Robert Frost: A Nature Poet with a Difference

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Abstract: Robert Frost’s poems are socially and academically very relevant in today’s globalized world. Frost is a multi-potentialite, whose works are multi-dimensional and he cannot be labelled under one category. Frost was primarily a nature poet but with a difference, to put it in the words of Virginia Woolf, Frost’s nature is not the ‘rainbow’ nature of Wordsworth but ‘granite’ nature. Man plays a significant role in his poems and man is not a mute witness or blindly in love and awe with nature. This multi-dimensional personality of Frost is explored and presented and true to his words, his poems, “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.” And Frost lives up to his own poetic philosophy, his poems begin in delight and end in wisdom.

Keywords: pragmatic philosopher, realistic, pastoral poet,

I. Introduction

The keynote of Frost’s poetic philosophy and style is reflected in the remarks of W. W. Gibson, “Frost has turned the living speech of a man and woman into poetry… Tales that might be mere anecdotes in the hands of another poet take a universal significance because of their native voracity and truth to local character.” Robert Frost has won many laurels for the variety in his poems and also for the simplicity in terms of language, style and symbols in his poems. Frost wears different masks in each of his poems. He puts on the mask of a child, a carefree boy, a witty rural philosopher, a realist or a sensitive poet, but whatever mask he wore he wore it with utmost integrity and sincerity. Robert Graves, the English poet very rightly proclaims: “The truth is that Frost was the first American who could be honestly reckoned a master-poet by world standards.” Robert Frost is widely acknowledged as a world poet and he continues to be one of the oft quoted poets of all times. Frost has been widely acclaimed as a nature poet, a pragmatic philosopher, a realist, a pastoral poet and so on. He wears many crowns and with great élan too. He is a chameleon who glides in and out of the many facets of his personality. Yet, Frost is not a complex poet neither is he a complex man.

The Romantics humanised nature and attached strong emotional values in landscape. Wordsworth stressed on the harmony that exists between man and nature while Frost harps on the difference between man and nature. Wordsworth is concerned with the inner exploration of nature, but Frost, with the precise outlining of a character outside of himself. For Wordsworth the inner eye of the soul perceives the harmony of the universe. Wordsworth says “While with an eye made quite by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We see into the power of things.” Frost did not idealize Nature and his nature poems are marked by realism in conception and description of nature. He conceives nature as merely matter. “In Frost’s nature poems,” says John F. Lynen, “the technique quite obviously results from his desire to recognise the validity of science.”

Frost is a nature poet with a difference. No discourse on nature poets or nature poems is possible without a mention of one the greatest nature poets, William Wordsworth. The brightest star of the Romantic Age, Wordsworth, is a nature poet par excellence. A brief comparison between Wordsworth and Frost is attempted to serve as a sieve to bring out Frost – the pragmatic philosopher.

Both Frost and Wordsworth were nature poets, both were inspired by nature and the most profound, pensive thoughts, images, symbols and expressions flowed spontaneously in the midst of nature. At the same time, it is an undisputed fact that the way they responded to nature was different. In Frost’s own words, “We have had nature poetry for a hundred years. Now we must have the human foreground with it.” He is not just concerned with nature as such; he is more concerned with the common human activity that goes on in her lap. Wordsworth mystified nature and to him nature was both ‘law and impulse.’ Wordsworth pictured nature as a benign mother, teacher and guide and emphasised the harmony of man and nature…
Let Nature be your teacher.
Unlike Wordsworth, Frost loves both her pleasant and unpleasant aspects; he enjoys her sensuous beauty, he is also alive much that is harsh, bleak and barren in her. Frost does not deny the sensuous enjoyment he derives from nature but that does not make him turn a blind eye to the possible danger and destructive side of nature. The traveller in, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, enjoys the charm and beauty of the woods, but Frost also depicts nature as cold and strange and he is aware of the constantly changing weather of April. He feels the lurking presence of something hostile and sinister. The poet’s sensitivity is evident in the lines:

Be glad of water, but don’t forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

Nature for Wordsworth was not only a source of joy and inspiration it was a major source of his moral health and well being. Nature was to Wordsworth the anchor of his parent thought, a kindly nurse, a doting mother and soul of his moral being. Wordsworth spiritualised nature and his Nature was wrapped with layers and layers of profound wisdom:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages.

Frost takes on a different stance. He is modern, and realistic in his attitude towards nature. For him, Nature is only a background which provides him a poetic occasion to clarify human experience. Frost in an interview in the fall of 1952 said, “I guess I’m not a nature poet. I have written only two poems without a human being in them.” He doesn’t see nature with an eye of the Romantics. Nature is different from Man and yet their existence is intertwined. In the poem, *Tree at My Window*, he creates a kinship between man and tree and feels they are destined to be together.

Your head so much concerned with outer
Mine with inner weather.
And stand witness to each other’s storms of existence

Frost doesn’t seek an escape into the arms of Mother Nature, though there is the eternal conflict between man’s sense of duty and his tendency to escape from man’s day to day mundane existence and also from the turmoil of life. Frost was never an escapist, not fleeing from the realities of life. He is more of a traveller, an adventurer, all eager and excited to suck in the beauty of nature, but also aware of the dangers, ruthlessness and destructive power of nature. He wants man to enjoy the charm and mystery of nature but doesn’t want man to give up his worldly life too. In the beautiful poem, *Birches*, he wants man to be ‘a swinger of birches.’

I’d like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love;

Frost is a pragmatic philosopher and this aspect of the poet’s personality shines through his pastoral poems. Pastoralism portrays generally rustic life as it really is in itself without the romanticising and spiritualising of nature. The essential ingredients of pastoral poetry - the unhappy and lonely shepherd, the wandering flock, the violets and daisies, the greenland, pastoral dances – represent traditional motifs which are in the long pastoral tradition from Theocritus to Pope and even in the 19th Century. Though Frost is considered a pastoral poet he did not conform to traditional conventions and he did away with the myth of the rural world and brought freshness, realism and wisdom into his pastoral poems.

His pastoral poems apart from painting nature as it is, in all its glory and ugliness, are delightfully sprinkled with pragmatic philosophy, as gently as dew drops on the delicate petals of the most beautiful flowers. Frost does not weigh the readers down with deep philosophical thoughts, but as he says in, The Figure a Poem Makes, his poems begin in delight and end in wisdom. The reader can experience the beautiful and gradual metamorphosis of his poems from the beginning to the denouement, as the great poet himself says of the evolution of his poems: “It
must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.”

Frost’s pastoral poems are also in accordance with the sense of duality that we find in his poetry. Peter J. Stanlis, a personal friend of Frost for many years has this to say of Frost’s duality.

“Dualism for Frost meant that all reality is comprised of matter and mind, or as he preferred, matter and spirit; as opposed to a monism that sees reality comprised of one element, spiritual or material.” His attitude towards nature has a duality, while he brings out all the terror and isolation and littleness in a cold and unfeeling universe, he also brings out man’s superiority over nature, of mind over matter. He is tempted to escape but only temporarily from the choking and suffocating modern city life. But this escape is an artistic perspective to analyse and explore the complexities of urban life. Frost never loses sight of the fact that for a fuller life, the rural and urban life is equally essential. He doesn’t moralise, he lets his intellectual views just blossom and suggestively allows the reader to discover the realities of life in a delightful way.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the ones less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost combines pastoralism with realism and even when he is describing pastoral scenes, sights and sounds, he is not only portraying life realistically, but he is also at his best in gently placing his pragmatic views to sink in for him and for the reader. As in Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Frost’s tradition unfolds breezily and tranquilly towards the end.

The woods are lonely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Frost’s treatment of man is significant. He gives humanity a better place than nature in his poems and insists on man’s superiority over nature. Nature is poised against humanity, he does not glorify nature, nor does he idealize men. His treatment of both nature and man is free from romantic excess. L.Untermeyer aptly puts it in the words, “Frost is a realist, for no American writer knows his subjects, people and places, so thoroughly. But his is a peculiar kind of realism. It does not insist on a catalogue of mean trifles, on a piling up of bald or brutal details.” Frost does not exaggerate and as he says, “There are two types of realists. There is the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real potato. And there is the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I am inclined to be the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form.”

We may doubt the just proportion of good and ill,
There is much in 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 more in favor of man,

Frost does not attribute human emotions or soul or personality to nature as Wordsworth did. Frost does not take any theory from nature; he writes from his own personal experience and observations. His approach is realistic and distinctive. For Frost, the mountain in The Mountain is not a personality as it is for Wordsworth in The Prelude. In Frost’s poem the mountain takes the space and prevents the village from growing. Frost sees it as one of the obstacles in the vast universe. The adoption of realism and pastoralism in his treatment of nature is only a technique through which he is able to clarify human experience and human situation.

Frost was a rural dweller for much of his life but an ‘unsystematic philosopher’ by temperament. As Peter J. Stanlis says his friend is ‘a cranky, iconoclastic reactionary against modernity,’ witty and illuminating but never sentimental. Frost has written almost on every subject but his eternal subject is humanity. Man’s encounter and experience with nature is a clear symbol for Frost to explain human experiences. He is more a poet of man than of nature. Frost felt the need for realism in the presentation of nature, of man and of their place in the universe. He always insists on the separateness of man and nature. John F. Lynen also recognises this point: “By insisting on the gulf separating man and nature, he directly opposes the Romantic attempt to bring the two together.”

Frost’s poems reveal a great barrier between man and nature, and man’s efforts trying to bridge the gap, only makes him conscious of his own littleness. He also stresses on the loneliness of man in the unfeeling universe. He
presents man as a solitary figure, alienated from nature. The following lines of Frost in *The Most of It*, brings out man’s isolation.

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.

Though Frost talks frequently about the isolation of man, he never forgets to assert man’s superiorit over nature. In this aspect, Frost is very different from the Romantics who spiritualised and expressed in great lyrical style the harmony between man and nature. In the poem, *Neither Out Far Nor in Deep*, Frost admires the courageous watchers on the show, who are dauntless in keeping their watch and do not turn away in horror from the unfathomable blank stretches before them. They continue their eternal watch despite their limitations:

They cannot look out far,
They cannot look in deep,
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

The necessity of fences in the *Mending Wall* is emphasised and at the same time some mystical power at work in nature is against all fences and walls.

Something there is that doesn’t love all,

But Frost also maintains that,

Good fences make good neighbours.

Another not so pleasant or delightful aspect of Frost’s treatment of man is, his characters are alienated form mankind and they lead a life of isolation. The reader gets a glimpse of a terrifying picture of life in Frost’s poem beneath their apparent simplicity and innocence. In *Home Burial*, the husband and wife cannot share their grief for their dead son, resulting in her threat of separation:

You ---oh, you think the talk is all I must go ---
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you ---

In *Old Man’s Winter Night*, the poet brings out very touchingly the loneliness of the old age:

A light he was to one but himself,
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.

Frost may not be sentimental but he touches the heart of every reader with his very poignant and moving episodes in human life – the death of the crippled hired man, in his poem, *The Death of the Hired Man*. Frost was very much aware of the complexity and struggle of modern man and never shied away from tackling them in his poems. He presents men who go forward in life with courage and vigour in spite of their shortcomings. An example of this kind of positive attitude is seen in the poem, *The Gum Gatherer*:

I told him this is a pleasant life
To set your breast to the bark of trees
That all your days are dime beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down
And bring it to market when you please.

II. Conclusion

Robert Frost – a nature poet, philosopher, pastoral poet, a poet of man, a realist, dualist – a man of many hats. It is not necessary to anoint the great poet with one crown. Like Edward de Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats*, Frost wears different hats and is at his best in each. As his longstanding friend, Stanlis demonstrates, “Frost was an immensely
learned, largely autodidactic philosopher who absorbed the prevailing ideas of his time and fashioned his own independent thought in the face of turbulent cultural changes.”

He believed that ‘a poem is never a put-up job.’ His poems were never contrived and his poems blossoms beautifully and smoothly like a bud into a flower. The reader experiences excitement and delight by the slow unveiling and the excitement is heightened as in the unveiling of a beautiful painting till it reaches the pleasant climax of a full disclosure.

Frost’s poems have retained their freshness and universality. That is why he remains till date to be one of the most referred and quoted poets in academic and social circles. A fitting acknowledgement and tribute to Frost is made by Frost himself: “Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.”

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