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Study of Robert frost: A modern poet

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Abstract

“The Frost poem, like other typically modern poems, differs from earlier periods in that it not only actually functions in this way, but intentionally defines itself as a poem that would be in these terms. Its indeterminacy is not only a consequence of its rich complexity of meaning, that being of the very essence of all poetry, it is an indeterminacy that announces itself as a confessed enigma by an imperious confidence of tone, full of Miltonic organ notes so inflating to the readers expectations as to make explicit these non-fulfillment. The promise to bring the reader to a state “beyond confusion” leaves him in the dark as to just what such a state would be like. The plentiful advice he receives gives him no practical enlightenment as to what to do. But if this induces the “blank wall” feelings that Pearce has mentioned, it also reveals some procedural truths. We learn, for example, that the contradictions of experience are not miscellaneous collisions, but contracts between opposed limits within a system that meaning can be a spectrum joining contrary thoughts, like old-new, or imaginary-real, and that therefore, even the most harmonious thought naturally displays some tension within the elements of its system, and must generate some measure of doubt and of formlessness.

Keywords: Study, Robert frost, modern poet

Introduction

Frost’s first volume of poetry was published in 1913 and his last in 1947, and he died in 1963. Thus, it is as clear as crystal that in point of time, he is the contemporary of such twentieth century poets as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Auden and Ezra Pound. But at the same time, some critics like Granville Hicks, Schneider and Yvor Winter have regarded Frost as a traditional nineteenth century poet and have emphatically denied his modernity. For one thing, it has been pointed out that his poetry is characterized by complexity and intricacy. In his poetry, we do not find irregular verse-form, fragmentary sentences, learned allusions and references, ironic contrast, and erudite and abstruse symbolism, with which we are familiar and which he regarded as the hall-mark of modernity. Apart from this, in accordance with the views of these critics, Frost writes of mountains, fields and brooks, and of farmers at their humble task; these things have become part of our imaginative inheritance and one must be insensitive, indeed, not to be conscious of the beauty in them. But these are other subjects now more frequently before our eyes-factories, skyscrapers, machines. We see mechanics, shop-girls, truck-drivers, more often than we do farmers, and we set the farmer not as a romantic figure but as the victim of cruel economic forces. Moreover, Yvor Winters analyses such poems as The Bear to show that Frost admires man as a creature of impulse and instinct, and ridicules the idea of man as a reasoning creature, and this is the marked opposition to modern thought. It is only through these ideas and views that these critics have tried to show the affinity of Frost with the great nineteenth century romantics rather than with the great moderns.

Robert Frost’s world is rural. Undoubtedly he retires into countryside and such retirement is not a romantic escape from the unpleasant realities of modern life rather it provides him with a point of view, a frame of reference, for studying and commenting on the facts of modern life. Frost studies life and strips down to its elemental simplicity - and this simplicity is his norm of judgement - not only the urban life, but of life in general. However, “Birches” shows his realistic attitude to life and it also tells us that man constantly aspires for things beyond the world. Frost suggests that one should not do it rather one should know and love the things of the world and let the afterlife take care of itself. So the speaker says that:

“Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.”

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Frost has used a method of indirection as used by modern poets like T. S. Eliot and others. In “The Waste Land” Eliot juxtaposes the present and the past. The past here is definitely meant to reveal and interpret the present. Likewise, in Frost’s poetry, the rural and the urban are juxtaposed – the rural serving as a standard for and comment on the urban. The metaphoric poem, “Mending Wall” shows the necessity of walls, of clear demarcations of property is emphasised, implicitly criticising the craze for breaking down walls and imposing brotherhood.

Frost has an affinity with the modern poets in style and symbolic technique. “Fire and Ice” is a symbolic poem. The speaker of the poem is dwelling on the two theories for the end of the world. Some contend that the world will perish in fire symbolising passion, some ice symbolic of hatred. But the speaker favours passion and upon second thought; he adds that hatred is powerful enough to destroy the world. They both are capable of destroying the world. The underlying symbolic meaning is that the intensity of man’s passions, which makes him human, creates the inhuman forces of disaster. The speaker says:

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.”

Like many other modern poets, Frost deals with the tension and problems of modern people. Just as in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot, the protagonist is suffering from indecision to propose the woman he loves, so in “Road Not Taken” by Frost, the speaker hesitates to choose one of the two roads. But here he becomes successful in electing one of them after a long period of hesitation. The speaker’s hesitant mind is expressed:

“And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could”

Frost’s poetry gives evidence that he believes in some kind of god, and that he adheres to a strict sense of values, but that his beliefs are not those of the traditional Christian. He rejects the acceptable idea of heaven. In “After Apple Picking” he suggests that man’s life after death is akin to the hibernation of an animal. He also rejects the rigid orthodoxy which he sees in most religions. So there is not denying of the fact that such an approach to religion is modern.

However, such views arise from a one-sided, superficial reading of his poetry. Cleanth Brooks, John Lynen, Trilling and a host of other competent and that the surface simplicity of his poetry is deceptive and misleading. There is no doubt that he withdraws into rural New England and writes of New Englanders, of their simple occupations carried on in their primitive setting, away from the haunts of modern civilisation, and the concerns of modern life. But, John Lynen rightly points out, “his retreat into countryside is not a romantic escape from the harsh, unpleasant realities of modern life, rather, it provides him with a point of view, a frame of reference, for studying and commenting on the facts of modern life.” He studies life reduced to its elemental simplicity, and this elemental life is his norm with reference to which he judges urban life, and even life in general, life as it has been in all ages and countries. It is the same method of indirection as is used by such modern poets as T.S. Eliot. Just as Eliot in his poems, for example, *The Waste Land*, juxtaposes the present and the past is made to

reveal and interpret the present, so also in his poetry Frost juxtaposes rural and the urban, the rural serving as a comment on the urban. And, as in T.S. Eliot, the comment is implicit rather than explicit. A simple everyday situation from rural life is presented, and the situation is such that it serves to illuminate and clarify some aspect or problem peculiar to the modern age. Thus in the *Mending Wall*, the necessity of fences is emphasised—“Good fences make good neighbours”—and thus we get an implicit comment on the modern craze for pulling down barriers. Says John F. Lynen, “He has, in effect, found a retreat in one of those out of the way places where technology has not yet complicated life by separating man from the land. But this retreat is of a special sort. He does not turn his back on the world of today, nor does he advocate a ‘return to the soil’. There is in his regionalism no call for action or program for social reform, and, as a matter of fact, he insists over and over again that no program will ever resolve the basic conflicts in human life. His withdrawal must be distinguished from agrarianism. It is the adopting of an artistic perspective. Regional New England—just because it is primitive and remote from modern life—is for him a medium for examining the complex urban world of today, a standard by which to evaluate it, and a context within which to discover the order underlying experience that modern life has obscured and confused. This point deserves a good deal of emphasis, for there is a tendency even among the poet’s warmest admirers, to view his preoccupation with rural New England as merely an escape from problems too overwhelming to be faced.”

Problems of Modern Life

Frost may not depict the scenery of modern life—its chimney and factories, its railways, and automobiles, but he certainly deals with the basic problems and the basic facts of modern life. The ache of modernism finds its fullest expression in his poetry. The modern note of frustration, loneliness, isolation and disillusionment is often struck. Cleanth Brooks establishes the point through a study of some of the most characteristics of Frost’s poems. He writes, “Another sense in which Frost is a truly modern poet is his portrayal of the disintegration of values in modern life and disillusionment of the modern man. Most of his poems deal with characters who suffer from frustration, isolation and helplessness—diseases of modern life, which are portrayed in modern poems like *The Waste Land*.” Frost’s poetry reflects modern life not in the sense that it depicts the outward events and conditions, but it brings out the central facts of twentieth century experience—the uncertainty and painful sense of loss. For example in *The Hill Wife*, Frost has portrayed obliquely the cumulative sense of fear; loneliness and marital estrangement of an isolated woman who is so completely misunderstood by her husband that he is baffled when she disappears, irrevocably and without warning. The poem has a wider meaning and it depicts the isolation and loneliness of modern man who has lost his moorings, and finds no comfort from old values. The poem *The Road Not Taken* depicts the confusion which prevails in modern life. The modern man does not know which way to go, and it is difficult for him to make a choice of the means he should adopt in order to come out of the present impasse.

An Old Man's Winter Night is another poem of isolation, frustration and loneliness, and it is an epitome of modern times.

"The Frost poem, like other typically modern poems, differs from earlier periods in that it not only actually functions in this way, but intentionally defines itself as a poem that would be in these terms. Its indeterminacy is not only a consequence of its rich complexity of meaning, that being of the very essence of all poetry; it is an indeterminacy that announces itself as a confessed enigma by an imperious confidence of tone, full of Miltonic organ notes so inflating to the reader's expectations as to make explicit their non-fulfillment. The promise to bring the reader to a state "beyond confusion" leaves him in the dark as to just what such a state would be like. The plentiful advice he receives gives him no practical enlightenment as to what to do. But if this induces the "blank wall" feelings that Pearce has mentioned; it also reveals some procedural truths. We learn, for example, that the contradictions of experience are not miscellaneous collision, but contrasts between opposed limits within a system, that meaning can be a spectrum joining contrary thoughts, like old-new, or imaginary-real, and that therefore, even the most harmonious thought naturally displays some tension within the elements of its system, and must generate some measure of doubt and of formlessness. To quote Pound again: "There is in inferior minds a passion for unity, that is, for a confusion and melting together of things which a good mind want to keep distinct." Even the greatest organizing cultural statements – The Odyssey, The Divine comedy, Paradise Lost – give only putative answers concerning the unity of the world and the oneness of man's duty and his nature, answers which, when we try to specify their exact meanings, turn into fields of exploration, and cease to be answers at all. Directive, as a modern poem, gives us answers designed to make the question as to, the nature of answers and the conditions for finding them its central theme."

Conclusion

Frost is modern not in any overt and obvious manner. He is modern through and through; and his modernism naturally gets confirmed by getting a proper perspective of layers of meaning that enwrap his poetry and the sensitivity that runs through it. He may not depict the outward conditions and events of modern life, but the central facts of modern experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, the disintegration and confusion of values, the frustration and disillusionment, are all there, and they seem more bleak and terrifying because they are presented in their nakedness stripped of all their social, political and economic manifestations. Thus, even as far as sensibility is concerned, Frost is modern, or perhaps one should say, of „universal“ sensibility.

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