughtful statement of the relationship between the present experience and recollected experience balances emotion. Therefore, balance plays a key role in Frost's artistry. Frost has said, "Keeping the thing in motion is sometimes like walking a rolling barrel." Again he compares it to riding a wild horse: "The great pleasure in writing poetry is in having been carried off. It is as if you stood astride of the subject that lay on the ground, and they cut the cord, and the subject gets up under you and you ride it. You adjust yourself to the motion of the thing itself. That is the poem.[1]

In human nature there are certain enduring qualities and everlasting truths which permit us to join in humerous hymns of joy or threnodies of sorrow.[2] "Let a poem be written on these themes and it will last," says Frost, "for it will forever keep its freshness...." Poetry is concerned with a meaning and truth which may clarify the mingled good and evil in life without becoming too hopeful or too doubtful ever the presence of either good or evil. This, then, is Frost's answer to those who question how poetry can become a "clarification of life" without becoming overly involved with meaning as an end in itself.

He continues with his comments on the purpose of his poetic art by stating, "performance and prowess are the chief objectives in the field of art."[3] He states also, "poetry is words that have become

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[1]"The Poet's Next of Kin in a College," a talk given by Robert Frost at Princeton University on October 26, 1937; published in Biblia, IX, no. I (February, 1938).

[2]Thompson, op. cit., p. 30.

[3]Reginald L. Cook, "Frost Asides His Poetry," American Literature, XIX (January, 1948), 352.

deeds."[1] The control plank in this platform only shows, then, that he makes the height of his poetry a performance in words and thinking.[2] With words and thoughts as guideposts to his poetic art, Frost is able to paint his country scenes with rare insight. He makes use of the things that are peculiar to the climate and topography of New England. The setting of New England provides a natural dramatic medium. It furnishes him with the stories, attitudes, characters and expressions which are appropriate to his needs.[3]

Without qualification, we can justly say that Frost's work is almost photographic. The pictures and the characters are direct reproductions of life. He has a knack for painting just what he sees as he sees it. He gives out with what has been put in unchanged by any personel mental process.[4] Basically, he is a nature poet who revels in such poems as "Birches," "Pea Brush," "Putting in the Seed," "The Cow in Apple Time," "A Late Walk," "Wind and Window Flower," and "Blueberries." The following lines show the poet's love of New England and his ability to interpret the things that are indigenous to New England Life.

> When I see birches bend left and right
> Across the lines of straighter darker tree,

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[1] Gorham B. Munson, Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense (New York, 1927), p. 98.

[2] Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost As a Teacher," College English, VIII (February, 1949), 255.

[3] William Van O'Connor, Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry (Chicago, 1948), p. 197.

[4] Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston, 1917), p. 81.

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
Ice storms do that. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. The click upon themselves
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel...[1]

With a vividness which is extraordinary, Frost has reproduced both people and scenery of his New England world. His book, North of Boston gives a photographic view of the huge hills, blueberry fields lying bare in the sun and autumn orchards over-burdened with fruit. Frost is a broad-minded poet. He embraces all facets of New England life. With the same ease that he sees life rich and abundant in New England; he sees, likewise, its death and decay. Take this picture of blueberries:

It must be on charcoal they fatten their fruit
I taste in them sometimes flavour of soot
And after all really they're ebony skinned;
The blue's but a mist from the breath of the wind,
A tarnish that goes at a touch of the hand,
And less than the tan with which pickers are tanned.[2]

Mere observation of his lines will reveal that Frost is a pure realist. Facts are presented in his verse as if they were his sole purpose in writing. "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," he states. His habit of resting his poetic interpretation upon a realistic basis is one of his most agreeable and characteristic traits.[3]

Since he has studied mankind in both rugged fields and academies of arts and sciences, he knows mankind with and without company manners. Frost has timed his poetry to the heart beat of the workday world. He

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[1]"Birches," p. 152.

[2]"Blueberries," p. 78. 11. 24-29.

[3]Richard Thorton (ed.). Recognition of Robert Frost (New York, 1937), p. 224.

has united poetry and action, love and need and hate and desire in a unique manner. His purpose is given in the following lines.

> But yield who will to their separation
> My object in living is to unite
> My advocation and my vocation
> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> For Heaven and the future's sake.[1]

Robert Frost is a New Englander by heritage and his verse bears marks of his regionalism; nevertheless, what he writes has universal significance. He is universal in that he seeks for eternity in the temporal and infinity in his own surroundings.[2] In a true sense, he represents "the fulfillment of much that was implicit in Emerson and in Thoreau and William Ellery Channing.[3] When he speaks, he not only talks about New England; rather, he is the voice of any section of the country. "Death of a Hired man" is not simple a poem about "a pathetic member of the silent majority of misery in this life;" it relates to the entire human condition.[4] Frost clarifies his own position as an artist perfectly in these lines.

> I'm what is called a sensibilist
> Or otherwise an environmentalist
> I refuse to adapt myself a mite
> To any chance from hot to cold, from wet

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[1]"Two Tramps in Mud Time," p. 357. ll. 65-71.

[2]Charles Angoff, "Three Towering Figures," The Literary Review, VI (Summer, 1963), 424.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

To dry, from poor to rich, or back again,
I make a virtue of my suffering
From nearly everything that goes on around me,
In other words, I know wherever I am,
Being the creator of literature I am
I shall not lack for pains to keep me awake.[1]

Here it is clearly shown that Frost is a poet influenced by his surroundings. These lines also illustrate that New England life is being viewed through the eyes of a sensibilists whose rich experience provide a fertile background for him to paint a vivid picture of New England. Nevertheless, he never fails to paint the facts of his chosen area.

It may be well here to discuss another facet of Frost's poetic theory. Frost defines poetry "as a way of life." When he defines poetry as such, he is identifying his double role as a human being and poet.[2] It is difficult to separate the man from the poet, for he lives as a poet who dedicates his entire existence to the service of making his art a clarification of truthful realities. For him, the maximum clarification of life comes through his practice of poetry. By a kind of magic synthesis, exploration and explanation are simultaneous in his adventure; poetry, to him, is "all there is to know." So, whether dealing with the common everyday problems that confront man, or describing a typical New England scene, the poet's conduct is interrelated with the workings of his poetry.

Without a doubt, Frost's life as a farmer and a poet of New England helps him to capture the true feeling of his countryside. Life in New

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[1] "New Hampshire," p. 199. ll. 1-10.

[2] Elizabeth Isaacs, _op. cit_., p. 39.

England has provided a rural setting appropriate for his art. He is no amateur ruralist; rather, he is a true son of rural life as the following lines will indicate.

> I choose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
> With an income in cash to say a thousand
> (From say a publisher in New York City),
> It's restful just to think about New Hampshire
> At present I am living in Vermont.[1]

Since he is a true son of New England soil, he is able to carry out his poetic purpose by "clarifying realities," through his interpretation of New England life and its peculiarities.

To Frost, no phase of New England life is insignificant. He pictures the scenes with poetic genius, and the nature and seasons of his region are realistically portrayed. Not only does he interweave his theory of poetic realism into his geographical sketches, but his character sketches as well are portrayed with poetic instinct for true-to-life qualities and sensibility of expression. A striking example of his interest in both his hillside country and neighbors can be seen in the lines below.

> If I must choose which I would elevate
> The people or the already lofty mountain
> I'll elevate the mountain.[2]

In order to understand Frost as a painter, it is necessary to consider two aspects of his art. In the first place, it is the result of his ability to select those details of scene or action and paint them truthfully. His best pictures are filled with experiences which when

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[1]"New Hampshire," p. 199. 19-23.

[2]*Ibid.*, ll. 26-28.

considered on a higher level of meaning symbolize life. Next, he is able to hear sounds of his province and reproduce them as living words for his verse. Gorham Munson observes:

> It is the poetry of observation, emotional response, lyrical, dramatic, humorous, tragic to what he has seen and heard.[1]

Frost feels that a poet should lean hard on facts, if he is to paint truthful pictures of life about. In "Mowing," he says, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." As a result of his depending heavily on facts, he is able to present life as it actually is without becoming sentimental in his rusticity. Despite his literal realism, he has never been a mere reflector of his chosen New England locale; rather he has learned to create the illusion of making the world he describes, and in his hands the region north of Boston becomes a self-sustaining, yet surprisingly inclusive microcosm with the character of Frost himself at center.[2]

In the lines illustrated below, Frost has vividly painted the rock-strewn land of Vermont.

> I farm a pasture where the boulders lie
> As touching as a basket full of eggs.[3]

His vivid pictures lack ornamentation, and it is clear that he is concerned with facts only. It is characteristic of his manner to reveal only what he sees as he sees them with truth and love. He is quoted as

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[1]Gorham Munson, op. cit.

[2]James M. Cox, "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXV (Winter, 1959), 77.

[3]Robert Frost, "Of the Stones of the Place," The Witness Tree (New York, 1959), p. 81.

saying: "We love the things we love for what they are."[1] The secret of his success as a painter lies in his ability to adhere to facts.

"Birches" furnishes a shining example where truth may again be seen as an important aspect of his art.

> But I was going to say when truth broke in
> With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
> I should prefer to have some boy bend them...[2]

This observation later gives in to creative imagination and the poem develops into a dream-land of trees swaying in the woods. Note the lively vigorous movement of the trees in the following lines.

> You may see their trunks arching in the woods
> Years afterward, trailing their leaves on the ground
> Like girls on hand and knees that throw their hair
> Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.[3]

This lively fantasy beautifully illustrates the poet's power to blend shrewd observation and imagination. The reader is suddenly arrested by a whimsical image, and the fact suddenly becomes a fancy. Fact and fancy play together throughout the poem. In like manner, wisdom and whimsey are combined to present the eternal search for the meaning of life. It goes without saying, that Frost with his eyes rivuted steadfastly on the birches, paints pictures in words that photographs his north of Boston scenery with conscientious efforts and prowess.

Even though Frost is unwilling to codify his poetic views in a formal essay, it is possible to glean fragmentary elements of his poetic theory from his creative output, lectures and conversation. He is

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[1] "Hyla Brook," p. 149. 1. 54.

[2] "Birches," p. 152. 11. 20-22.

[3] _Ibid_., 11. 24-28.

quoted as saying, "A poem must be a momentary stay against confusion. Each one must clarify something. Making poems encourages man to see that there is a shapeliness in the world. A poem is an arrest of disorder...." This is the key to the disciplines of Frost's poetic art. In his poetry, he strives to give life a little order and true meaning. If a poem fails to give order and meaning to life, it has failed Frost's test for felicity. Finally, his poems, though seemingly regional, take on universal significance because they deal with problems that are common to humanity.

CHAPTER II

MAJOR THEMES IN FROST'S POETRY

Robert Frost has often been compared with Wordsworth as a nature poet. In a casual way, nature is his subject, but to Frost it is never an inspirational force from a "vernal wood." His poetry concerns itself with the drama of man in nature; whereas, Wordsworth excels when he is emotionally exhibiting the vast spectacle of the natural world. In the fall of 1952, Frost said in a television interview, "I guess I'm not a nature poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in them." The similarity between Frost and Wordsworth is, of course, obbious; but casual observation will reveal that Frost's concept of the natural world is quite different from that of Wordsworth's.

While Wordsworth seeks a kind of mystical brotherhood between man and nature that will create a harmonious relationship between the two principles, Frost tends to create a feeling of mutual discord between them. He proposes for himself in "A Lesson for Today" to instigate a "Lover's quarrel" between the forces of the natural world and man. He has chosen this lover's quarrel for his subject, and throughout his poetry there are evidences of this view of man's existence in the natural world.[1] And herein lies one of his basic and recurrent themes-the indifference and blindness of nature toward man.

Frost is consistent in his attitude toward nature. Phases of the

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[1]Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature toward God," The South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII (Summer, 1958), 714.

above mentioned theme can be traced from his first publication, A Boy's Will down through his later publications. He has indicated a realization that nature willfully inflicts hurt upon those who love it.[1] The immediate natural, destined for chaos, seems intent upon taking men along with it, if he is not mindful. Man does have an advantage, however,

> We may doubt the just proposition of good and ill.
> There is much nature against us. But we forget;
> Take nature altogether since time began,
> Including human nature in peace and war
> And it must be a little in favor of man.[2]

In Frost there is no intimation that nature is wholly benevolent and purposeful. Nevertheless, man's struggle against unseeing power and fate is never diminished because his mind makes it possible for him to partially govern and make use of nature. In "Sand Dunes," one of his most characteristic metaphorical poems, Frost states the matter concisely: the ocean eats away at the shore endlessly and ferociously through the syllables of time, though she may change the position of sand dunes and even change the shoreline completely;

> She may know cave and cape,
> But she does not know mankind
> If by any change of shape
> She hopes to cut off mind.[3]

Not frequently in Frost's poetry does he seek unity between man and the natural world. In other words, the line of distinction between man and the inaminate world is always closely drawn; however there are times

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[1]Ibid.

[2]"Our Hold on, the Planet," p. 469, ll. 18-23.

[3]"Sand Dunes," p. 330, ll. 12-16.

when there is a longing in man to seek an almost mystical identification with nature as evident in these lines:

> I'm a poor underdog,
> But tonight I will bark
> With the great overdog
> That romps through the dark.[1]

There are times when Frost writes of the natural world in a Cavalier fashion which Wordsworth would think heretical.[2] He says, "You know Orion always comes up sideways."[3] To Frost nature is not the bearer of good tidings that Wordsworth saw. The natural world never sends Frost's rain and wind. It could possibly be, however, that a mountain

> had the slant
> As of a book held up before his eyes.
> And was a text albeit done in plant.[4]

Nevertheless, Frost's mountain does possess the human character as Wordsworth's does in The Prelude. His attitude toward nature becomes clear when he says,

> I wouldn't be a prude afraid of nature.[5]

and again quite pointedly, he says,

> Nothing not built by hands of course is sacred.[6]

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[1]"Canis Major," p. 331, ll. 9-12.

[2]Montgomery, *op. cit*.

[3]"The Star-Splitter," p. 218, l. 1.

[4]"The Mountain," p. 56, ll. 2-4.

[5]"New Hampshire," p. 210, l. 10.

[6]*Ibid*., l. 15.

Frost, like Wordsworth, speaks directly to objects in nature. In "The Tree at My Window," he observes how the branches are tossed about by wind and compares its state to his own feeling, deciding that

> That day she put our heads together
> Fate had her imagination about her
> Your head so much concerned with outer,
> Mine with inner weather.[1]

These instances of direct address may prompt one to suppose that Frost feels the kind of brotherhood for natural objects that is expressed in much of Wordsworth's poetry. Even though he speaks to them, his trees do not lose their identity by taking on human traits as Wordsworth's objects tend to do. When Frost talks directly to or directly of natural objects or creatures, we feel that he is really looking at man out of the corner of his eye and speaking to him out of the corner of his mouth.[2] He does not read nature into the animal and vegetable world as Wordsworth is inclined to do; rather he describes the animal and vegetable nature in man.

Nature has erected barriers to inhibit and eventually destroy man. If man were unable to destroy the barriers set up by nature, Frost feels that the world would be in a desperate and meaningless situation. In "Triple Bronze," we find that man has been provided with powers that will help him prepare for inner defense, and that man himself made a wall "of wood or granite or lime" which crime cannot breach. This concern with barriers is another of the dominant themes in Frost's poetry. These barriers fall into several distinct categories. Listed first

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[1] "Tree at My Window," p. 318, ll. 12-16.

[2] Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

among them is the great natural barrier-the empty space between man and the stars, a barrier which man constantly and sometimes foolishly tries to bridge in his attempt to escape his limited haunt. The very stars because of their aloofness, reduce man if he confuses distance and size with his own nature. Remembering an earlier age when man felt compelled to revolt from religion because God's remoteness seemed to reduce man, Frost makes a comparison between that age and our own:

> We both are the belittled race
> One as compared with God and one with space.[1]

But the remoteness of the stars at times is in man's favor. This remoteness is something that man can rest his mind on and feel content. In "Brown's Descent" the old farmer, grimly and determinedly, maintains his fight against the physical world. Even though he slides all the way down the mountain on the icy snow, he refuses to surrender to the forces of gravity. In the end he is victorious, but not before he finally yields to natural laws, and goes around the mountain and re-establishes himself on top. The laws of nature are inexorable, but man is armed against them; therefore, he can make allowances. Nevertheless, there are those individuals who are satisfied to have a barrier stand as a constant challenge which they never quite accept. For example, there is the elderly teamster of "The Mountain" who never leaves this particular place of habitation. He always intends to climb the mountain, but never does. There are others, however, who accept the challenge and go down in defeat. The gaunt and ugly buildings in the deserted village of the "Census Taker" will bear witness to such a failure. In Frost's long poem "Snow" a preacher leaves the comfort and warmth of a neighbor's

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[1]"The Lesson for Today," p. 473, ll. 2-3.

house because he feels that he must go out and conquer the blizzard. Whenever there is failure and the natural world wins out, there are always the young who follow to restore where their fathers failed. In "Generations of Men" a boy and girl meet at the ruins of an old home-place and talk about their families and the decayed place. In the end they make a pact to return and rebuild the decayed home place.

Even though Frost appears to be at odds with nature most of the time, there are instances when his attitude toward nature is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with the crossings of the boundaries separating the two principles, individual man and the physical forces of the world.[1] In "Two Look at Two," the man and woman feel a natural kinship between themselves and the buck and doe that stand before them. The Wordsworthian influence is clearly discernible in these lines.

> Still they stood
> a great wave from it going over them,
> As if earth in one over-looked-for favor
> Had made them certain earth returned their love.[2]

And there are other instances when Frost assumes a likeable attitude toward nature. His poem "A Dust of Snow" was originally called "A Favor." He recounts that once while he was sitting by a window, an owl banked itself against the window pane and suddenly took flight. He felt that the owl had spoken to him or favored him. Thus, the poem was entitled "A Favor" because according to Frost, it had come to him as one of nature's favors.

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[1] Montgomery, op. cit., p. 143.

[2] "Two Look at Two," p. 282, ll. 39-42.

However, even in these moments of favor, there are always barriers that cannot be crossed. Natures favors are limited. The humor in "Dust of Snow" is not blurred by the fact that the crow's actions are accidental and unintended: a window pane stands between the poet and the owl. In the poem "Two Look at Two" a man-made fence stands between the human and the natural world. Man is never completely certain that nature returns his love.

No one would argue with the statement that Robert Frost appears to be happiest and most comfortable when he turns to direct, spontaneous observation or relatively natural things in an environment writ large.[1] Such poems as "The Pasture" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" are good nature poems, but they do not deal with the problems that underlie much of Frost's poetry. He does not see nature as an all prevading good spirit. Most of the time he is concerned with nature as being malevolent and hostile toward man.

"The Demiurge's Laugh" is illustrative of Frost's concept of nature as a grim and uncaring goddess. It begins with the scenic-experimental assuredness characteristic of Frost's poetry.[2] The ordinary characters of the woods are substituted for extraordinary ones. The poet, chasing an answer to an unexpressed question, assumes that he has passed beyond the object of his search-Demiurge; for the god rises from his wallow and laughs. The poet quickly abandons the search because he feels that the god is without any feeling toward him. In this supernatural scene,

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[1]Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor, 1963), p. 26.

[2]Ibid.

mechanics of the universe are presented as real and inharmonious with man's ordinary hopes. Although appearing to be real and powerful, this god proves false. In short, when Frost is closest to nature, even the intimate nature of "The Pasture," he is able to furnish examples of a foreign interference. When he looks beyond the edges of the universe, he often repeats the theme of the uncaring Demiurge. Momentarily, he may feel that the constellations are related to man, but their impersonality soon becomes apparent. "Stars" will substantiate this fact.

Those stars like some snow white
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
Withdraw the gift of sight[1]

Since he feels a separation between himself and the outer cosmos, he gives up his search when he hears Demiurge's laugh. There is no harm in giving up his hunt. On the other hand, there is something wrong when he tends to turn toward an anti-intellectualism when he faces an uncaring god, who he feels may after all be a true god.[2] In "The Star-Splitter," Brad McLaughin burns his house down for the insurance money in order to buy a telescope. The poet narrator accepts this dishonesty with amused tolerance. And though he admits that he and Bradford "said some of the best things we ever said," the last question is "What good is a telescope?" "We've look and looked, but after all where are we?" This same attitude is expressed in such poems as "On Looking up by Chance at Constellations" and "The Bear." In "Desert Places," for example, the poet issues some practical boasting in "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces/Between stars-on stars where no human race

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[1]"Stars," p. 12, ll. 14-16.

[2]Squires, op. cit., p. 27.

is." Still Frost makes a declarative parallel between himself and the stars of space: "I have it in me and much nearer home' To scare myself with my own desert places."

It may be well to pause here to see just how Frost's themes of man and nature are in keeping with his poetic philosophy. In most instances, as has been illustrated throughout this discussion, Frost assumes a pessimestic attitude toward nature and her treatment of man. It must be remembered, however, that Frost is concerned with ultimate truth-at truth that will give a meaning to life. He is opposed to those who assume too much as to the extent and validity of human knowledge. He tells us that he has often shared the longing which inspires philosophers to project their systems beyond the realms of the known and the knowable.[1] He never grows weary of his own diligent quest for truth-not a philosophic truth, but a truth that will enable and give a meaning to life. He sees that nature, unintentional as she may seem, can be uncaring and impersonal when man is involved. As a result, when he writes, he projects the theme of the impersonal Demiurge.

Finally, he accepts the fact that he must surrender to the mood of isolation between himself and the natural world. In order to survive, he must allow himself the acknowledgement that he must accept the separateness of an uncaring universe. Peasant-like he cleaves straight to permanent essentials of his delineations of both man and nature.[2] In his poem "Fire and Ice" he admits the force of human passion and

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[1] Ludwig Lewisohn, The Story of American Literature (New York, 1939), p. 499.

[2] Ibid.

accepts ultimate and tragic circumstances which nature imposes on man. Nevertheless, though no conventional optimist, he is not hopeless. He feels that mankind has at least a fundamental moral energy which will protect man from the evil forces of the physical world.

If Frost feels, as he appears to, that nature is cruel, impersonal and unfeeling, what is his accessment of the creator? It is evident in his early poetry that he is not eager to say anything definitive on this matter. He, like the people he refers to in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," maintains his silence about God and his relation to man. This apparent reluctance to state his opinion about God has occasioned the belief among some critics that Frost is atheistic. It could be, however, that he feels that

> Heaven gives its glimpses only to those
> Not in position to look too close.[1]

Even though Frost does not make any sweeping comments on man and his relation to God, there is consistency in his view from his earliest to his latest publications as shown by "The Trial by Existence," a poem from A Boy's Will, and his two latter publications A Masque of Reason and A Masque of Mercy. "The Trial by Existence" suggests the utter futility in man's trying to seek a complete explanation of why there are so many difficulties in the world which prevent him from being totally at peace with himself and God. Man's true virtue, it asserts, is to dare, to seek and to build a wall which will protect him from the hardships of life. "The Trial by Existence" bears a close resemblance to Wordsworth's "Imitations Ode," and Frost doubtlessly had Wordeworth's

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[1]"The Strong Are Saying Nothing," p. 219, ll. 11-12.

poem in mind when he wrote it. Frost's poem shows the souls in Heaven before they come to earth. Each soul is eager to come to earth so that it may stand itself

> Heroic in its nakedness
> Against the uttermost earth.
> The tale of earth's unhonored things
> Sounds nobler there than neath the sun....[1]

God lets the soul go on its earthly mission on one condition. Frost's God, unlike Wordsworth's, makes it clear that no soul shall remember anything about its former state or about its earthward journey.

> ...the pure fate to which you go
> Admits no memory of choice,
> Or the woe were no earthly woe
> To which you give the assenting voice?[2]

The soul was given a moment to make its decision and then it began its earthly journey. As a result of this bargain made in heaven, man has no memory that tells him that he chose the woe of the world. God says, "There's no connection man can reason out/Between his just deserts and what het gets." Frost argues in this allegorical poem, "Trial by Existence," that there is no possibility that man will be able to be content with himself in a world in which God seems indifferent toward man.

In his later years, however, Frost has spoken more freely on his views of God and his relation to man and the physical world. An indication of his widening scope appeared in his book, A Further Range, published in 1936. In like manner, his works, A Masque of Reason (1945) and A Masque of Mercy (1947) are devoted to the question of man's

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[1] Robert Frost, "The Trial by Existence," A Boy's Will (New York, 1934), p. 40. ll. 42-46.

[2] Ibid., ll. 52-56.

relation to God-another of Frost's major themes. In A Masque of Mercy Frost attempts to justify the ways of God to man. In this work God is represented as a rather familiar being. This presentation of a cavalier God has caused many readers to consider the masque as indicative of Frost's cynicism and of his rejection of the Christian God. They argue that the masque convicts God of cruel injustice to man.

This presentation of a cavalier God is a deliberate device which accentuates the theme of the masque. It has already been established that whenever Frost speaks of or to nature, he is basically concerned with showing nature in man. When this view of nature has been considered, it becomes clear that his picture of God in A Masque of Reason shows not the lack of reason or justice in God, but man's stubborness and lack of understanding.[1] Only man like Job's wife, would exclaim, "It's God. I'd know him by Blake's picture anywhere."[2] In the same way that man has made the error of reading man into nature, so it has been his error of reading man into God; and Frost's poem, though satirical in its shrewd observation on this human fallibility, concerns itself with this problem. Can man reason sufficiently enough to overcome the wall between himself and God? Job, along with his wife, sought a rational explanation of man's condition which would clarify everything and bridge the wide gap between the finite mind and the infinite. The theme of the poem, then, is that understanding is dependent upon reason as well as faith-a faith that is strong enough to help the finite mind

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[1] Montgomery, op. cit., p. 142.

[2] Robert Frost, A Masque of Reason (New York, 1945), p. 2.

accept the mystery that reason cannot adequately explain. Job is unsatisfied when God attempts to help him by establishing the principle, "There is no connection man can reason out/Between his just deserts and what he gets." Moreover, Job and his wife, the ardent feminist, refuse to accept God's statement that "My forte is truth." They insist on reason so that they can make progress in the world. God leaves them to ponder this statement, "I was just showing off to the Devil, Job." They are more likely to accept this explanation than any other.

Poets since Shelley, and particularly since Whitman, have often chanted in one and the same tune, the joy of human brotherhood.[1] Now in Frost there also exists this spirit of brotherhood; but it is pitched in a key which subdued from the first, has become progressively more in keeping with the true tone of alienation and its effect on humankind. Fundamental among Frost's major themes then, is the theme of alienation or isolation of man from man. With his eyes focused attentively on "Truth with all her matter-of-factness, part of his poetic principle, the poet gives a two-sided picture of life. "Good fences make good neighbors;" but also on the other hand, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." This double text of "Mending Wall" represents in minature the great paradox which human society is confronted. "Walls" are necessary. But at the same time, progress toward brotherhood seems sadly restrained by "walls." Frost constantly displays the rank-growing selfishness which finds shelter behind human walls as in "Build Soil" when he says, "Keep off and keep each other off. We're too unseparate but among each other... Steal away and stay away." There is very little

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[1]G. R. Elliott, "The Neighborliness of Robert Frost," The Nation, CIX (December, 1919), 715.

in Frost's writing that will suggest that he is in favor of Christian charity and universal brotherhood under God.

In "Two Tramps in Mud Time," for example, Frost tells how two tramps came to a farmer's house and saw him chopping wood. They offered to do the job for pay and were refused. From their impoverished appearance, the farmer deduced that they were unemployed and that they had spent the winter in a lumber camp. Yet, the farmer did not help them. He sent them away without an offer of food or a job. This poem has prompted many of Frost's readers to think that he sets before his readers an ideal not of charity or brotherhood, but separateness.

> I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
> Collectivistic regimenting love
> With which the modern world is being swept.

Frost is aware of the powerful forces that aggravate the tension between man and his fellow beings. In North of Boston he attempts to make a dramatic projection of the theme of isolation. He may disagree with the separation of man from his fellow man just as much as any other man of wisdom but he sees it as a reality that everyone face in one way or another. And since he has chosen as his poetic duty to clarify life by a truthful portrayal of realities, it may be that he projects the theme of alienation in order to show how cruel man can be to his brother when his help is needed. Whenever he looks at life, he sees the predominence of tragedy, hatred and sorrow in the world and he writes of these realities in an effort to give a clarification of life.

CHAPTER III

FROST'S LANGUAGE AND STYLE

For twenty years Frost went unnoticed in the literary world. Time and time again he would send manuscripts to major literary magazines, and time and time again they were returned to him, bearing the label rejected. His critics contended that he lay outside the mainstream of the American conscious because he did not write about science and the machine age or any of the many other problems peculiar to America; rather they argued, he was walled in by the problems confronting one particular region of the country-New England.

To many critics Frost was a poet who treated minor themes. Some charged that his poems were not poetic because they had too much the sound of speech. Still undaunted, Frost decided to give his talent another chance. He sent a manuscript to an editor and asked for an honest appraisal of his work. He wanted to know exactly what his poems did to his readers. The unimpressed, but sympathetic editor wrote him a letter in which he told him that his poems talked, while other contemporary poetry had a singing quality. Consequently, his verse was certainly out of tune. The editor also suggested that Frost abandon writing as a livelihood and choose a trade. Characteristic of Frost, he ignored him and decided to capitalize on his greatest "weakness." He set out to make his poetry conversational-conversation with a Yankee accent.

It is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to analyze Frost's poetic theory without taking into consideration his concept of the

language of poetry. His language has its roots in New England soil. Only a man as familiar with New England as Frost is could write in such a manner.[1] The Yankee manner for which he is so well known is far more than technical achievement. Frost, like every poet, had to either find or create an individual idiom, and North of Boston is his crowning achievement. His readers are often impressed by the amazingly subtle mode of expression and delicacy of handling tonal effects. Expressiveness, however, is not its only value. More important, is Frost's ability to make his language function as an image. His Yankee manner thus becomes not only a way of speaking; it symbolizes a mode of thought. The representation of the thought process of his yankee speaker becomes a means of picturing the regional world itself.

Frost has said repeatedly that in his poetry he is not interested in adhering to any particular speech, unliterary, vernacular, or slang. He further asserts:

> What I have been after from the first, consciously and unconsciously is tones of voice. I've wanted to write down certain brute throat noises so that no one could miss them in my sentences. I have been guilty of speaking of sentences as a mere notation for indicating them. I have counted on doubling my meaning with them. They have I been my observation and my subject matter.[2]

This statement has prompted some critics to argue that Frost does no more than copy regional speech. Others argue that his handling of language is merely a very accurate kind of phonetic notation. Still there are other critics who place him in the same tradition as Wordsworth.

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[1] John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: The American Bard," Saturday Review, March 24, 1962, p. 54.

[2] Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1963), p. 3.

For example, Cornelius Weygandt states,

> Wordsworth fits no more perfectly into the background of England's lake country than Frost into the background of New Hampshire. Hot-heartedly individual as Frost is, With an intensity of lyric feeling, and a keeness of vision, and a firmness of artistry independent of place and time, there is much of New Hampshire in him... All rural New England shares a laconic speech, a picturesqueness of phrase, a stiffness of lip, a quizzicality of attitude, a twistiness of approach to thought, but there is a New Hampshire slant to all these qualities, and that slant you find in the verse of Frost.[1]

An oral line by line reading of his blank verse lyrics will reveal a startling reproduction of sounds of speech. He knows that gesture and inflection are more than a means of registering subleties of feeling and shades of meaning supplementary to the sense of the words. The word order of the sentence gives the whole speech a distinctive meaning. The meaning of the sentence depends largely on the way the reader delivers the line. The tonal quality of the voice and the pitch and breath quality of the voice determine the different shades of meaning a sentence evokes. In other words, the meaning is dependent upon how a particular word or phrase is said rather than what is said within the sentence.

The word "Oh," for example, in the following specimen sentences indicates where vital significance inheres in the tone which the sentence form evokes. From "The Bonfire," we have the "Oh" of a sudden flash of thought.

> "Oh, let's go up the hill and scare ourselves
> As reckless as the heart of them tonight
> With pitchy hands to wait rain or snow.
> Oh, let's not wait for rain to make it safe."[2]

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[1]John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven, 1961), p. 80.

[2]"The Bonfire," p. 54, ll. 26-30.

From "Home Burial" Frost gives us the "Oh" of tragic recognition.

> "She let look, sure that he wouldn't see,
> Blind creature; and a while he didn't see,
> But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."[1]

The "Oh" of amusement is expressed in "Snow."

> "Oh, yes, you do,
> You like your fun as well as anyone."[2]

In these lines Frost has arranged the words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. He shows that in speech the movement of a sentence is an expression of its sense. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and in fact, all effects, can be indicated and obtained.[3]

His verse adheres to his theory faithfully enough, namely, that it should record and reproduce the actual speaking tone of an imagined voice. Plain everyday language furnished the poet with a plain idiom.[4] The following phrases are used to illustrate the poet's ability to re-create New England speech. "A strong of stale tobacco,"[5] "Home is the place where when you there, they have to take you in,"[6] "What did he

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[1]"Home Burial," p. 211, ll. 14-17.

[2]"Snow," p. 127, ll. 109-110.

[3]Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," American Literature, IX (November, 1937), 297.

[4]Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England (Baltimore, 1938), p. 86.

[5]"The Death of the Hired Man," p. 118, l. 118.

[6]"Snow," p. 134, l. 76.

say? Did he say anything? But little."[1] These locutions reveal an awareness of people who talk in the homely idiom peculiar to them.

Frost's language ranges from never vulgar colloguialism to brief moments of heightened and intense simplicity. There are moments when the plain language and lack of violence make the inaffected verses look like prose, except that the sentences, if spoken aloud, are most felicitiously true in rhythm to the emotion.[2]

Frost uses the metaphor of two people who are talking behind a closed door being overheard by another person to suggest his aim and achievement. His long poem "A Masque of Mercy" illustrates this point adequately. In this poem Jonah and Paul are often distracted in their conversation by the owner of the bookshop into which they have stumbled. Here, the Keeper of the shop speaks:

> My failure is no different from Jonah's.
> We both have lacked the courage in heart
> To overcome the fear within the soul
> And go ahead to any accomplishment.[3]

Here Frost endeavors to catch the tone of voice, rather than impose or invent it. And then, he seeks the right phrase and the exact word that will not destroy the meaning of his passage. This is his conscious task in attempting his verse. In his own phrase, "sentences are a notation for indicating tones of voice; no arbitrary alien notation being necessary, or possible."

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[1] Ibid., p. 119, l. 120.

[2] Op. cit., p. 87.

[3] Robert Frost, A Masque of Mercy (New York, 1945), p. 60.

To get it anywhere that I can see.[1]

The last line does not bear any kinship to literary usage, yet none of the words are outside the vein of written English. The colloquial quality is achieved through the casual arrangement of the idioms. Likewise, the same may be said for phrases like "farm machinery's gone in" and "Has any more to do with me." Far more than the word choices, it is the rhythm that sings and speaks in New England cadences.

Frost's constant preference for the phrasing of everyday speech is related to the looseness of his rhythm. Colloquialisms have a certain wordiness. Since in conversation, the speaker is unable to attend too closely to matters of syntax, his sentences tend to be roundabout and vague in syntactical connection. He consciously avoids light sentence structure and endeavors to make his sentences appear to ramble, weaving in loosely related modifiers and interrupting asides. He uses few abrupt stops or sharp transitions from point to point. The speaker aimlessly wanders from one subject to another, and it is only when we glance back over the paragraph that it becomes apparent how compactly he has fitted his materials together. In the lines illustrated below the clauses are joined as loosely as possible:

And, anyway, its standing in the yard
Under a ruinous live apple tree
Has nothing any more to do with me,
Except that I remember how of old
One summer day, all day I drove it hard,
And someone mounted on it rode it hard,
And he and I between us ground a blade.[2]

Here the weakness of the connectives permits Frost to give important

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[1]"The Grindstone," p. 231, ll. 1-3.

[2]The Grindstone," p. 232, ll. 18-24.

It is for the above stated reason that Frost went undiscovered for twenty years while George Herbert Palmer hammered away that "The Death of the Hired Man" was not a poem, and Richard Hovey told him how to make such poems poetic. His poems, Hovey told him, had too much the tone of speech.[1] Cox is in agreement with Hovey on this point. He argues,

> Frost early began his endeavor to make his style approximate as closely as possible the style of conversation, and this endeavor has added to his reputation; it has helped to make him seem "natural." But poetry is not conversation, and I see no reason why poetry be called upon to imitate conversation. Conversation is the most careless and formless of human utterance; it is spontaneous and unrevised, and its vocabulary is commonly limited. Poetry is the most difficult form of human utterance; we revise poems carefully in order to make them more nearly perfect. The two forms of expression are extremes; they are not related to each other.[2]

It is colloquial usage rather than dialect that distinguishes Frost's style. We as English-speaking people are familiar with two tongues-the formal, more tightly organized literary language, and colloquial English, the language of everyday speech. Frost consistently writes in the latter manner. But in employing colloquial language in poetry, he purifies it. He recognizes that everyday language tends to be slangy and allows for careless inaccuracies in the use of many words. He knows the essence of colloquial English in its phrasing rather than its diction, and in his verse it is this that he imitates. Take the opening sentence of "The Grindstone:"

> Having a wheel and four legs of its own
> Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone

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[1] Sidney Cox, "Robert Frost and the Poetic Fashion," The American Scholar, XVII (Winter, 1948-49), 81.

[2] Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost; or, the Spiritual Drifter As a Poet," Quarterly Review, VII (April, 1931), 318.

snatches of information in the briefest and most direct way. If the sentences were put together in a more compact manner, the verse would be too neat and sophisticated. The wordiness and loose syntax are important aspects of Frost's poetic art. They belong to the same level of language, and they create an air of informality peculiar to his verse patterns.

If Frost's style did not extend beyond the imitation of everyday speech, it would be easy to end our investigation here, for it would appear that his technique is merely that of combining a somewhat irregular meter with colloguial idiom. But there is much more to it. How do we account for the peculiarly regional quality of his lines? And how does the poet create the impression that his lines are being spoken by living people? It must be kept in mind that Frost is working with the written, not spoken the word. Since it is impossible for him to reproduce the intonation of Yankee speech, he imitates it, and no particular rhythm will accomplish this. Truthfully, no particular rhythmic pattern, no technique of phrasing, no system of poetic diction taken by itself can adequately explain the dramatic and regional qualities of Frost's style. Even when these are taken together, they do not account for it. Why not? In his verse, as in all good poetry, the way a poem is written is a part of its meaning. If the stylistic elements are isolated, they lose their meaning and thus their essential nature. The amount of stress a poem gets depends to a large extent on what the line says, and that in turn, by what the poem in its entirety says. Likewise, the sound tone of a phrase is a by-product of the emotional tone, which depends on the attitudes implicit in other parts of the poem. The style, then, is not distinct from the content of poetry. Instead it is

reflected in and symbolized by details of language. The essential nature of Frost's style depends largely on seeing the stylistic elements in their organic relation to the meaning of his poems.

The character of the person who delivers Frost's lines is the link between style and meaning. Frost's general statements concerning poetry applies with especial significance to his own work:

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.[1]

His ability to capture the inflections of Yankee speech is derived from his sense of the dramatic. One hears the speaking voice in his poems and knows that the language is authentic, because the speaker is dramatically conceived. Frost himself comes closest to explaining his actual method of composition when he comments that he starts a poem by imagining "the tone of someone speaking as a form of simple meter."[2] He develops the speaker and the speech rhythms simultaneously; the meter is that of a person speaking. The entire mode of speaking is embodied in that person.

In most instances, this speaker is a rural New Englander. His attitude, his moral sense and, indeed, his whole mentality dramatize the regional world and therefore function as symbols to represent it. His manner of speaking reveals his character and since it is he who utters the poem his manner of speaking becomes the poem's style. His

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[1] Lynen, op. cit., p. 89.

[2] Cook, op. cit., p. 355.

character is a harmonious union of style and content. It is at this point that the Yankee manner is recognized as a vital part of the structure of the poem. For it is through his style that Frost is able to represent the Yankee point of view and at the same time establish the contrast between the rural world and common experience. But the process is reciprocal. In the same way that the Yankee manner defines the regional, the theme in turn infuses the style with a distinctly local flavor.

"The Grindstone" is illustrative of how this is done. The poem is a shining example of Frost's pastorialism. In this poem, as in so many of his other rustic pieces, an insignificant incident is developed into a symbol of serious consequence. The speaker, in his casual way, gives a description of the old grindstone in the yard and further relates how he worled at the wheel one afternoon to grind a blade. As the speaker continues talking, the fragments of descriptive detail begin to build up and it is then that the grindstone is an analogue for the world. It stands under the shadow of "ruinous live apple tree," its shape worn down through centuries of use to "an oblate/Spheroid."[1] It rotates on

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[1]Lynen claims indebtedness to Mr. Norman Holmes Pearson for the analogy between the grindstone and the world. Pearson made available to Lynen a letter from Frost in which the poet commented on "The Grindstone" as follows:" If you had permitted me one nomination it might have been 'The Grindstone,' a favorite of mine and to me 'an image of the naughty world.' You know Herschel had a grindstone theory of the universe."

Pearson reports that actually this comparison did not originate with Herschel. It seems to have been suggested first by Simon Newcomb in discussing Herschel's theory of the shape of the universe. The relevant passage from Newcomb is as follows:

> A century ago Sir William Herschel reached the conclusion that our universe was composed of a comparatively thin but widely extended stratum of stars. To introduce a familiar object, its figure was that of a large, thin grindstone, our solar system being near the center. Considering only the general aspect of the heavens, this conclusion was plausible /The Stars: A Study of the Universe (New York, Putnam, 1908), p. 233.

its axis, and it tilts and wobbles in turning in the same way that the world does in relation to the sun from one season to another. The grindstone is ancient and at one time it may have ground arrow heads as it presently grinds metal blades. Its turbulent motion could easily result in disaster. It is proud, hard and indifferent.

The analogy gradually extends to the two grinders, who represent two aspects of human creativity. The speaker, whose duty it is to turn the wheel, becomes symbolic of the efforts and suffering of man's creativity. It is his job to hold the blade to the stone. In so doing, he works against the speaker, even though it is only through his counterpressure that the blade can be ground. His role in the work becomes symbolic in meaning. Two aspects of him are noteworthy, his deliberate indifference toward the speaker and his role as final judge. He controls his work and at the same time he is the one who will decide when the blade is sharpened to perfection. He will not accept anything less than perfection, regardless of how long and hard the speaker has to work. There exists between them a natural hatred for each other. They are working as a team, yet they compete against each other.

Their relation is a vital point. The ancient man in possession of the blade is comparable to Father Time with his scythe, so that alone he creates an image of mortality. The speaker's only function is to turn the wheel; whereas the intelligence, without which nothing could be created, is that of the old man. Within the two men, they are the embodiment of the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles - natural energy and pure intellect.[1] Since the grindstone represents the world, it is easy

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[1]Lynen, op. cit., p. 92.

to some extent, for the men to suggest the flesh and the devil.[1]

Again it may be noted that the style of the poem is the speaking made of the Yankee character who delivers the lines. His manner of speaking reveals his character, His standard of judgment, and his way of thinking. However, it is the style that is the key to the hidden significance he discerns beneath the surface of his experience. By symbolizing his attitude, the style interprets what he tells. The symbolic interpretation may be found in various other colloquialisms. For example:

> I wondered what machine of ages gone
> This represented an improvement on.
> For all I knew it may have sharpened spears
> And arrows itself.[2]

And again in "The Gum-Gatherer,"

> There overtook me and drew me in
> To his down-hill, early morning stride,
> And set me five miles on my road
> Better than if he had had me ride,
> A man with a swinging bag for load
> And half the bag wound round his hand.[3]

Also in "From Plane to Plane,"

> They were both bent on scuffling up
> Alluvium so pure that when a blade
> To their surprise rang once on stone all day
> Each tried to be the first at getting in
> A superstitious cry for farmer's luck -
> A rivalry that made them both feel kinder.[4]

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[1] *Ibid*.

[2] "The Grindstone," p. 232, ll. 35-38.

[3] "The Gum-Gatherer," p. 79, ll. 1-6.

[4] "From Plane to Plane," p. 91, ll. 18-24.

In each instance Frost's colloguialisms are employed not to portray the speaker's mind, but to reveal the Yankee traits of that mind. This is why in his verse the everyday language spoken throughout America appears to be a unique Yankee speech. This technique is not peculiar to his longer poems where the New England setting is obvious. Frost manages his style in the same way in his lyrics.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is illustrative of Frost's skill in constructing a complete plot within the compass of a short poem. The hired man is not presented in the poem, but he is nevertheless the main character. His death is the most important factor of the action, and the meaning is gradually revealed through the successive perceptions of Mary and Warren, the married couple to whose house the old man has returned to die. The dramatic struggle consists in Mary's attempts to make Warren see that he is obligated to accept and help the useless old dying man. Warren in his practicality, objects because he feels that the hired man is unreliable and will be of little help on the farm. He resents the fact that the old man has deserted the farm to hire himself for higher wages during times of harvest when he was especially needed. Warren has not seen the hired man and is not aware of the fact that he has come back to die. More important, however, is the fact that he does not understand the character of the old man. The movement of the action is the revealing of the hired man's true character through Mary's endeavors to make Warren see the fundamental self-respect which makes the old man seek their assistance. In the struggle between Mary's sympathy and her husband's practical objections, each additional argument produces new information. As Mary's sympathy for the old man gradually wins Warren over to a more compassionate view, the hired man's character

is more clearly defined. The final truth about his personality is his on-coming death. When the reader learns of this at the end of the poem, it comes as the inevitable culmination of all that he has come to know about the old man.

The fact of his death reveals the basis of the hired man's character and life. His high idealism and pride will not permit him to ask for charity from relatives, but leads him instead to seek work at Warren's farm in order that he may maintain a semblance of his independence. His self-respect has been the essence of his life, and now that his self-respect depends on charitable fiction his life, in the true sense of the word, is ended.

Of course in this medium, the canvas is much smaller, with the result being that that the poet has far less space to reveal the regional traits of his speaker. Nevertheless, he consistently views life through the eyes of a New Englander. Oddly enough, the greater compression of the lyric makes the method more apparent. The result being that it only takes a few deft touches in style to portray the regional speaker.

Because Frost thinks in terms of metaphors, he is able to make a single incident contain a larger design than ordinarily would be expected. His poems tend to have a doubleness in meaning. He feels that there must be a larger design relating the ideal goals of any individual with those of his neighbors, his state, his nation and ultimately his God.[1] All of his poems invoke what he chooses to call the pleasure of ulteriority. Frost has said,

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[1]Lawrence Thompson, "A Native to the Grain of the American Idiom," Saturday Review, March 21, 1959, p. 55.

> There is something in all of us like the match maker, man likes to bring things together in one. He likes to make things in rhymed couplets, but the couplings of all sorts of things that reason rhyme together. Rhymed couplets are the symbols of this tendency in man. He likes making associations and he is doing well by himself and in himself when he thinks of something else that no one ever put with it before. That's what I call a metaphor.
>
> I couldn't do without that sense of two-ness. It's a feeling I've had from infancy, a kind of "ulteriority complex."[1]

"Fire and Ice," although not an example of an overtly regional poem, derives its power chiefly from the regional qualities implicit in the tone of the speaker. One doing only surface reading will be impressed by the bold metaphors within which the poem's value would seem to consist in the care with which Frost developed them. In actuality though, Frost's success here is dependent upon his perfect control of style. The poem is interesting because of the content of its statements, but more than that it is the point of view from which the lines are stated. The more one listens to the nuances of tones, the more pronounced the Yankee qualities become.

> 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.[2]

The life of the poem rests not upon what the speaker says, but rather what he does not say. While he omits a discussion on any particular evant of his life, his words vibrate with the consciousness of experience

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[1]John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: Master Conversationalist at Work," Saturday Review, March 21, 1959, p. 20.

[2]"Fire and Ice," p. 242.

acutely felt.

By what means does Frost achieve this effect? The emotion is one of such intense bitterness that it is easy to assume that Frost works through the vehicle of exaggeration. So far as the imagery is concerned, this is true. The combinations of desire and fire and hate and ice transform emotions into vast, impersonal forces. The poem is extremely rich in terms of imagery alone. The great complexity of meaning in the paradoxes reveals the idea that the intensity of man's passion, the very thing that makes him human, creates the inhuman forces of disaster.

Were it not for the harsh, tight-lipped way in which the lines are spoken, the metaphor would lose much of its intensity. What gives the poem its power is something just opposite of exaggeration, the speaker's persistent understatement. Throughout the poem the homely, informal, dryly factual manner of speaking plays against the strong emotion and seriousness of what is said. Examine the language of Frost in these lines; at one moment the speaker appears folksy ("Some say"), then witty ("But if I had to perish twice"), then modest ("Ithink I know enough of hate"), and finally, cool practicality pervades his lines ("for destruction ice/ Is also great/ and would suffice"). It would appear that the poem would lose its bitterness through its colloquial phrasing. Quite the contrary, it serves as a means of elevating it to an extreme pitch. The more the speaker's manner disavows strong feelings, the more intense his emotions run. In addition, the understatement dramatizes the special character of the Yankee persona. His ironic, casual manner manifests a more than normal sensitivity of thought. Although he talks about things in human nature which arouse deepest terror, he does not give away to emotional outburst; rather he contains himself, pretending

to be amused and even cooly impersonal, because only by controlling his own feelings can he be free to face the cruel results of man's emotions realistically and recognize their full destructiveness. It is here again, that Frost's use of colloquialism illustrates the pastorial structure of his style. It is the homely, rustic everyday phase that serves as a vehicle for expressing the most serious ideas, just as elsewhere it is the simple, country scene that symbolizes the entire world. Frost's accomplishment as a stylist may be accredited to his ability to transform the style itself into a symbol. The Yankee manner, then, is not only a medium for expressing regional attitudes, it is in addition an image of them.

Many critics choose to explain Frost's style as a matter of pure technique. They speak of his craftmanship and suggest that Frost had devised some trick method of contriving tonal and metrical effects. They talk quite a bit about his ability to pick the right words and to catch the exact rhythm of a voice, but strangely enough, they never divulge the secret of how this is achieved. Chances are, this secret never will be revealed, for this view suggests his style may be explained in terms of verbal mechanics alone. The tendency to emphasize the mechanical aspect of his arrangement of sound would tend to create the impression that his style is purely a matter of sound patterning. However, sound and rhythm constitute only one phase of his style, and this cannot be properly understood unless it is seen in relation to the others.

Since scanning in itself is always crude and arbitrary, the present writer will make no claim on the exactness in judgment on the meter of the passage below. However, by examining Frost's prosody, as it is

evident here, we will be able to see just how far a mechanical analysis will take us. The poem "October" is used here to illustrate this process.

> Make the/ day seem/ to us/ less brief.
> Hearts no averse to being beguiled,
> Beguile us in the way you know.[1]

The line opens with a trochee, which places proper emphasis upon "make," which needs emphasis because "make" (bringing to bear unusual pressure) is necessary to change the normal course of nature. After lingering over "Make," it is quite likely that the reader will touch lightly "the day," with the result that "seem" will get a heavier accent than it would receive in any prose sequence. The abnormal accent on "seem" gives a voice quality which clearly establishes the illusory nature of the length of the day. And the case of compensation which occurs at the end, (to us less brief) approximately focuses attention on "less brief." There are other instances in "October" of both devices here discussed. Thus the meter is used to help emphasize the significant elements in the poem, elements which are there without the presence of meter, but which would not be so apparent in its absence.

Frost's practice is conventional in that it does not involve any very unusual innovations. His poems, on the whole, are written in traditional meters. With rare exceptions, the lines are of four or five feet and the movement is usually iambic.

His unique handling of rhythm reveals his ability to keep a strong, regular cadence while at the same time his lines seem loose and unpatterned. The numerous spondees and clusters of unaccented syllables

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[1]"October," p. 247, ll. 9-12.

which break up the meter over and over are accountable for the looseness of his verse. It might appear that the meter might easily be displaced, but the variations are balanced by frequent repetitions of meter in perfect lines. Syllable count is also strictly observed. The end result is a rhythm which has the advantages of regular meter, and at the same time creates an abrupt and rough effect characteristic of everyday speech.

In summary, failure to see the modernity of Frost's poetry is seldom due to the fact that his verse is devoid of the traits of style which seem characteristic of modern poetry. There is in his poetry, something in a general way, which is related to modern style. Admittedly, Frost's manner is different from other contemporary poets, but it would be absurd to make style the only criterion for making a judgment on the modernity of his verse. It is quite possible to write in the modern idiom and yet exhibit little originality or newness in one's response to the contemporary world. And even among the most unquestionable and fine modern verse, it is possible to find the style far more contemporary than the thought.

CONCLUSION

Few things are more foolish than to predict that a poet's fame will last beyond his time. It is amazing how little we remember, beyond their names, such men as Cowley, Phineas Fletcher, Samuel Rogers and others whose reputations seemed not only great but permanent. The writer, therefore, will not dare to prophesy that Frost will become immortal. However, if posterity will pardon this assertion, if Frost's present popularity has any bearing whatsoever on the future, it is possible to assume that the rewards he has reaped thus far may be enduring.

Frost was late arriving on the literary scene. The doors to publishing houses remained closed to him until he reached the span between his fortieth and sixtieth years. It was only then that he was read, known and admired. His lateness may be accredited to the fact that he introduced a new language for poetry. His poems do not sing; they talk. If this is not poetry, then Frost is definitely not a poet. If, on the other hand, it is poetry; then Frost has supplied the proof. Despite the fact he has been imitated by poets younger than he, he has been the only one to excel in making conversation into poetry.

Frost, like any other contemporary poet who has received critical acclaim, is a symbolist. In other words, he deals in indirection or doubleness. He takes a fairly simple object and treats it in such a manner that it takes on dimensions far beyond what he actually writes in his deceptively simple verse. There is in his verse a kind of mystery. This mystery, however, is never the kind that makes so much contemporary verse sound like puzzles. His is the kind of mystery in which additional

and deeper layers of meaning underlie the surface of his verse.

It is for this reason that Frost has a wide reading audience. He can be read and appreciated by people on various levels. He has been read and enjoyed by both lay reader and the professional - one reading for pleasure; the other reading in order to make a critical analysis. It is difficult to conceive of any contemporary poet who has kept allegiance to more schools. He was hailed in London by Ezra Pound, and within a year Amy Lowell started singing his praises in Boston and New York.

At a birthday party in honor of his fiftieth birthday, the guest ranged from people who had nothing to do with the literary world to representatives of every possible phase of literary criticism. Frost has always appealed to the few, while at the same time <u>North Of Boston</u> appeals to thousands. These are important facts, for they are an indication of the poet's position in the literary world.

Finally, though by no means of least importance, even though it will be recounted briefly here, he is a New England poet who perhaps reaps the full benefit of being faithful to a particular region - true to its people, its climate, its landscape, its history, its morality and its vernacular. Likewise, he is at the same time a poet of universal significance. It is not necessary for one to live in New England, to understand and appreciate him. He has made his region seem like home to people who have never set foot on its earth. But more than that, his voice is immediately recognizable as a human voice which has much to say to humanity. Since this is so, one can rest assured that he will live as long as there are men and women to listen to him.

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