

## **The Poetics of Robert Frost: An Introductory Essay**

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In his critical writings Robert Frost tends

(a) to emphasise

– the concrete qualities of poetry (particularly «the dramatic» and «the metaphorical»), and

– the role played by «inspiration» in the creative process;

and (b) to reject new techniques and free verse.

This essay attempts a critical assessment of Frost's poetics in relation to 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theories.

A careful reading of the critical writings of Robert Frost points to a number of recurrent ideas. This essay attempts a critical study of these ideas in relation to 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theories. It is an introductory study, which does not pretend to be exhaustive.

*Poetry cannot be forced into being:*

In his essay «Education by Poetry» (1931) Frost emphasizes the natural, spontaneous quality of the writing:

Every time a poem is written, every time a short story is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be, is more felt than known<sup>(1)</sup>.

In this respect Frost declares that he does not subscribe to the «common jest on the writers» that

they write the last end first, and then work up to it; that they lay a train toward one sentence that they think is pretty nice and have all fixed up to set like a trap to close with<sup>(2)</sup>.

Frost insists that «it should not be that way at all»<sup>(3)</sup> and points out that

No one who has ever come close to the arts has failed to see the difference between things written that way, with cunning and device, and the kind that are believed into existence, that begin in something more felt than known<sup>(4)</sup>.

And then writes:

I would undertake to separate short stories on that principle; stories that have been believed into existence and stories that have been cunningly devised. And I could separate the poems still more easily<sup>(5)</sup>.

Frost reiterated his view that poetry cannot be logically thought out in advance in other essays. Thus in «The Constant Symbol» (1946) we come across the following statements:

The freshness of a poem belongs absolutely to its not having been thought out and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music. A poem is the emotion of having a thought while the reader waits a little anxiously for the success of dawn<sup>(6)</sup>.

The idea is repeated again in «The Figure a Poem Makes» (1939) when he remarks that «it is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last»<sup>(7)</sup>. And when towards the end of the essay he writes:

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. *A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being.* Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went<sup>(8)</sup>. (Italics mine).

The second sentence, we notice, sums up Frost's main idea that poetry cannot be forced into being. Some revisions are possible, but ideally, there should be none. In the following quotation from one of his letters, Frost writes to the same effect:

I have never been good at revising. I always thought I made things worse by recasting and retouching. I never knew what was meant by choice of words. It was one word or none. When I saw more than one possible way of saying a thing I knew I was fumbling and turned from writing. If I ever fussed a poem into shape I hated and distrusted it afterward. The great and pleasant memories are of poems that were single strokes (one stroke to the poem) carried through<sup>(9)</sup>.

From this and from the other passages quoted above, it is clear that Frost is a firm believer in

- (a) the concept of «inspiration»,
- (b) Wordsworth's idea that «poetry is a spontaneous overflow of emotion», and
- (c) the «subjectivity» of art.

Frost's position here is of course completely different from Eliot's (the position adopted by both the New and the neo-New Critics). Eliot's general position in this respect can be summed up in the following quotation from «Tradition and the Individual Talent» (1919):

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion,... it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality<sup>(10)</sup>.

Although Frost does not say that poetry is a turning loose of emotion or that it is the expression of personality, the emphasis he lays on «spontaneity of expression» does not only point to the personality of the artist, but it also points to the amount of «subjectivity» involved in the act of creativity.

Oddly enough Frost's description of one aspect of the creative process is not very much different from Eliot's. Eliot's general definition of the process is that

It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all<sup>(11)</sup>.

Frost writes more or less to the same effect in many places in his essays. Thus in «Maturity No Object» (1957) he tells us that the poet's «most available knowledge is acquired unconsciously»<sup>(12)</sup> and in «The Figure a Poem Makes» he points out that poets acquire their knowledge «cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books» and adds that «they stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields»<sup>(13)</sup>. Frost goes on to explain that out of the fragmentary pieces of knowledge picked up in this fashion the new work is produced. In the following quotation Frost seems to be rephrasing Eliot's statement quoted above:

The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic<sup>(14)</sup>.

Thus on the origin of the component parts of the work of art Frost and Eliot seem to hold similar views.

*«Approach to the Poem»:*

This brings us to another point on which the two poets are in agreement. Like Eliot, Frost seems to subscribe to the concept of «tradition». In «The Prerequisites» (1954) Frost states that the «approach to the poem must be from afar off, even generations off»<sup>(15)</sup>. He maintains that the reader «should close in on it on converging lines from many directions like the divisions of an army upon a battlefield»<sup>(16)</sup>. He then goes on to elucidate:

A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do<sup>(17)</sup>.

This is not different from what Eliot says in the following passage from «Tradition and the Individual Talent»:

what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered, and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity, between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past<sup>(18)</sup>.

The two poets, we notice, are trying to say the same thing; poetry is a kind of

«continuous and complex stream of thought», a mass of memories in which what we have experienced in the past is all the time merging with our experience of the moment.

*Not Necessarily Difficult:*

Unlike Eliot, however, Frost does not insist that «poetry must be difficult». In «The Constant Symbol» he writes:

There seems to be some such folk saying as that easy to understand is contemptible, hard to understand irritating. The implication is that just easy enough, just hard enough, right in the middle, is what literary criticism ought to foster. A glance backward over the past convinces me otherwise. The *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* are easy. The *Purgatorio* is said to be hard. The *Song of Songs* is hard. There have been works lately to surpass all records for hardness. Some knotted riddles tell what may be worth our trouble. But hard or easy seems to me of slight use as a test either way<sup>(19)</sup>.

Many critics do not find Eliot's statement, that poetry written in this century must be difficult, easy to accept. Frost's view here is not likely to provoke argument.

*New Techniques:*

And unlike many a 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, Frost does not seem to believe in new techniques. In his «Introduction» to E.A. Robinson's poem *King Jasper* (1935) he is sceptical of what he calls «the new ways»:

It may come to the notice of posterity (and then again it may not) that this, our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served. Science put it into our heads that there must be new ways to be new<sup>(20)</sup>.

Frost observes that the new ways «tried were largely by subtraction – elimination»<sup>(21)</sup>, and goes on to enumerate the various fads of newness in modern poetry:

Poetry... was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye; and a loud general intoning had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear, those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto constituted the better half of poetry. It was tried without content under the trade name of poesis pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability... It was tried premature like the delicacy of unborn calf in Asia. It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for small pay in the underworld<sup>(22)</sup>.

He then comments on these fads:

These many things was it tried without, and what had we left? Still something. The limits of poetry had been sorely strained, but the hope was that the idea had been somewhat brought out<sup>(23)</sup>.

Frost argues that one can be new without «straining the limits of poetry». And this is exactly what he admires about E.A. Robinson: «Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new»<sup>(24)</sup>. This means that Robinson's «newness»

resides in the «what» and not in the «how»-which implies that originality resides (or should reside) in «subject-matter» and not in «style». Now this does not command immediate and unhesitating assent. For it is a fact universally accepted that because «basic themes are few, especially in popular fields», originality seldom resides in the subject. It «resides rather in the point of view or in the style than in the basic idea»<sup>(25)</sup>.

*Free Verse:*

Frost is also against free verse. In his critical writings he tends to speak of the «poem written regular». To give only one example, in «The Constant Symbol» he writes:

Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost; be it in art, politics, school, church, business, love, or marriage-in a piece of work or in a career. Strongly spent is synonymous with kept<sup>(26)</sup>.

Problems of «intention» and «execution» are here discussed in relation to the «poem written regular». Obviously, the word «art» and the phrase «a piece of work», which occur in the second half of the quotation, do not apply to the poem written «irregular» (*i.e.* written in free verse).

Poetry «written regular» is of course «poetry which has a disciplined, formal metre and structure». Implicit here is the idea that free verse is inferior. And this is indeed the view Frost keeps repeating in his letters. (In many of these letters he makes it abundantly clear that free verse is either inferior or less challenging).

*Art Theory:*

Unlike many a 20<sup>th</sup> century artist-critic, Frost does not believe in «theory». In his «Introduction» to E.A. Robinson's poem *King Jasper* he declares:

We [Robinson and Frost] didn't care how arrant a reformer or experimentalist a man was if he gave us real poems. For ourselves, we should hate to be read for any theory upon which we might be supposed to write. We doubted any poem could persist for any theory upon which it might have been written<sup>(27)</sup>.

The last sentence is significant. It is a criticism of the theorists who make grand statements on the nature and function of poetry without pausing to think of the problem of application. Frost is trying to say that there is a world of difference between theory and practice and that it is wiser not to theorise in the void. Indeed the last sentence implies that it is wiser not to theorise at all.

It is worth noting here that when asked about his art theory, Frost (whose prose abounds in theories and critical judgments) said: «My theory was out of my practice». See Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost on Writing*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1973, p.33. (More about Frost's theory in relation to his practice below).

*Explication:*

Like many a 20<sup>th</sup> century critic, Frost, however, seems to subscribe to

MacLeish's statement that

A poem should not mean  
But be<sup>(28)</sup>.

In the «Introduction» to *King Jasper Frost* cites the case of the reader who once said to him: «I understand the poem all right, but please tell me what is behind it?» And goes on to say:

Such presumption needs to be twinkled at and baffled. The answer must be, «If I had wanted you to know, I should have told you in the poem»<sup>(29)</sup>.

In this connection, the editors of his *Selected Prose* tell us that

When anyone asked him the meaning of one of his poems, he would reply, «What do you want me to do, say it again in different and less good words?»<sup>(30)</sup>.

Frost is also against «prefaces», «notes», and «books on books». «I don't like to read about a man», he often said. «I'd rather read the man himself»<sup>(31)</sup>. In «The Prerequisites» Frost elaborates:

The heart sinks when robbed of the chance to see for itself what a poem is all about. Any immediate preface is like cramming the night before an examination. Too late! Any footnote while the poem is going is too late. Any subsequent explanation is as dispiriting as the explanation of a joke. Being taught poems reduces them to the rank of mere information<sup>(32)</sup>.

These devices, Frost seems to suggest, are either useless or superfluous. Implicit in his condemnation of the practice is the fact that resorting to such devices points to some defect somewhere in the poet-poem-reader relationship.

*Form:*

Frost's preoccupation with «form» is reflected in many passages in his letters. To give an example or two, consider:

- (i) I thank the Lord for crudity which is rawness, which is raw material....A real artist delights in roughness for what he can do to it. He's the brute who can knock the corners off the marble block...<sup>(33)</sup>

and (ii) My object is true form-is was and always will be...I fight to be allowed to sit cross-legged on the old flint pile and flake a lump into an artifact<sup>(34)</sup>.

In the following quotation from «The Constant Symbol», Frost makes it plain that he is against texture as an end in itself:

Texture is surely something. A good piece of weaving takes rank with a picture as decoration for the wall of a studio, though it must be admitted to verge on the arty. There is a time of apprenticeship to texture when it shouldn't matter if the stuff is never made up into anything. There may be scraps of repeated form all over it. But form as a whole! Don't be shocking! The title of his first book was *Fragments*. The artist has to grow up and coarsen a little before he looks on texture as not an end in itself<sup>(35)</sup>.

Frost here makes fun of the artist, who for one reason or another, emphasizes

texture at the expense of form. Texture here means the interwoven threads and strands which make up the fabric of the piece. According to Frost, it is nice to look at, but it is not enough. A work of art should have a structural pattern, a kind of form. By form Frost does not mean an external scheme imposed upon items of texture. Form should be the complete structural integration of expression and thought. In the fourth sentence («There may be scraps of repeated form all over it») Frost refers to what Coleridge calls «mechanical structure», and in the fifth («But form as a whole!») the reference is to «organic structure». Thus by «true form» (which occurs in the sentence «My object is true form-...» quoted earlier) Frost probably means «organic form».

«A Dramatic Necessity»:

Frost's emphasis on the dramatic qualities of poetry figures prominently in the «Preface» to his little play *A Way Out* (1929):

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing. A least lyric alone may have a hard time, but it can make a beginning, and lyric will be piled on lyric till all are easily heard as sung or spoken by a person in a scene-in character, in a setting<sup>(36)</sup>.

Frost goes on to say that

It is the same with the essay. It may manage alone or it may take unto itself other essays for help, but it must make itself heard as by Stevenson on an island, or Lamb in London<sup>(37)</sup>.

He then writes:

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. *That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself*<sup>(38)</sup>. (Italics mine).

This is not the only essay in which Frost stresses the dramatic qualities of writing. In the «Introduction» to *King Jasper* he praises the author, because he «could make lyric talk like drama»<sup>(39)</sup>.

Frost, we notice, makes it quite clear that «the dramatic» is his criterion of excellence. Small wonder, then, that the editors of his *Selected Prose* view his «Preface» to *A Way Out* as a preface to all of his «beliefs about the art of writing»<sup>(40)</sup>.

«Poetry is simply made of metaphor»:

This brings us to Frost's belief that all poetry is essentially metaphorical. Consider the following quotation from «The Constant Symbol»:

There are many... things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So

also is philosophy-and science, too,... Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing<sup>(41)</sup>.

Frost does not only stress the importance of metaphor here («Poetry is simply made of metaphor.»), but he also stresses the importance of originality («Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing.»).

So far so good, but what has the second sentence («Poetry is simply made of metaphor.») to do with the third («So also is philosophy-and science, too»)? Frost's thesis here (and indeed in many places in his critical writings-especially in «Education by Poetry») is that, because metaphor (defined by Frost above as «saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another») gives insight into two things, it is a means of giving the receptor new knowledge and new awareness of pattern. It follows therefore that all forms of knowledge are metaphorical because they place objects or events into patterns and so give the receptor new insight and sense of pattern.

#### *Education by Poetry :*

Frost's conviction that poetry serves as a means of giving patterns to man's existence is given prominence in his essay «Education by Poetry». According to Frost, «education by poetry is education by metaphor». In this connection he writes:

Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, «grace» metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. 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<sup>(42)</sup>.

Frost is here trying to say that (a) poetry (or metaphor-because, according to Frost, «poetry is metaphor») is capable of expressing what he terms «the profoundest thinking that we have», and that (b) poetry more or less reflects life when it uses figurative language. And the implication is that to be a profound thinker and to understand life properly, one must be well-versed in the metaphor. I say «must», because, in the following quotation from the same essay, Frost lays a great deal of emphasis on the role played by this figure of speech in this context:

...unless you are at home in the metaphor, *unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor*, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you<sup>(43)</sup>. (Italics mine)

The italicised sentence is revealing. Frost believes that poetry is the only form of knowledge that makes one «at ease with figurative values». Frost maintains that failure to be at «ease with figurative values» can have grave consequences. For one is apt to lose one's sense of balance or one's awareness of pattern. One then becomes a lost soul:



Materialism is not the attempt to say all in terms of matter. The only materialist - be he poet, teacher, scientist, politician, or statesman - is the man who gets lost in his material without a gathering metaphor to throw it into shape and order. He is the lost soul<sup>(44)</sup>.

It is in order to point out here that even a casual reading of Frost's poetry will show that it abounds in lost souls-characters who suffer because they have failed to view life metaphorically (that is to say, because they have failed to see relationships between apparently unrelated things).

Frost's concept of «education by poetry»-or «education by metaphor»-can thus be seen to throw light on his poetry.

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According to 20<sup>th</sup> century criteria of excellence (which emanate from the critical theories formulated by T.S.Eliot, the New and the neo-New Critics), Robert Frost is right when he emphasizes the concrete qualities of poetry (the dramatic and the metaphorical discussed above); when he insists on a close and searching reading of a given text; and when he stresses the primacy of «form».

Judged by the same criteria, Frost's depreciation of new techniques and free verse and his emphasis on the role played by «inspiration» in the creative process are not acceptable.

At the end of this essay, I should point out that, though Frost does not believe in art theories, his critical writings throw a great deal of light on his poetry (I have already substantiated this fact with reference to his concept of «education by metaphor»); to give another example, his belief in «the dramatic» accounts for his tendency to cast many of his poems in the form of «monologue» or «dialogue»; and point to the fact that he wrote with a rather clearly defined theory of poetry in his mind.

This brief note brings this essay to an end. This is not an exhaustive account of the poetics of Robert Frost, but enough has been said to form the basis for further study.

### Notes

(1) Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (editors), *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, New York, 1966, p.44.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

(4) *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

(5) *Ibid.*, p, 45.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- (9) **Lawrance Thompson** (ed.), *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, New York, 1964, p.237.
- (10) **T.S. Eliot**, *Selected Essays*, London, 1969, p. 21.
- (11) **T.S. Eliot**, «Tradition and the Individual Talent», *Selected Essays*, London, 1969, p.21.
- (12) *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 50.
- (13) See *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- (18) **T.S. Eliot**, *Selected Essays*, London, 1969, p. 15.
- (19) *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 23.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- (22) *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- (24) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- (25) See **Joseph T.Shibley** (ed.), «Originality», *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*, London, 1970, pp.227-28.
- (26) *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 24.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- (28) **Archibald MacLeish**, «Ars Poetica», *Poems*, 1924-1933, Boston and New York, 1933, p.123.
- (29) *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 65.
- (30) *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- (31) *Ibid.*, p. 9. (compare with what Eliot says in «Tradition and the Individual Talent»: «Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry». *Selected Essays*, London, 1969, p. 17).
- (32) *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.
- (33) *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 465.
- (34) *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- (35) *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, pp. 23-24.

- (36) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (37) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (38) *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
- (39) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- (40) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (41) *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- (42) *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
- (43) *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- (44) *Ibid.*, p. 41.

## دراسة استطلاعية تحليلية لآراء روبرت فروست في الشعر

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إن القارئ لمقالات روبرت فروست الأدبية ليجد أنه يميل إلى تأكيد دور الإلهام في عملية الخلق، كما يميل إلى تأكيد النواحي «الدرامية» و«الاستعارية» في الشعر.

والقارئ لهذه المقالات سوف يجد أيضاً أن روبرت فروست لا يقبل إلا القليل مما استحدث في القرن العشرين في فن كتابة الشعر، وأنه يرفض الشعر الحر رفضاً باتاً.

هذا المقال عبارة عن محاولة لتقويم آراء روبرت فروست في الشعر في ضوء نظريات النقد في القرن العشرين.