A Comparative Study between Wordsworth and Frost
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Abstract: The present study makes a comparative overview between William Wordsworth, forerunner of the Romantic Movement in England, and Robert Frost, national bard of America. Wordsworth and Frost appear both similar and dissimilar with regard to their philosophy and writing style. Both poets see Nature in different ways although there are some aspects of the subject which are clearly the same. As a poet of Nature, Wordsworth stands supreme. He is a worshipper of Nature, Nature’s devotee or high-priest. He has a full-fledged philosophy, a new and original view of Nature. Frost, on the other hand, is not interested in Nature for itself. Unlike Wordsworth, he finds no sustaining power or source of joy and moral health in nature. For both poets Nature brings the same thing, yet in very different ways. Frost maintains artistic detachment from his writing while Wordsworth clearly involves himself in the subject matter of his poetry. Frost is deceptively plain whereas Wordsworth is genuinely simple. Frost is pragmatic, worldly and anti-romantic. On the other hand, Wordsworth is transcendentalist, romantic and mystic. Frost’s poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom, whereas Wordsworth’s poetry begins in delight and ends in delight.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Frost, Nature, Romanticism, style

William Wordsworth is the quintessential figure of Romanticism in England. For his treatment towards romantic elements, Wordsworth stands supreme as a Romantic poet. The Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century is a revolt against the classical tradition of the eighteenth century; Wordsworth is, of course, a pioneer of the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century. With the publication of Lyrical Ballads, the new trends become more or less established. In contrast with the eighteenth century poets who used to put emphasis on ‘wit’ and reason, Wordsworth used to put emphasis on ‘imagination’. With the help of imagination Wordsworth makes the common things look strange and beautiful. In his famous “Ode to Immortality”, it seems to him as to the child “the earth, and every common sight” are “apparelled in celestial light”. Here he says,

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light.

Similarly, in the poem, “Tintern Abbey”, the poet sees the river, the stream, steep and lofty cliffs through his imaginative eyes. He was enthusiastically charmed at the joyful sound of the rolling river. Here he says,

Once again
Do I behold those steep and lofty cliffs
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion and connect
The landscape with quiet of the sky”.

In this poem, the poet seems that the nature has a healing power. Even the recollection of nature soothes the poet’s troubled heart. The poet can feel the existence of nature through imagination even when he is away from her. He says,

In lonely rooms and ‘mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensation sweet.

Robert Frost, on the other hand, has been the most widely known – and perhaps the most fully appreciated – American poet of the twentieth century. He holds a unique position as national bard. Frost used to write poetry by lodging himself in the hearts of his countrymen as an American symbol. He symbolizes the peaceful, self-knowing, and independent citizen whom every American dreams of becoming. Frost exudes genuineness – and people respond. He exemplifies the simple life, and people in an overly complex world cling to this. He typifies
lost dreams of rural innocence; and his fellow citizens, snared in a squirrel cage of urbanity, cherish that irrecoverable past.

Wordsworth advocates the use of simple, ordinary language in poetry. He is of the opinion that poetry should be written in a “selection of language really used by men in humble and rustic”. He sets himself to the task of freeing poetry from all its “conceits” and its “inane phraseology”, and of speaking the language of simple truth. The simplicity of the following lines, for instance, is noteworthy:

*A violet by a mossy stone,
Half hidden from the eye;
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.*

One could quote numerous examples of the successful and effective manner in which Wordsworth handled simple language. All Lucy poems offer striking examples. A poem like the one on daffodils represents the successful simple style too.

Robert Frost, on the other hand, is deceptively simple in his poetry. His poems on the surface seem simple. He puts on the familiar mask of a shrewd Yankee farmer who speaks of the simple rural folk, and birds and animals, and the cycle of seasons, and whose utterances are full of poetical wisdom. But the poems in reality have deep significance, and show Frost’s penetrating insight into the primal instincts of man.

Frost reveals the complexities of rural life in the garb of plain words. Many of his monosyllabic words are difficult to comprehend as these are charged with symbolic meanings. The body of his poetry wears an ordinary garment but beneath it remain messages that need one to introspect for clear understanding. Frost uses symbols taken from nature to express the intended meanings or messages. Frost’s diction is apparently simple but behind the simple is great art. A majority of his poems offer more than one interpretation. The rich texture gives the poems an inexhaustible quality. The best examples are perhaps “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and “Birches”. At the end of “Mending Wall”, we do not quite know which side Frost is on, for there are different meanings to be understood from the poem.

Wordsworth expresses his personal thoughts, feelings through his poems. Subjectivity is the key note of his poetry. In “Ode: Intimation of Immortality” the poet expresses his own/personal feelings. Here he says that he cannot see the celestial light anymore which he used to see in his childhood. He says,

*It is not now as it hath been of yore;-*
*Turn wheresoe’er I may,*
*By night or day,*
*The things which I have seen I now can see on more.*

Frost, on the other hand, maintains what Eliot terms as ‘artistic detachment’. Except in elegies, Frost does not always involve himself in the subject matter of his poetry.

Wordsworth has a superabundant enthusiasm for humanity. He is deeply interested in the simple village folk and the peasant who live in contact with nature. Wordsworth emphasises on the kinship between man and nature. Wordsworth’s philosophy of human life rests upon his basic conception that man is not apart from Nature but is the very “life of her life”. In childhood man is sensitive to all natural influences; he is an epitome of the gladness and beauty of the world. Wordsworth explains this gladness and this sensitiveness to Nature by the doctrine that the child comes straight from the Creator of Nature. This kinship with nature and with God, which glorifies childhood, ought to extend through a man’s whole life and ennoble it. This is the teaching of Tintern Abbey in which the best part of human life is shown to be the result of natural influences. According to Wordsworth, society and the crowded unnatural life of cities tend to weaken and pervert humanity; and a return to a natural and simple living is the only remedy for human wretchedness.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, nature is supreme, where humans and nature forge an intimate communion; humans and nature are never found hostile to each other. In Frost, rural people are supreme and nature has been made subordinate to humans. It is hard to describe Frost as the poet of nature, if we determine Wordsworth as the standard. Frost himself admits: “We have had nature poetry for a hundred years.” He is interested in locating the relations between nature and humans. It is true that both poets sought to find solace and delight in nature. The poem “Birches” offers the best example of how the poet blends observation and imagination, fact and fancy, feeling and wisdom. The poet says that he used to be a swinger of birches and that he would like to return to this activity when life begins to seem too burdensome to him:

*I’d like to get away from earth awhile*
*And then come back to it and begin over.*

When life becomes a little too much for him, he needs to escape briefly, to get off the ground just as a birch swinger does. However, he stresses that he would not like to leave life permanently because “Earth’s the right place for love”. The meaningful relationships of life cannot be fulfilled if one tries to get away. Moreover, there does not seem to be any other realm in which one can achieve such complete satisfaction as on earth. What he would like to do is climb:
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.

Momentary escape would be enjoyed because a person would know that he was returning to life. Yet the direction — toward heaven — would be important because it would indicate that one had ideals. Birches are rooted in earth, but they reach toward heaven; similarly aspirations must move toward the ideal, but they should be grounded in reality. “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.” One could do worse than have ideals and hopes; he could be tied to earth and never wish to climb toward his dreams. The good life joins a sense of realism and idealism.

Like the poetry of Thomas Hardy, the subjects of Frost’s poetry are local or regional. Their poetry springs from specific areas. The subjects of Wordsworth’s poetry are universal, and are true of all people of the world. Frost wrote about ordinary people; farmers and workers were the subjects of his poems. Woods, flowers, birches, weeds, birds and trees showed up frequently in his poems. The rural landscape and wildlife form the content of his poetry. Because of his unfeigned interest in and love for rural people, Frost emerged ultimately as a national bard and a poetic sage of America.

Frost has written on all conceivable objects but his central subject is humanity. He portrays all sorts of people with a realistic vividness. His poetry has cropped out of his farmer’s world every part of which he knows and knows how to render it in words with a brilliant off-hand ease. His reticent poor, dignified New Englanders are evoked in monologues, a little like those of E.A. Robinson or of Robert Browning, but with a difference. His people speak cautiously amid intervals of silence making each word count. Volubility would be alien to them. They do not go on and on as in Robinson or explode as in Browning. Their lonely farms, the cold winters and all-too-brief summers, the imminence of failure, of the wilderness, of death — all give one the sense of people living tensely. The tension comes out in the poetry and the moments of relaxation have by contrast an almost extravagant gaiety. The hardihood is that of life in New Hampshire as such, not that imposed by the poet though of course, Frost describes it with a professional mastery.

For Wordsworth, poetry is the outcome of personal, spiritual or mystical experience — experience is the antecedent and poems are the consequent. In fact, experience causes expression, and expression becomes a spontaneous outburst. For Frost, poetry begins consciously and it ends unconsciously. Wordsworth conceives of a spiritual power running through all natural objects- the “presence that disturbs me with the low of elevated thoughts” whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, the rolling ocean, the living air, the blue sky, and the mind of man (“Tintern Abbey”). Wordsworth considered Nature as a living personality. In most of his poems nature is constructed as both a healing entity and a teacher or moral guardian. He is a true worshipper of nature: nature’s devotee or high priest. The critic Cazamian says, ”to Wordsworth, nature appears as a formative influence superior to any other, the educator of senses or mind alike, the shower in our hearts of the deep laden seeds of our feelings and beliefs”. He dwells with great satisfaction, on the prospects of spending his time in groves and valleys and on the banks of streams that will lull him to rest with their soft murmur.

For Wordsworth, nature is a healer and he ascribes healing properties to Nature in “Tintern Abbey”. This is a fairly obvious conclusion drawn from his reference to “tranquil restoration” that his memory of the Wye offered him “in lonely rooms and mid the din/Of towns and cities”. It is also evident in his admonition to Dorothy that she let her

Memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh !then
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations!

Wordsworth says nature “never did betray the heart that loved her”.

To Frost, nature is unfriendly, malevolent and malignant; it creates barriers to the smooth fulfillment of human and social obligations. From this perspective, Frost is comparable to Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. Nature is a menace and discomfort. Although, to Frost, the woods are “lovely, dark and deep,” humans should not stay there for long, as they have duties elsewhere, they “have miles to go” before they sleep. In the poem “Come In”, Frost promises:

“But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.”

To Frost, there are barriers between humans and nature, between humans and humans, and between the creator and the creation. Yet he does not cease to work; he rather tries to adjust himself with the barriers created by nature.

Wordsworth’s sense of the “souls of lonely places” is a conspicuous feature of his poetry of Nature, says Bernard Groom in The Unity of Wordsworth’s poetry. In some of his greatest passages, the spirit of a lonely
region is embodied in a human figure. The Highland girl in the poem addressed to her, forms a single being with her environment: “The cabin small, the lake, the bay, the waterfall...” It is in Lucy Gray or Solitude (1799) that such poetry has its finest flower. Of all the “spirits” of lonely places in Wordsworth’s poetry, none fills the role with such magic and sweetness as Lucy who, as some maintain, still trips over rough and smooth, singing her solitary song, inseparable from the lonesome wild.

Frost feels that originality and initiative should be embodied in poetry to give it an everlasting freshness. A poem’s freshness and originality lie in its flow from delight to wisdom – “the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew”. Frost's poetry, to use his own words, “begins in delight and ends in wisdom”, whereas Wordsworth’s poetry “begins in delight and ends in delight.” Frost's wisdom is best reflected in the immortal line in Mending Wall: “Good fences make good neighbours.” In Byron's view, Wordsworth is “dull, over-mild and flat like a sauce into which the cook had forgotten to shake pepper.”

It is beyond all doubts that in Frost’s view man’s mundane existence is rather bleak and gloomy. In this attitude we can see how realistic he is and how readily he recognises the evils, sorrow and suffering that beset man’s life under the sun. But mere recognition may lead one to cynicism and nihilism. Frost does not stop with that recognition. He is willing to remedy and rectify and work for amelioration of suffering. One must do one’s duty sincerely and devotedly retaining the faith in divine mercy. This is a sane approach to life and many of his poems reveal this philosophy of ripe wisdom.

Wordsworth is the poet of thought and meditation whereas Frost is one of activity, work, obligation and duty. Frost is pragmatic, worldly and anti-romantic. Wordsworth is a transcendentalist, romantic and mystic. Unlike Wordsworth, Frost keeps himself confined with earthly region, with mundane phenomena; he is not willing to transcend the boundary of this earth. Frost is not a mystic. He is not romantic about nature. Natural objects in his poems are not foci for mystical medication or starting points for fantasy, but things with which, and on which, man acts in the course of the daily work of gaining a livelihood. Man and nature in Frost are two distinct entities, and the two may exist together but not fuse into a single being. Frost goes to the rural areas to drink the delight of nature and also withdraws from nature to respond to the call of duty – social, familial, official.

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is the prime example of Frost’s commitment to convention, describing it as “my heavy duty poem”. Frost said that he wrote the poem after an extended night of work on his long poem “New Hampshire”. Whether it was inspired by auto-intoxication and sheer tiredness, as its author suggested, or by some more ethereal influence, it has come to be the single poem with which most readers identify Frost. No better demonstration could be desired for explaining what Frost may have meant when he spoke of a poet committing himself to convention – to form:

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.

Frost is always in favour of ceaseless mobility, of activity and action. To him, life is duty; every human being has to fulfill the duties or obligations assigned to him or her by God or by fellow-humans. In his poem “Mending Wall”, and “The Road Not Taken”, he shows that although he takes recourse to nature for delight or pleasure, he at once withdraws himself from nature and returns to the place of work. In “New Hampshire” he says that he “would hate to be a run-away from nature”. The poet is not willing to depart from the world so soon because he has more duties to fulfil. It is not justified to leave this earth early without meeting the obligations to society, to country and to the earth.

Wordsworth has taught us how to be friendly to nature and how to obtain solace from it in times of psychic crisis, and Frost has taught us how to engage in ceaseless work and also to seek transitory relief by being away into wildlife and communicating with the innocent unacknowledged rural people.

References