

Robert Frost: An Alternate View

by Charles W. Petersen

Robert Frost has often been accused of writing poetry that is saccharin in both its treatment and its outlook. This view has become so widespread that, at present, the stereotyped portrait of Robert Frost is that of an American romantic--a "Farmer Brown," so to speak--who loved nature and wrote affectionately about it. Many casual readers have gone so far as to suggest that, like Wordsworth, Frost is one of "nature's high priests." To the contrary, Frost cannot agree with Wordsworth that "nature never did betray the heart that loved her."¹ At the heart of his philosophy is the belief that nature, or the process of existence, is heartless and cruel--something to be feared. "From the publication of A Boy's Will down to the present time Frost has indicated a realization that nature, natura naturata, not only will, but sometimes seems intended to, hurt those who love it. The immediate natural world even seems to be moving toward chaos, intending to take man along with it if he isn't careful.

¹ Howard Mumford Jones, Belief and Disbelief in American Literature (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, and Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 126.

Frost feels...that the natural world is impersonal, unfeeling, and at best animal creation."²

The primary reason for this misinterpretation on the part of these casual readers is that they misconstrue Frost's use of nature in his poetry. Nature serves as the basis for metaphor: to Frost, it is a constant symbol. "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, 'Why don't you say what you mean?' We never do that, do we, being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections--whether from diffidence or some other instinct."³

Frost uses metaphor to make his poetry a "clarification of life,"⁴ using the synecdoche of nature for man's condition. His preoccupation with places, mountains, lakes and forests serve as nothing more than a series of concrete images that help him to focus on his study of people. In a television interview on NBC's Conversation, in 1952, Frost was proud to quip that he "had only

² Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, The Twentieth Century Views Series, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 139.

³ Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Latham, eds., "Education by Poetry," Selected Prose of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp. 36-37.

⁴ Lawrence Thompson, "Robert Frost's Theory of Poetry," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, The Twentieth Century Views Series, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 32.

written two poems that didn't have a human being in them. Only two."

The large portion of Frost's work can be viewed as conversations between the poet and the various forces of the universe. They are a series of interchanges in which man attempts to gain knowledge of his place in the world and his relationship to the various themes of life. These themes can be divided into four categories: man's relationship to himself, to his fellow man, to his world, and to his universe; and in dealing with each of these themes, Frost is presenting a view of natural process which is always uncaring and often cruel and heartless.

The people in the poetry of Robert Frost are actively engaged in a struggle for survival: actively engaged in a battle for existence. The means to victory is through knowledge and the path to knowledge is through observation. Only through observation can man become aware of his place in the cycle of being and only through appreciation of his place in nature's scheme can man come to understand himself.

Basic to man's understanding of himself is the acceptance of the lack of permanence in living things. We live in a mutable world where the death and decay of one organism are necessary for the growth and regeneration of another. It is this cycle of being that is illustrated in "In Hardwood Groves":

Before the leaves can mount again
 To fill the trees with another shade,
 They must go down past things coming up.
 They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
 Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
 However it is in some other world
 I know that this is the way in ours. (11. 5-12)⁵

Concurrently, the notion of change runs throughout Frost's poetry. The message is clear: change is inevitable and one must either accept this inevitability or reject it.

The acceptance of inevitability is graphically illustrated in "'Out, Out-'" where the neighbors "since they/Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." (11.33-34)⁶ This ending is commensurate with Frost's view on a savage and heartless life process. Since the boy had given up on life, they must give up on him. There is nothing to be done for someone who has died. Practical farm people who must earn a difficult living from the earth cannot afford the luxury of long, idle grief.

Total acceptance is depressing for it denies the soaring of the human spirit. However, this does not mean that Frost believes that life is without value as do those existentialist thinkers who feel that man's only control over life is his prerogative to end it. Life is worth too much to Frost, although he does believe

⁵ Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949), p. 37.

⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

that acceptance of the inevitability of change is essential to make life bearable. Man, like the bird in "Acceptance," will find solace in surrendering to the inevitable:

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
And goes down burning into the gulf below,
No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
At what has happened. Birds, at least, must know
It is the change to darkness in the sky.
Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
One bird begins to close a faded eye;
Or overtaken too far from his nest,
Hurrying low above the grove, some wail
Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
At most he thinks or twitters softly, 'Safe!
Now let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. Let what will be, be.'⁷

Although Frost feels that acceptance is essential in making life bearable, he also feels that rejection holds an equally important position in the cycle of being. For it is through rejection that man challenges the natural process and it is through challenging this process that man develops individuality. A progression in the philosophy of rejection can be seen in the poetry of Robert Frost as his writing comes to full maturation in his later years. In "Reluctance," from A Boy's Will, his first published work, there is a definite feeling toward the advocacy of non-acceptance to the death of things. Though change and decay are unavoidable, the heart of the speaker rejects acceptance. It refuses to submit:

⁷ Ibid., p. 313.

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow to accept the end

Of a love or a season? (11.19-24)⁸

In this final stanza, it is ironic that the poet opposes acceptance and instead advocates rebellion, although this is futile. The poet never does make clear his reasons for advocating resistance in this early work. It isn't until "West-running Brook" that the necessities for rejection are illuminated. Contrariness is necessary to the development of man's independence; and man, similar to the brook, finds his individuality, a knowledge of his uniqueness, in asserting his independence. It is contrariness which makes a man stronger than nature and enables him to survive. It is contrariness that helps foster an understanding of man's place in the relentless cycle of being.

'It has this throwing backward on itself
 So that the fall of most of it is always
 Raising a little, sending up a little.
 Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
 The brook runs down in sending up our life.
 The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
 And there is something sending up the sun.
 It is this backward motion toward the source,
 Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
 The tribute of the current to the source.
 It is from this in nature we are from.
 It is most us.' (11.66-77)⁹

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

Rejection can be taken too far, however, and begin to become a destructive force. It can reach the point where it no longer adds to man's self-awareness, but contrarily begins to inhibit self-realization. Such is the case of the wife in "Home Burial." Unable to cope with the cruelty of the death of her child, she is inconsolable. By the refusal to accept this change in her life, she seems likely to alienate herself from others and sacrifice her self-image to despair. Her husband states:

'Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
 Unlike other folks as your standing there
 Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
 I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
 What was it brought you up to think it the thing
 To take your mother-loss of a first child
 So inconsolably...' (11.62-68)¹⁰

Concurrent with the themes of acceptance and rejection of change in man's relationship to himself is Frost's preoccupation with darkness and the terror which it holds for man. The image of darkness is brought into his poems through the use of a metaphor-his woods. "The woods play a curious part in Frost's poems: they seem to be his symbol for the uncharted country within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of horror."¹¹

⁹ Ibid., p. 329

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

¹¹ Malcolm Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, The Twentieth Century Views Series, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 43.

The questions of existence which man does not understand are represented by the numerous creatures which gaze at man out of the darkness of the woods. The image is one of foreboding: a message to stay in the light where he belongs, as evidenced in these stanzas from "Come In":

Far in the pillared dark
 Thrush music went--
 Almost like a call to come in
 To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
 I would not come in.
 I meant, not even if asked,
 And I hadn't been. (11.13-20)¹²

The darkness, however, offers a strange fascination that entices man. It is a lure of beauty that is commingled with a lure of destruction. In "Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening," the poet is confronted with the lure of beauty in the snow-filled, dark, impenetrable woods but chooses to go on and avoid the darkness:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep. (11.13-16)¹³

He has "promises to keep"--commitments to life that must be carried out before the final surrender. He must at all costs

¹² Frost, Complete Poems, p. 446

¹³ Ibid., p. 275.

avoid the darkness that threatens to engulf him, and so he moves on.

The heartless and cruel aspects of nature are also prevalent in Frost's poems concerning the relationship of man to his fellow man. As man develops individuality and uniqueness from his confrontations with the omnipresent situations in nature, he must avoid considering only himself. Preoccupation with self can severely limit one's ability to cope with the problems of existence. Man must use his talents and reconcile himself to his society. He must at the same time be able to understand himself as well as understand his relationship and his value to those around him; otherwise he is alienated, as in "Bereft":

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
Holding open a restive door,
Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
Summer was past and day was past.
Somber clouds in the west were massed.
Out in the porch's sagging floor,
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.¹⁴

The feeling is one of utter vulnerability to the hostile world which is surrounding the poet. He is alone, separated from

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

his fellow man, and now must face the problems of existence with only the aid of God; and the implication is that God will not be enough. Man needs his fellow man to offer solace from the terror of the "darkness," for it is in sharing his plight that man can muster the courage to continue existing. "We throw our arms wide with a gesture of religion to the universe; we close them around a person."¹⁵

Although Frost feels that man needs his fellow man, he is indeed appreciative of the ramifications of incommunication. Many of his poems deal with man's lack of both ability and desire to communicate with his fellow creatures. It is often within man's power to reach out to his fellow man and to tear down the barriers that separate them, but he does not because of mutual suspicion and hostility. Even though man has the option of not being alone in his world, he is more afraid of the darkness in his fellow man than of the darkness in nature's environs:

...It comes to little more:
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him
 He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

 ...I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

¹⁵ David A. Sohn and Richard H. Tyre, Frost: The Poet and His Poetry (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), p. 75.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
 (11.22-27, 38-45)¹⁶

In the beginning of this quote, from "Mending Wall," the narrator seems to feel as if the wall has little purpose and its destruction would be a gesture of civility. He realizes by the end of the poem, however, the reasons for the necessity of the wall's existence. The image of the savage, though fleeting, reminds the narrator of the uncharted area of darkness which he knows is within himself and therefore knows is a part of all men. For his own well-being he must be able to maintain a distance between himself and his fellow man.

Walls and barriers appear in many of Frost's poems and seem to have a dual purpose. On the one hand, they represent a barrier to complete communication between men, yet also function as a buffer zone behind which each may retreat when necessary to keep his own individuality. These walls serve, then, as parameters marking the limits to which man may go in his relationships with others and still maintain his uniqueness. It is interesting to note that, although Frost's walls have a certain feeling of permanence about them, they are neither too high to be bridged by a handshake nor too opaque so as to prevent man from seeing what

¹⁶ Frost, Complete Poems, p. 47.

is on the other side. As Marion Montgomery states: "The wise person knows that a wall is a point of reference, a touchstone of sanity, and that it must be not only maintained but respected as well."¹⁷

The question of man's limitations does not stop with man's relationship to his fellow man. No one can read the poetry of Robert Frost and not be impressed by his preoccupation with the surrounding world. It is this preoccupation with nature that has made Frost's poetry appear quaint and provincial, when, in fact, Frost is concerned with nature only as it imposes limitations on man. These limits show what men may or may not do, where he may or may not go--the safe and the forbidden zones. Beyond the safe zone, nature is hostile and cruel, forcing man to observe the boundaries if he is to survive. In "There Are Roughly Zones," Frost deals with the theme of man's limitations in an unfriendly environment:

We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside.
And every gust that gathers strength and heaves
Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been
tried.

We think of the tree. If it never again has leaves,
We'll know, we say, that this was the night it died.
It is very far north, we admit, to have brought the
peach.

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind--
That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.

¹⁷ Montgomery, p. 147.

Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
 That though there is no fixed line between wrong and
 right,

There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.
 There is nothing much we can do for the tree tonight,
 But we can't help feeling more than a little betrayed
 That the northwest wind should rise to such a height
 Just when the cold went down so many below.
 The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.
 We must wait till some months hence in the spring to
 know.

But if it is destined never again to grow,
 It can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of
 men.¹⁸

But man must dare to be contrary. He cannot sacrifice his
 humanity to nature. It is within his power to bring order,
 although it may not be a permanent order, to the chaos in the
 world and thereby work out a place for himself in the scheme of
 things. "You've got to be brave and you've got to be bold. Brave
 enough to take your chance on your own discrimination--what's
 right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad."¹⁹

Sohn and Tyre interpret Frost's philosophy on life to be one
 of perseverance against nature's adversity. "Many of the
 poems...dealt with what man finds dark and frightening in nature or
 in himself. What a person does--how he acts--when he is
 frightened tells a great deal about his character. Frost believed
 that man should face up to the indifference and hostility of

¹⁸ Frost, Complete Poems, p. 401.

¹⁹ Sohn and Tyre, p. 63.

nature, accept the disturbing qualities within himself, and go about his daily affairs with courage...For Frost courage is not fighting back; it is the power to endure."²⁰

In man's effort to endure, he builds the very walls that separate him from nature in order to remind himself of the danger that exists if he is tempted to cross over to where he doesn't belong. As Frost uses his idea of the terror of the darkness, which so often occurs in his poetry as his woods, to symbolize the unknown area in man himself, so it is also a metaphor for everything terrible and frightening that man does not understand about his surrounding world and his universe.

The ominous qualities of nature are not limited to earth alone. The later Frost works look beyond man's immediate world and also find terror in the dark void of the universe. The vastness of this dark void holds a grim fascination as well as an aura of foreboding for Frost. In this regard it is interesting to note that he never dares to confront the nameless. He chooses, instead, to skirt the issue in order to avoid having to answer the universal questions of existence that he finds in this unknown. In "For Once, Then, Something," a simple encounter with nature reflects the poet's propensity for not probing too deeply:

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 63.

Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
 Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.
 (11.7-15)²¹

Rather than probe deeper for truth, the poet chooses to accept the blurring of his goal. He allows the answer to escape him. He prefers not to venture further. Frost echoes this theme in "The Star-Splitter." By again avoiding a direct confrontation, he uses nature metaphorically to represent the mysteries of our existence:

Till having failed at hugger-mugger farming,
 He burned his house down for the fire insurance
 And spent the proceeds on a telescope
 To satisfy a life-long curiosity
 About our place among the infinities. (11.15-19)²²

The interference is obvious: the farmer feels that in a closer look at the stars he can find an answer to the question of his place in the universe. The heavenly bodies represent for Frost the eternal questions of existence to which there are no answers. The poem goes on to bear out the point that man is no better off for the burning of his house because the stars will not give him

²¹ Frost, Complete Poems, p. 276.

²² Ibid., p. 218.

the answers he seeks: "We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?/Do we know any better where we are...? (11.95-96)²³

The fact that man will never find the answer to these questions is the final irony imposed by the natural world which man must accept and endure. "True understanding in man is recognition through reason, and acceptance through faith of man's limitations."²⁴

It is paradoxical that by accepting this final limitation man comes to the realization that he will never fully understand his existence. He must accept the fact that there are questions which will always remain unanswered.

But what of Frost's view of God? If Frost's view of the world is that it is heartless and cruel, it would seem that his concept of its creator would be equally as impersonal. This is especially true in his early works. "The Demiurge's Laugh," in A Boy's Will, depicts a creative spirit which watches and mocks man from the shadows of the forest:

The sound was behind me instead of before,
A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As of one who utterly couldn't care.
The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;
And well I knew what the Demon meant. (11.7-12)²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 221.

²⁴ Montgomery, p. 145.

²⁵ Frost, Complete Poems, p. 35.

This concept of the creative spirit does not radically change with time. In a later work, A Masque of Mercy, Frost deals with the question of justice and states his own philosophy of personal courage as the only hope for man in an uncaring universe:

My failure is no different from Jonah's.
 We both have lacked the courage in the heart
 To overcome the fear within the soul
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.
 Courage is what it takes and take the more of
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal.²⁶

The "deeper fear" is that nature, or the process of existence, is all to no avail. Again, in this work, Frost affirms that the world as it stands is cruel and unjust:

And I can see that the uncertainty
 In which we act is a severity,
 A cruelty, amounting to injustice..²⁷

Throughout his poetry, Frost pictures a dark and hostile world bent on breaking the spirit of man. The process of existence demands submission. It is imperative, therefore, that man, alone and isolated, muster the courage to endure the limitations and obstacles placed in his path. Nature, in the final analysis, proves to be the constant adversary against which

²⁶ Ibid., p. 642

²⁷ Ibid., p. 641.

man must continually test his mettle, for to Frost, the sum of life is in the striving.

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