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## FROST AS A CRITICAL THEORIST

They would not find me changed from him they knew-  
Only more sure of all I thought was true. (Into My Own)

Despite Robert Frost's assertion of this dubious virtue, his ideas about poetry did change; at least the expression of them did. Although the central idea of the importance of the speaking voice remained with him, the language in which he talked about his poetry changed over the years from the technical ("tones," "voice-posture," "metrics") to the moral and psychological ("belief," "commitment," "courage," "prowess") and to the linguistic ("meaning," "metaphor," "naming"). His early critical ideas were wholly those of the craftsman; later ideas were those of the philosopher. A quality of abstraction creeps in - the result not simply of age, or fame, or rationalization, but of a broader concern for the nature and function of poetry.

The heritage of poetic form against which Frost formulated his earliest ideas was the musical assonance of most nineteenth-century poetry. Poetry and music were seen as twin offspring of the same Victorian muse. Frost set out to wrench them apart. In a letter to John Bartlett in 1913 he explained:

You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it. Anyone else who goes that way must go after them. And that's where most are going.

Frost, seeking a road less traveled by, began with a certainty that poetry was, in its essence, different from music. A light exchange with Louis Untermeyer indicates his irritation at any blurring of these two separate art forms. "Tell me, Louis," he wrote in 1915, "while it is uppermost in my mind what, when you are doing the high critical, do you mean by 'overtones' in poetry." At Untermeyer's presumably reassuring reply that it meant nothing, Frost's relief is obvious: "It's all right then. ...It's just one of those bad analogies that obliterates the distinction between poetry and music." (1)

This suspiciousness toward musicality, then, was a basic starting premise - though Frost was not as alone in holding it as he imagined. Yeats, though his early poetry would appear to deny it, was asserting the same distinction (2) and advising John Synge to go to the west of Ireland and listen to people talk. The anthology *Georgian Poetry: 1911-1912* declared its separation from fin-de-siecle musicality and a return to natural speech rhythms. Yet Frost's position as an American poet gave him a somewhat different perspective. American poetry in the nineteenth century had polarized itself more obviously than English poetry. One of the poles had been Edgar Allan Poe, who in "The Rationale of Verse" claimed that verse "cannot be better designated than an inferior or less capable music," (3) and whose own poetry surrendered all

other poetic effects to the lulling hypnosis of sound. This tradition continued through much minor poetry to later poets like Sidney Lanier and Vachel Lindsay, both of whom Frost rejected vigorously. When "My Butterfly" was first published in *The Independent* in 1894, the well-meaning editor sent Frost a copy of Lanier's verse so that he could study felicity of meter. Frost's refusal to do so ("No writer has ever been corrected into importance") was a declaration that his poetic aims were different. And all his life he scoffed at the orchestrations and stage directions of Vachel Lindsay: "'Say this in a golden tone,' he says. You ought not to have to say that in the margin. ...That ought to be in the meaning." One of his few parodies has Lindsay as its target.

Running a strong countermovement to this poetry-as-music tradition in nineteenth-century America is a colloquial tradition, to which in fact the best poets belonged: Emerson, with his imperfect rhymes and meters, calling for "not metres, but a metre-making argument," Whitman, with his use of slang and free rhythm, Emily Dickinson whose homely diction and frequent metrical irregularity give the impression of a speaking voice, and Edwin Arlington Robinson whose "talking tones" Frost so much admired. This was the tradition, virtually closed to the Georgians, that Frost was heir to. As he dogmatically summed it up in a lecture years later: "No music is the same as poetry, any more than architecture and poetry is [sic] the same." (4)

Although poetry for Frost was not "an inferior and less capable music," yet for him its essence lay, constructively and meaningfully, in sound. He was no Imagist. For him sound was the great artistic catalyst, and its function was mysteriously epistemological. As early as 1894 he made this extraordinary statement in a letter: "Sound is an element of poetry, one but for which the imagination would become reason." (5) Thus, whereas Wordsworth, for example, would talk of the imagination in terms of encounters, direct or remembered, with the physical world, and Emerson in terms of neo-Platonic glimpses of reality, Frost talks of it in terms of prosody, of what he never ceased to regard as the central feature of poetry. The physical perception dictates the emotional one:

There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is the most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. And the surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it is more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and in fact, all effects, can be indicated or obtained. (6)

If this initially appears close to Poe, the distinction lies in Frost's characterization of sound as being "the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice." Not the rhythmic, singing, voice, but the talking voice. Most of Frost's early critical ideas center on this concept.

In later years, he was fond of recalling how this theory crystallized for him. A clergyman

friend, commenting on Frost's first poem in *The Independent*, tried to give him some advice about metrics, as the poem sounded too much like talking. Suddenly Frost knew precisely what he was after: the sound of talk. But his fascination with this was always more prosodic than picturesque or cultural. He was not interested in idioms and intonations for their quaintness, or their national or local flavor. Although he admired Synge, he himself would never, as he told Sidney Cox, have listened to conversations through a chink in the ceiling and written down notes, (7) and this difference in literary approach is reflected in the difference in artistic effects. The rich language of Synge's plays is a distillation of images and rhythms heard, in fact a highly literary language - "as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple." (8) It is Frost's undoctored language that actually gives us the sense of eavesdropping. He sought to extend the boundaries of literature into the real vernacular, whose meaning was as varied as the tones of voice that could be used to express it:

There are two kinds of language: the spoken language and the written language - our every day speech which we call the vernacular; and a more literary, sophisticated, artificial, elegant language that belongs to books. We often hear it said that a man talks like a book in this second way. We object to anybody's talking in this literary, artificial English; we don't object to anybody's writing in it; we rather expect people to write in a literary, somewhat artificial style. I, myself, could get along very well without this bookish language altogether. (8)

A proper understanding of intonation, the sense of the speaking voice, opened up to Frost endless possibilities for poetic effects. At the furthest extreme, intonation alone could carry meaning, quite divorced from particular words. Frost was fond of citing the example of listening to the rise and fall of voices behind closed doors or just out of earshot, where individual words could not be discerned, yet meaning, emotion, and dramatic interaction could all be intuited. Similarly, he had a Celtic delight in listening to the limited vocabulary of hearty curses and the infinite variety of meanings they could convey, depending solely "on the tones of saying it and the situations." But intonations conveyed most when they occurred most naturally, as interdependent with the actual words, when the voice itself could add connotative to denotative meaning.

This interdependence Frost called "sound-posturing": the tone of voice extended, even perhaps created, the "dictionary" meaning of a word or phrase. At the same time, one could only know how to say a particular sentence by an understanding of the total meaning, or context. Language is a living, dramatic thing and communication depends largely on the performer:

I say you can't read a single good sentence with the salt in it unless you have previously heard it spoken. Neither can you with the help of all the characters and diacritical marks pronounce a single word unless you have previously heard it actually pronounced. Words exist in the mouth not in books. You can't fix them and you don't want to fix them. You want them to adapt their sounds to persons and places and times. You want them to change and be different. (Letter from Frost to Sidney Cox January 19, 1914, Beaconsfield)

Not every yawp, then, had to be barbaric. Frost's own favorite example was the almost endless variety of meaning possible in the simple word "Oh":

"Take, for instance, the expression 'oh.' The American poets use it in practically one tone, that of grandeur: 'Oh Soul!' 'Oh Hills!' - 'Oh Anything!' That's the way they go. But think of what 'oh' is really capable: the 'oh' of scorn, the 'oh' of amusement, the 'oh' of surprise, the 'oh' of doubt - and there are many more." (9)

The particular tone chosen - whether of scorn, or amusement, or surprise, or doubt - will be dictated by the dramatic situation of the speaker. This is what Frost worked hard to establish through context in his own poetry. He once told Sidney Cox that he added the moral at the end of "The Runaway" just for the pleasure of the aggrieved tone of voice, (10) and in a letter to John Cournos it is in the achievement of this "hearing imagination" that he takes most pride:

I also think well of those four "don'ts" in Home Burial. They would be good in prose and they gain something from the way they are placed in the verse. Then there is the threatening "If-you-do!" (Last of Home Burial) It is that particular kind of imagination that I cultivate rather than the kind that merely sees things, the hearing imagination rather than the seeing imagination though I should not want to be without the latter .

I am not bothered by the question whether anyone will be able to hear or say those three words ("If-you-do!") as I mean them to be said or heard. I should say that they were sufficiently self expressive. Some doubt that such tones can long survive on paper. They'll probably last as long as the finer meanings of words. (11)

After Frost had thus broadened the poetic possibilities of individual words by such concentration on the relation of sound to meaning, it was but a small step to extend the flexibility of the sentence, to wage war on the traditional concept of the sentence as "a grammatical cluster of words," and to establish instead "the distinction between the grammatical sentence and the vital sentence." Again, it was a matter of intonation, of voice posture: "There's something in the living sentence (in the shape of it) that is more important than any phrasing or chosen word." (12) The best analysis of this idea occurs in the letters to John Bartlett and Sidney Cox. What is curious, however, in view of Frost's usual insistence on the possibilities, rather than the limitations, of intonational effect is his frequent claim that there are only a certain fixed number of sentence-sounds in man's vocal run:

Remember, a certain fixed number of sentences (sentence sounds) belong to the human throat just as a certain fixed number of vocal runs belong to the throat of a given kind of bird. These are fixed I say. Imagination can not create them. It can only call them up! (13)

The physical possibilities for expression, which so extend the meanings of words and sentences, in the end, it would seem, also mark their limitations. As Frost wrote to John

Freeman: "The brute tones of our human throat [ , ] that may once have been all our meaning. I suppose there is one for every feeling we shall ever feel, yes and for every thought we shall ever think. Such is the limitation of our thought." Art consists not in creating new variations (for that would place the artist outside nature) but in listening for tones that have not been stereotyped by literary expression, in collecting and arranging. Appreciation rests in recognition, not discovery.

The very images of orchestration, of stage direction, with which Frost talks of gathering and selecting his sentence-arrangements indicate how close his conception of poetry is to drama. He wrote only three complete plays (if one includes the two masques), yet he conducted a lifelong flirtation with the stage. During his first teaching appointment at Pinkerton Academy, he produced five plays, ranging from *The Rivals* to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*; throughout his life, he seized any opportunity he could to attend plays; certain of his dramatic eclogues were formally dramatized and acted. (14) His statements on writing continually affirm this quality:

"Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing." (15) He has expressed his indebtedness to Turgenev. Indeed, his realization of the innate dramatic possibilities of stasis ("It is a poem just to mention driving into a strange barn to bide the passing of a thunder storm" 16) has much in common with Chekov or Maeterlinck; "An Old Man's Winter Night" is just such a "play." Like these dramatists, he was acutely aware not only of the dramatic force of intonations, but also of pauses and silences. Hence the importance of the pauses in "If - you - do!" And hence the superb control of inarticulateness, of silences and breakings-off, in "A Servant to Servants." At a time when Ibsen was revolutionizing the nineteenth-century drama with thesis-plays ("writing from a formula," Frost told Sidney Cox), and later, when Shaw's argumentative prefaces covered more space than his actual plays, Frost's notion of the real source of dramatic interest never wavered. Language, properly conveyed, contained its own conflicts. He went back to Shakespeare to justify his "sound of sense." Real drama did not come from imposed theses, or extravagant stage directions, not even from body movement. His appreciation of a play by Edwin Arlington Robinson is typical: "The speaking tones are all there on the printed page, nothing is left for the actor but to recognize and give them. And the action is in the speech where it should be, and not along beside it in antics for the body to perform." This is the concept of "language as gesture" indeed. In fact, quite early Frost defined literature to Louis Untermeyer as "words that have become deeds." (17)

Because Frost's sense of drama, as of poetry, was so tied to this "language such as men do use," his themes belong strictly to the here and now. If Poe in *Politian* shifted the Kentucky *Beauchamp* murder case to sixteenth-century Rome, the strange transmigration was surely due as much to the lack of an adequate language to cope with the local and present as it was to his natural penchant for the exotic. Frost's English friend Lascelles Abercrombie, publishing the first act of his play *The Sale of St. Thomas* in 1911, was careful to set it at a distance - India, at the time of Christ; and again one suspects on his part a failure of language. Frost's "dramas," on the other hand, even when they are about witches, are about witches actually known in the present, like the witch of Coos. Similarly, part of what makes *A Masque of Reason* such a stylistic tour de force is that the philosophical dilemma is couched in the language of colloquial American rationalism. In a revealing letter to John Erskine, Frost states clearly his attitude

toward arbitrary objectification. Commenting on a poem by Erskine, he concludes:

But why to objectify the idea and put it far enough away from yourself must you put it away off in antiquity and say it in heroes and gods. Why must you every time, I mean. All right for this poem; but why not next time say it in modern people. It is like diffidence, shyness, this remoteness in time and space. Get over it and you can break in on the age with your strength and insight.

By the time he went to England in 1912, Frost's basic ideas about poetry were already established. The seriousness and self-consciousness with which he formulated them are affirmed not only in his letters at this time but also by his eagerness to discuss his ideas among the friends he found in the new literary world that was opening up to him. The world of literary camaraderie and exchange of ideas had been denied him in the years at Derry; he now, though not without some reservations in regard to certain of his fellow poets, took advantage of his new opportunities. In an unpublished postcard to F. S. Flint, Frost solicits the advice of Flint and T. E. Hulme:

Do you suppose you could get Hulme to listen with you some night to my theory of what would be pure form in poetry? I don't want to talk to a salon, but to a couple of clear-heads who will listen and give my idea its due. I will be greatly helped in what is before me by a little honest criticism. You would advise as metrical expert and he as philosopher. Do I ask too much. R. Frost

Be sure not to force Hulme. I wouldn't put him to sleep for the world. (18)

This meeting took place, and Frost was obviously grateful for the chance to articulate his critical theories. He referred to the meeting in a letter written the following week:

I don't know but that I have delivered the best of what I had to say on the sound of sense. What more there may be I will be on hand to talk over with you and Hulme at five, Tuesday. My ideas got just the rub they needed last week.

The same self-consciousness underlies the tone of conviction with which Frost wrote to Sidney Cox in 1914 about the Poet Laureate. Bridges' syllabic theories, according to Frost, were not only unsuited to a naturally accentual language like English, but they closed the door to all the dramatic possibilities of intonation, everything that makes a poem "living" as distinct from the "dead" poetry of extinct languages that are revived only in formalized scansion:

The living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence. It is only there for those who have heard it previously in conversation. It is not for us in any Greek or Latin poem because our ears have not been filled with the tones of

Greek and Roman talk. It is the most volatile and at the same time important part of poetry. It goes and the language becomes a dead language, the poetry dead poetry.

It was surely of this intonation that Frost was thinking when he later described poetry as "that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation."

Central as this concept of "voice-posture" or "sound of sense" was to Frost's critical thought, however, he was not naive enough to think that the capturing of tones of voice was anything more than the "raw material" of poetry. He was no simple tape recorder. And he was constantly at pains to dissociate himself from free-versers like Carl Sandburg. If a proper ear for intonation increased one's awareness of the range of natural rhythm and accent in English, this was just the beginning: "An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skilfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre."

Talking of capturing the sentence tones of everyday talk, he notes:

No one makes them or adds to them. They are always there - living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: they were before words were. And they are as definitely things as any image of sight. The most creative imagination is only their summoner. But summoning them is not all. They are only lovely when thrown and drawn and displayed across spaces of the footed line. (19)

The rather self-conscious mixture here of the image of the magician with that of the craftsman suggests the duality behind poetic creation.

There has always been a particularly close relation between poetic meter and poetic meaning. (20) The very earliest poets knew that the regular stress of meter gives poetry a definite emotional, even a physical appeal. All of us, Frost often said, grew up on Mother Goose; and nursery rhymes have had their perennial appeal simply through our instinctual reaction to a regular beat. Yet the best poets have also known that too much regularity is soporific, or can lead to doggerel; and their real craftsmanship has lain in constructing irregularities within some chosen framework. Rhythm and meter had to be wary bedfellows. Frost's theory carries this idea even further. Since he had enlarged the concept of natural speaking rhythms by his capturing of intonations, there is, accordingly, a greater sense of conflict in the way meter tries to harness these rhythms. Note the imagery of strain that is always present when Frost talks of poetic creation: "I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle." (21) Forty years later, this sense of strain was still obviously the most conscious part of Frost's craftsmanship: "They use the word 'rhythm' about a lot of free verse; and gee, what's the good of the rhythm unless it is on something that trips it - that it ruffles?"

You know, it's got to ruffle the meter."

For the poet who wrote "West-Running Brook," this basic conflict in the act of creation, this sense of art won only through strain, was symptomatic of profounder conflicts. Frost's kind of poetry mirrored basic psychological oppositions; and his art, in this sense, was truly mimetic. In a short casual letter he mentioned the idea in passing: "Free rhythms are as disorderly as nature; meters are as orderly as human nature and take their rise in rhythms just as human nature rises out of nature." (22)

To Frost, form is as necessary to poetry as the discipline of holding opposites in flux is necessary to the emotional life; and for the same reasons. Hence his sweeping statements on the human relevance of poetry. Insanity in his own family gave him enough evidence to fear the lack of such inner structure. Not surprisingly, then, he talks of form in two ways. When he hurls abuse at the "free-versters," "form" has a purely technical meaning; it embraces the traditional poetic tools of selectivity, choice of words, meter, and stanzaic patterning. His favorite comparison here was that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down - no fun, no challenge, no effect." There is no greater fallacy going," he wrote to Sidney Cox, "than that art is expression - an undertaking to tell all to the last scrapings of the brain pan. ...My object is true form. ...form true to any chance bit of true life." (23) And he lightheartedly asserts the importance of "measure" in the poem "The Aim Was Song." But even quite early in his theorizing, form also had a broader, more philosophical meaning; it is this meaning, associated with concepts like "freedom," and "belief," and "performance," that came to predominate in Frost's later attitudes. "Form" was a way of encompassing and giving coherence to the confusion and chaos of life itself; this imposed discipline then liberated one to a truer "freedom" - "the almost incredible freedom of the soul enslaved to the hard facts of experience," (24) as he expressed it to Edward Garnett in 1915 while giving his definition of "realist." Frost's idea of form was never dilettantish nor purely theoretical. He welcomed the confusions and crudities of experience precisely because of this opportunity for conflict; in an almost existential sense, one defined oneself through the tussle. "I thank the Lord for crudity," he wrote, "which is rawness, which is raw material, which is the part of life not yet worked up into form, or at least not worked all the way up." (25) He wanted the world no different from what it was: "I wouldn't give a cent to see the world ...made better. ...I have no quarrel with the material." (26) As the surprisingly orthodox theology of *A Masque of Reason* affirms:

Except as a hard place to save his soul in,  
A trial ground where he can try himself  
And find out whether he is any good,  
It would be meaningless. It might as well  
Be Heaven at once and have it over with.(27)

Frost was thus a realist in the most experiential sense, and form was sheer tough-mindedness. He shrewdly saw through the phony, yet immensely popular, "realism" of Edgar Lee Masters,

for example, claiming that Masters was "too romantic for my taste, and by romantic I'm afraid I mean among other things false-realistic." (28)

His own resolution of the confrontation with the "crudity" of experience was usually the more controlled one of ironic understatement.

But if "form" thus acts as a catalyst in this philosophical resolution of "crudity," it is also a paradigm of such resolution. In the terminology of *A Masque of Reason*, art can capture the "meaning" only if it echoes the sense of "trial"; the very form of a poem must emerge from a confrontation with the "threat" of formlessness. Thus, as Frost wrote to Sidney Cox as early as 1914: "[O]ur technique becomes as much material as material itself." In the series of teasing questions that he puts to Lewis Chase, he asks twice if his poems produce a feeling of threat; and in a letter to Amy Bonner written many years later he relates form directly to both life and art, and asserts the necessity of threat to both:

[T]here are no two things as important to us in life and art as being threatened and being saved. What are ideals of form for if we aren't going to be made to fear for them? All our ingenuity is lavished on getting into danger legitimately so that we may be genuinely rescued.

Twelve years earlier, Frost had expressed in a memorable image an idea similar to this precarious, nonlinear "progress" through "being threatened and being saved":

The most exciting movement in nature is not progress, advance, but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the hand, the heart, the mind. We throw our arms wide with a gesture of religion to the universe; we close them around a person. We explore and adventure for a while and then we draw in to consolidate our gains. The breathless swing is between subject matter and form.

One feature of form that bridges the technical and philosophical meanings is style, and Frost, in a letter to Untermeyer, gives a thoughtful analysis of this, which he later expanded in his Preface to *King Jasper*. **Style**, he notes, is "that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying. ...It is the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward." It thus establishes the necessary objectivity, the judgment of the intellect on the emotional involvement of artistic creation. Most difficult, because most intangible, of all qualities for the artist to develop, it is nevertheless the ultimate pointer to his literary tact and literary faith. The easiest escape is to be completely abstract, to have no style at all. Frost thus criticizes one of Amy Lowell's poems: "How completely outside of herself she gets and how completely outside of everybody else she keeps. She executes a frightfulness." (29) Elinor Wylie, on the other hand, at least establishes an attitude to her subject in a kind of irony, and the presence of "style" wins his approval:

She was self-conscious artist enough to see her appointed task. It was to make a false heart ring

false. Art forbade that a false heart should ring true. That would have been false art. The rules of the game permitted her, required her, to slip from one pose to its opposite even in the same poem when of moderate length. So long as she kept her high poetic strain, so long as the work was all crystals, sugar, glass, semi-precious and precious, the falser she was the truer she rang. The ultimate test is how a writer takes himself as betrayed in tone, word-font, and collateral advertising. I find the Wylie's way of taking herself, her airs about herself, not very detestable.(30)

Irony, he realizes, is simply "self-defence," just as humor is. And Frost should know. In the same letter to Untermeyer on style, he goes on: "I own any form of humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness. ...Humor is the most engaging cowardice. With it myself I have been able to hold some of my enemy in play far out of gunshot." The best writers, those who dare, take their beliefs seriously: "Belief is better than anything else, and it is best when rapt, above paying its respects to anybody's doubt whatsoever." For Frost, the best example of such commitment was Emerson.

Belief, then. But this should not be confused with beliefs, particularly the social and political credos that rang through the 1920's, just as griefs should not be confused with grievances. For belief meant acceptance of the age for the possibilities it offered, a sense of the eternal verities. "We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world's history," he wrote to The Amherst Student in 1935. ". ..It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God." Life, like poetry, finds not only its security but also its triumph in form. He concludes the same letter with Faulknerian tolling: "The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration."

Frost's definitions of poetry in the middle years of his career have thus left behind the technical questions of intonations and rhythms and meters, and concern themselves instead with this sense of metaphysical struggle. "Every poem," he wrote in 1946, "is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements." In a jocular letter to Leonidas Payne as early as 1927, he made a revealing metaphor out of a childhood incident:

My poems. ..are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless. Ever since infancy I have had the habit of leaving my blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, and in the dark.(31)

And perhaps his most sustained and famous metaphor for poetry occurs in "The Figure a Poem Makes," the preface he wrote to his collected poems in 1939:

It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky

events, and ends in a clarification of life - not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.

It would be foolish to try to establish a strict chronological scheme in relation to Frost's critical theories. Sheer technique continued to interest him throughout his life, and there are slight hints of a more philosophical approach even in his earliest statements. But there is, from about 1925 on, a definite shift in emphasis, a change in expression and therefore in concept. The correspondence of poetry and life, of the technical and metaphysical meanings of form, occupied him increasingly. The position given to literature in the Platonic ladder of Frost's famous "four beliefs" is significant: self-belief, the belief of love, literary belief, and belief in God. (32) Not only is literature seen quite specifically here as a matter of "belief," but the nature of that belief is defined by what circumscribes it; it takes off from the human and points to the infinite; it is indeed "the will braving alien entanglements." The Biblical cadences into which Frost's prose often falls are not altogether fortuitous; there was a little of the prophet in Frost's own "style." If "form" liberated one to "freedom," freedom was "nothing but departure," and the creative possibilities were staggering. What mattered, as he came more and more to extract himself from his material, was "performance," the self-definition achieved by means of technical mastery.

Certainly, when Frost discussed the nature of poetic creation, he never belittled the initial inspiration-the "mood" or "moment" as he often called it. A "performance" can hardly take place in a vacuum; it must have material to shape. He never really analyzed the "moment," simply accepting it like a moment of grace or intuition. In a much-quoted extract from a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost enlarges the idea:

A poem is never a put-up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. It finds its thought and succeeds, or doesn't find it and comes to nothing. It finds its thought or makes its thought. I suppose it finds it lying around with others not so much to its purpose in a more or less full mind. That's why it oftener comes to nothing in youth before experience has filled the mind with thoughts. It may be a big big emotion then and yet finds nothing it can embody in. It finds the thought and the thought finds the words. Let's say again: A poem particularly must not begin with thought first. (33)

Actually this was simplifying his practice a little. In a subtle analysis of Frost's poetic impulse, Lawrance Thompson sees it more accurately as a two-way operation: sometimes Frost did work from an initial emotion through to thought by way of metaphor (as in "Stopping by Woods"), but at other times (as in "For Once, Then, Something") he starts with a sudden mental perception and, working it out through analogy, reaches an emotional afterglow. (34) But the emphasis, even in that letter to Untermeyer, is on the working out. The "performance" was an act of clarification, and one of its greatest dangers was "facility," a slickness that denied the difficulty of the performance. At the same time, for Frost a poem could not be "worried into

existence." Some revisions were always possible and usually necessary, but if a poem did not find its essential form at the beginning, he usually set it aside. There was only one right way of saying a thing:

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. I won't say I haven't learned with the years something of the tinker's art. I'm surprised to find sometimes how I have just missed the word. It wasn't that I was groping for my meaning. I had that clear enough and I had thought I had said the word for it. But I hadn't said within a row of apple trees of it. (35)

It is Frost's interest in the nature of the clarification-through-performance that marks a third stage in his critical thinking. From his early preoccupation with the technical aspects of poetry, and from his later more philosophical interest in the relation of poetry to life, Frost became increasingly fascinated by such questions as the meaning of meaning, the nature of metaphor and of originality, the relation of poet to reader - the broad epistemological questions that put him very much in the stream of modern linguistic philosophy. Again, the time lines are, to say the least, blurred. These were not consecutive "developments" in a rising scale of critical value; they are simply the shiftings of interest that one might expect in a long career. Nor is this last phase even as clearly defined as the other two; it is stated or implied, with varying degrees of formality, over many years.

Frost was always concerned with the nature of poetic communication; he wanted to "get the poems over" to a general public, having no desire to be, as he considered Pound was, "caviare to the crowd." In discussing this communication, he uses the same words - "remembering," "recognition" - to indicate the poem's effect on both the poet and the reader. For the poet, the poem takes off from the realization of "delight," like the sudden apprehension of love:

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. *The Figure a Poem Makes*

For the reader the effect must be the same: "The artist's object is to tell people what they haven't as yet realized they were about to say themselves." (36) Or, as Frost expressed it to John Bartlett as early as 1914:

A word about recognition: In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, "Oh yes I know what you mean." It is never to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize.

A poem will achieve this only if it has been a genuine act of clarification for the poet - not a "formula" poem that works up to a previously selected felicitous last line - and if the clarification takes place within the framework of the poem itself. Thus Frost was impatient with transient poetic vogues, originality for the sake of originality, "new ways to be new." The problem was the age-old one of understanding, beyond the limited clarification of debate. "I have wanted to find ways to transcend the strife-method," he wrote to Sidney Cox. "I have found some....It is not so much anti-conflict as it is something beyond conflict....I'll bet I could tell of spiritual realizations that for the moment at least would over-awe the contentious. ...Every poem is one." (37) What was essential for him was that the "act of clarification" remain fluid. It is possible to think out a perception totally before writing, in which case the poem has been thought out of existence. Or the technique of a poem can become too insistent and take over the initial "recognition": "What counts is the amount of the original intention that isn't turned back in execution." (38) In a good poem the poet discovers his world as he creates it in language; he is the "happy discoverer of his ends."

Thus the language itself has to be a discovery. Cliches and jaded diction carry no insight because they freeze meaning, allowing the mind no new "feats of association." In a perceptive statement on *Spoon River Anthology*, Frost touches on the relation of diction to originality:

But I can't say for certain that I don't like *Spoon River*. I believe I do like it in a way. ...I could wish it weren't so nearly the ordinary thing in its attitude toward respectability. How shall we treat respectability? That is not for me to say: I am not treating it. All I know with any conviction is that an idea has to be a little new to be at all true and if you say a thing three times it ceases to be so. (39)

Frost himself sought "the unmade words to work with, not the familiar made ones that everybody exclaims Poetry! at." *Letter to Cox* On March 13, 1918, he gave a talk to a class of boys at the Browne and Nichols School that he entitled "The Unmade Word, or Fetching and Far-fetching"; in it he urged that words should be "fetched" from one association and moved to another place, given another extension of meaning, in order to keep a language fresh. This fear of cliches in itself is not unusual; most good poets have been concerned with poetry as "the renewal of words." But Frost explores the nature of language, and the relation of naming to meaning, much more abstractly in the poem "Maple."

A girl called Maple is plagued from her school days by the difference her name has imposed on her. Other names - like the Mabel she is taken for - mean nothing, are simply denotative. Hers had "too much meaning" and her search for whatever the meaning was becomes a search for an identity, her self-seeking:

Her problem was to find out what it asked  
In dress or manner of the girl who bore it.

The word thus exerts a deterministic, shaping force on her experience. She looks for an unequivocal explanation - but the page in the Bible marked by a maple leaf tells her nothing, and her father's anecdote about her naming is ambiguous, belonging only to his experience. So absolute truth is ruled out, and human truth is proved relative. Eventually, through the intuition of a fresh perception rather than through a passive acceptance of a given correspondence, a man understands her meaning:

"Do you know you remind me of a tree -  
A maple tree? "

"Because my name is Maple? "

"Isn't it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel."

"No doubt you've heard the office call me Mabel.  
I have to let them call me what they like."

They were both stirred that he should have divined  
Without the name her personal mystery.  
It made it seem as if there must be something  
She must have missed herself .

Together they make one final trip to her birth-place to see if there, at the place of origin, they can locate the experience that gave rise to the name. Seemingly at a dead-end,

They clung to what one had seen in the other  
By inspiration. It proved there was something.

Yet even then, faced with simply the existence of the name, lacking the history that went into the creating of it, they can still choose, from the immediacy of their own experiences, the connotations that will provide their own "meaning." So "they kept their thought away from when the maples/ Stood uniform in buckets," and associated her instead with "the tree the autumn fire ran through/ And swept of leathern leaves." Suddenly one final revelation is offered to them in a striking image of visual parallel:

Once they came on a maple in a glade,  
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,  
And every leaf of foliage she'd worn  
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.

But "discovery" is prevented by their lack of "faith":

They hovered for a moment near discovery,  
Figurative enough to see the symbol,  
But lacking faith in anything to mean  
The same at different times to different people.  
Perhaps a filial diffidence partly kept them  
From thinking it could be a thing so bridal.

Caught thus in the self-imposed trap of relative thinking, they are finally blinded to further insights by their deliberate halting of the active quest:

"We would not see the secret if we could now:  
We are not looking for it any more."

It is a curious poem. It borders on the tall tale, yet the tone is more perplexed than facetious, and the very "tallness" of the narrative only highlights the deeper "meanings" of the poem in which, as in "Birches," "Truth...with all her matter of fact" is set beside Truth as interpretation, as discovery, as experience, as metaphor. The poem thus explores some profound and complex ideas about the nature of knowledge, language, and personality. Who gave meaning to the name? The previous generation ("Something between your father and your mother/ Not meant for us at all") ? The girl's own experience? The "inspiration" of her husband, creating fresh metaphoric relevance? Or the gratuitous revelation of the tree at the end, offering, in true Emersonian fashion, new correspondences? How does meaning shape experience? Or experience create meaning? If Frost here seems in the realm of

I. A. Richards and Wittgenstein, this does not necessarily mean that he had read either of them. His puzzling about the nature of language, and the relation of "Nature" to language, goes back rather to Emerson, but the nature of his preoccupations here place him in the same arena as some of the more sophisticated critical theorists of the twentieth century.

Central to Frost's thinking about the meaning of meaning are his ideas on metaphor. One of the most striking features of his prose from the very beginning is that nearly all his attempts at explanation or definition lead him into metaphor:

I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break  
stumbling on the shingle.

[A poem] begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love.

[Style] is the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward.

In the Paris Review interview he told Richard Poirier: "Every thought is a feat of association." (40) Thus all thinking is metaphoric, and Frost gives the broadest epistemological relevance to metaphor in "Education by Poetry." It is not a simple "pairing-off" correspondence, which would be static; he is careful not to use the word "simile" except facetiously, as in "The Door in the Dark."

In going from room to room in the dark  
I reached out blindly to save my face,  
But neglected, however lightly, to lace  
My fingers and close my arms in an arc.  
A slim door got in past my guard,  
And hit me a blow in the head so hard  
I had my native simile jarred.  
So people and things don't pair anymore  
With what they used to pair with before.

His "native simile," adept at pairing "people and things," did not open the door, only ran into it "in the dark." Metaphors are creative, door-opening, expansive, and the main value of teaching poetry is that it teaches awareness of metaphor. ("Education by poetry is education by metaphor.") It provides discipline and direction and understanding in its function as the "prism of the intellect" which takes "enthusiasm," the raw emotional response to experience, and spreads it "on the screen in a color, all the way from hyperbole at one end - or overstatement, at one end - to understatement at the other end." (41) It is thus a way of sorting out, of discriminating, meaning from the language that contains it. It is also a warning, as was "Maple," against the heresy of thinking that meaning is absolute:

Once on a time all the Greeks were busy telling each other what the All was - or was like unto. All was three elements, air, earth, and water (we once thought it was ninety elements; now we think it is only one). All was substance, said another. All was change, said a third. But best and most fruitful was Pythagoras' comparison of the universe with number. Number of what? Number of feet, pounds, and seconds was the answer, and we had science and all that has followed in science. The metaphor has held and held, breaking down only when it came to the spiritual and psychological or the out of the way places of the physical. (42)

This proper relation to meaning that one establishes through metaphor carries over into all aspects of living - into historical perspectives and personal values. A proper understanding of figurative values liberates one to the possibilities of Belief - or all four beliefs. Yet it finally has the limitation of the finite mind:

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say

matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed. We stop just short there. But it is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking, that attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter. It is wrong to call anybody a materialist simply because he tries to say spirit in terms of matter, as if that were a sin. 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. (43)

Thus through over sixty years of writing about poetry, and through a tantalizing variety of literary forms and styles, Robert Frost has left us a body of critical theory that is probably larger than that of any other American poet. It has scope and depth, wit and subtlety - and a great sanity. In its significance, it bears favorable comparison with the formalized criticism of Eliot or Pound, yet its dependence on Emerson gives it a more distinctive American quality. Finally, it should be remembered that Frost told John Freeman: "my theory was out of my practice"; he exemplified its relevance in the poetry he wrote.

## FROST AS A CRITICAL THEORIST - Footnotes

1. Louis Untermeyer (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), p. 16.
2. See Frost's recognition of this in "The Craft of Poetry," *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 203.
3. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Vol. 14. (The Monticello edition; New York: George D. Sproul, 1902), p. 220.
4. Unpublished transcript by Amy Bonner of a lecture given by Robert Frost at the New School for Social Research, N.Y., in 1937. (Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University.)
5. Thompson, *Selected Letters*, p. 25.
6. Newspaper interview, quoted in Robert Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," *American Literature*, IX (November, 1937), p.298.
7. Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. II.
8. J. M. Synge, *Preface to The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Complete Works of John M. Synge* (New York: Random House, 1935), p. 4.
9. Robert Frost, "A Visit in Franconia," *Interviews with Robert Frost*, p. 13.
10. Cox, *A Swinger of Birches*, p. 110.
11. Thompson, *Selected Letters*, p. 130.
12. *Ibid.*, 217.
13. *Ibid.*, 151.
14. The American Dramatic Society produced "The Death of the Hired Man" and "Home Burial" in 1915; the Breadloaf Writers Conference staged "Snow" in 1925.
15. Robert Frost, "Preface to A Way Out," *Selected Prose*, p. 13.
16. Thompson, *Selected Letters*, p. 182.
17. Untermeyer, *Letters*, p. 10.
18. Unpublished postcard from Robert Frost to F. S. Flint, n.d. (The Academic Center Library, University of Texas).
19. Thompson, *Selected Letters*, pp. 191-192.
20. See Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1965), Chap. I.

21. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 128.
22. Ibid., 242.
23. Ibid., 361.
24. Ibid., 179.
25. Ibid., 465.
26. Ibid., 369.
27. Robert Frost, The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), p. 484.
28. Untermeyer, Letters, p. 14.
29. Ibid., 17.
30. Ibid., 230.
31. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 344.
32. Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry," Selected Prose, pp. 44-45.
33. Untermeyer, Letters, p. 22.
34. Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942 ), Chap. 2.
35. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 237.
36. Untermeyer, Letters, p. 256.
37. Thompson, Selected Letters, pp. 324-325.
38. Ibid., 61.
39. Untermeyer, Letters, pp. 75-76.
40. Richard Poirier, "Robert Frost," Paris Review, No.24 (Summer- Fall, 1959), p. 115.
41. Frost, "Education by Poetry," Selected Prose, p. 36.
42. Ibid., 37.
43. Ibid., 41.

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