This document is formatted in PDF.
Use the word find tool for researching

THE SCOPE OF FROST'S CRITICISM

The best critics have frequently been practicing poets - Dryden, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot - and although the reverse is obviously not true, there is always something particularly valuable in the critical theories and judgments of a good poet. His ideas have a ring of authenticity. Since 1963, the publication of much primary material has extended our appreciation of Robert Frost and modified the myth. Most of his prose prefaces and interviews and some occasional lectures have been collected; many, not all, of his remarkable letters, suppressed during his lifetime, have been edited; the official biography is appearing. Although much remains to be done before we can have anything like a complete picture of the poet, this recent work has uncovered new facets of his mind, new dimensions of his achievement. One such dimension, particularly valuable in a poet of Frost's stature, lies in his role as a literary critic.

It should perhaps be said at the outset that Frost was not a great critic; he was hardly a conscious, let alone a conscientious one. There is not the capacity for sweeping cultural synthesis that T. S. Eliot demonstrates, little of the particularized astuteness of Ezra Pound, not the formal sense of creating a national identity through language that Yeats has. Yet Frost has more of each of these qualities than he has hitherto been credited with. Temperamentally akin to Eliot in his conservatism, Frost expresses similar views of the necessity for objectivity in art, and of the artist's interaction with the past. When Frost writes in 1954, for example,

> Approach to the poem must be from afar off, even generations off. A reader should close in on it on converging lines from many directions like the divisions of an army upon a battlefield.
> 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, (1)

he is really very close to T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," written in 1919:

> [W]hat 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 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. (2)

And the poet who strove constantly to escape sentimentality, "huge gobs of raw sincerity," through irony and understatement, who talked of the necessity of forcing "enthusiasm" through the "prism" of metaphor, or who once wrote to Sidney Cox, "A subject has to be held clear outside of me with struts and as it were set up for an object. A subject must be an object" (3) - such a poetical theorist is clearly akin to the Eliot who wrote, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (4) And Frost, who differentiated sharply between "griefs" and "grievances" would also have agreed with Eliot's corollary: "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."

When Ezra Pound talks of "book words" as distinct from words one could "actually say," when he asserts the importance of natural speech rhythms and the avoidance of "emotional slither," (5) he is reiterating, quite independently, one of Frost's most insistent critical ideas. And if the blue-pencil job Frost does on Pound's "Portrait D'une Femme" has less sense of critical sureness than Pound's alterations of "The Waste Land," this is largely due to a particular quality of cantankerousness that blinded him to the merits of certain kinds of poetry. Certainly, other of Frost's incidental or marginal comments reflect a Poundian sharpness of insight.

Finally, if Frost's desire to get back to the soil - to contact with homely idioms and speech rhythms - has a more generalized artistic purpose than Yeats's, this is because he was not in a historical position to feel such contact as a national, as well as an artistic, urgency. But his determination to "think New Englandly," to fill his eclogues with New England characters and tones of voice, to demonstrate that, as with his beloved Roman poets, universality can rest on being truly provincial, has much in common with the Irish manifesto:

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong. (6)

Frost, then, in some of his basic critical presuppositions, is very much part of the most important early-twentieth-century theorizing. But with Frost a distinction needs to be made between the critical theorist and the practical critic. As a theorist, Frost was not only sophisticated; he was a self-conscious innovator, dedicated, practical, rather assertively aware of being "possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification." (7) Even if he was not in fact quite so original as he thought himself to be, this is the most rewarding part of Frost's criticism; he brings both integrity and sureness to it. His theories cover many aspects of poetry and have a flexibility that allows them to develop without losing their initial relevance. They range from his early ideas about sound,

the "sound of sense," "voice-posturing," and a craftsman's concern for metrics, to a later, more abstract, conceptual awareness of language and a fascination with the meaning of meaning. In between these extremes of the practical and the abstract, he turns his attention to such concerns as the act of creativity, methods of composition, the relation of poet to reader, the nature of originality, and the necessity for form. To be sure, his theories are rarely stated in formal terms - they occur incidentally in letters, prefaces, interviews, lectures - yet taken as a whole, they form one of the most significant bodies of poetical theory by any American poet, more profound and wide-ranging than Poe's, more practical and technical than Emerson's.

The practical critic falls far short of the theorist, and this is largely a problem of personality. Frost disliked formal critics. In part, perhaps, such dislike ties in with his basic intellectual suspicion of dogmatism, his sense of the need to hold ambiguities in flux. ("I'm afraid of too much structure. Some violence is always done to the wisdom you build a philosophy out of." 8) This reservation is quite defensible, and fits in with the Romantic, and later the New Critical, avoidance of value judgments. In part, too, it fits in with his theory that the creative moment comes from a sense of "recognition," and that it is the poet's task to awaken a similar recognition in the reader: "If you feel it, let's just exchange glances and not say anything about it." (9) Recognition, like intuition, suffers from overexplication. But his dismissal of a critic like John Ciardi, (10) his irritability with the symbol hunters, (11) and his advice to Sidney Cox ("Let's not be too damned literary") all savor of the kind of aggressive defensiveness that one finds often in the amateur poet (who excuses basic ineptitude by a pose of taking his poetry neat, heart speaking to heart), but which one is surprised indeed to find in a poet of Frost's ability and sophistication. The irritability toward critics is present in the very tone of a letter to Lawrance Thompson about a proposed NBC broadcast:

Besides the danger of seeing figures and symbols where none are intended is the dangerous presumption on the part of the critics that they can go the poet one better by telling him what he is up to. He may think he knows what he means but it takes a modern critic to catch him at what he is up to. Shelley for instance thought he meant the desire of the moth for the star when he was merely up to seduction. A little of the low-down on motivation goes a long way. (12)

There is no recognition whatsoever here, or anywhere else in Frost's writing, that a good critic can constructively elucidate a poem, that there is such a thing as creative criticism, or that a responsible critic can be an arbiter and preserver of those twin virtues of taste and judgment that Frost regarded as the true ends of a literary education. (13) More explicitly, there is here a flat rejection of the assumption that there can be "more" in a poem than the author is conscious of, that he can write better, more universally, than he knows; and so, by implication, the unconscious is dismissed as an area of creativity. Critics and poets are rivals, rarely allies.

Such antagonism can only be explained by the quirks of Frost's own personality, and these are evident in his biography. He himself admitted a strong feeling of jealousy toward potential rivals in poetry:

Before I had published a book I was never conscious of the existence of any contemporary poet. But as soon as my first book came out, I became jealous of all of them - all but Robinson. Somehow I never felt jealous of him at any time. (14)

Frost obviously felt a strong sense of competitiveness. One of the saddest results of this was the negation of his wife's poetic talents; seemingly overshadowed by his artistic intensity, she even denied authorship of the poems she had written in high school. (15) Back of this jealousy and competitiveness lay an insecurity that seems strangely at odds with that confidence in his own talent that sustained him over twenty years of apprenticeship. Indeed this confidence never left him. The pride with which he rejected his publisher's suggestion that he publish A Boy's Will at his own expense, the fierce independence of his early dealings with Pound, and his aloofness from the poetic fads and fashions of the twenties and thirties all point to an artistic integrity and a consciousness of the poet's high role that is worthy of any Romantic. Yet the insecurity is plainly there, too. Time and again he turned down requests to write a review of a fellow poet, and his motives are unequivocal: "The very thought of reviewing scares me incoherent." (16) In 1916 he even rejected the opportunity to write an appreciation of Wilfred Gibson, with whom he had just been living in England, because "writing about writing is something I have never done nor wanted to do." (17)

His own craft, then, was one thing - he could, and did, expound seriously on that in letters written from England and in lectures as early as 1916 - and he would use those principles as a basis of judging other poets informally. But to abstract and formalize his critical premises was quite another thing. He clearly separated these two functions of criticism. His diffidence is perhaps most openly expressed in the unpublished letter written to Norman Foerster long after Frost had become an established poet:

My dear Foerster:

My debt to you is acknowledged. It is too great to be dealt with by telegraph. But ask me anything in payment except to act as a formal judge of poetry. It seems to me I spend half my time excusing myself from judgeships lately. I may tell you in confidence I refused to act on both the Pulitzer and Guggenheim committees of award - not without giving offense I was afraid. You I am sure will take no offense. I never set out in life to be a formal judge of anything. Judgement seems to fail me when it has to be formal. I suppose it becomes too conscientious. You will understand and indulge me.

Sincerely yours

Robert Frost (18)

South Shaftsbury V t

October 25, 1931

And if an almost arrogant self-confidence seems oddly incompatible with this profound sense of insecurity, other sensitive writers have displayed the same combination. One has only to think of Hawthorne's jealous guarding of his anonymity through his years of apprenticeship; he too was a perfectionist, desperate for reputation.

More important than the psychological reasons behind such insecurity in Frost are the limitations that it imposes on his practical criticism. There is the limitation of subject. He skirts the major poetic figures of his time, indulging only in minor combat. One would love to have his serious assessment of, for example, "The Waste Land," "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," "Four Quartets," or the later Yeats, but one would search Frost's criticism in vain for this. The most these poets get are incidental remarks, often obvious or simplistic. Instead, for the most part, Frost concentrates his critical attention on minor contemporaries, peripheral figures at best, whom he cannot feel threatened by.

There is also the limitation of approach. Although he did honor Edwin Arlington Robinson posthumously with a prose preface to Robinson's King Jasper, Frost rarely honors criticism itself with a shape so formal. That preface, he later admitted, cost him "a great deal" ("I am not a practiced prose writer" 19) . Most of his practical criticism, like his critical theories, occurs offhandedly - in letters, marginalia, conversations, or interviews. The often playful freedom that such informality affords also restricts our acceptance of his judgments. Which of his various opinions of Amy Lowell's poetry, for example, represents his definitive critical stand? When is he simply spoofing his correspondent, or working out a certain temporary peevishness in himself? When does tact cut across truthfulness? Or vindictiveness prevent wholeness of judgment? Or playfulness sidetrack seriousness? The question of tone in the individual piece thus becomes important; letters need to be checked against each other and the truth of a particular critical stance extracted from a kaleidoscope of moods. Certain correspondents, of course, are more reliable than others. Friends like John Bartlett, Sidney Cox, or Louis Untermeyer tend to get the "total" Frost, often speculative and uncertain; a more censored version goes to critics like William Braithwaite or Amy Lowell-they get only what Frost wants them to get.

Yet within these limitations, Frost's practical criticism remains valuable. What it lacks in ambition, and seriousness, and broad sweep, it almost makes up for in fine discrimination, and particularity, and attention to craftsmanship. It gives an added insight into his own poetry, and helps us to place it realistically beside both the achievement of his contemporaries and the American poetic heritage to which he was so much committed.

THE SCOPE OF FROST'S CRITICISM Footnotes:

1. Robert Frost, "The Prerequisites," Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966) , p. 97.
2. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 23.
3. Lawrance Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart &

Winston, 1964), p. 385.
4. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," p. 30.
5. Ezra Pound, " A Retrospect," Literary Essay s of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1968).
6. W. B. Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 369.
7. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 79. 8. Ibid., 343.
9. Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 372.
10. Ibid.,372. II. I bid., 304.
12. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 557.
13. Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 35. 14. Mertins, Life and Talks-Walking, p. 251.
15. Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 504-505.
16. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to Lewis Gannett, February 3, 1927 (Special Collections Library, Columbia University).
17. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to Ashley Thorndike, January 25, 1916 (Special Collections Library, Columbia University).
18. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to Norman Foerster, October 25, 1931 (Special Collections Library, Stanford University).
19. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 425.

To access links go back to HTML format