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FROST AS A PRACTICAL CRITIC

"Each poem clarifies something. But then you've got to do it again. You can't get clarified to stay so: let you not think that. In a way, it's like nothing more than blowing smoke rings. Making little poems encourages a man to see that there is shapeliness in the world. A poem is an arrest of disorder ."

Robert Frost, quoted in an interview by John Ciardi, published in the *Saturday Review*, March 21, 1959.

When we turn to Frost's practical criticism, our first impression is likely to be one of surprise at how low-keyed it is. There is, moreover, something curiously superficial about his literary judgments. Certainly this is due in part to the informality of his letter style, partly to certain difficulties in his personality, and very largely to the fact that he was not particularly interested in practical criticism. In looking at this aspect of Frost's literary mind, we are limited by the available evidence. Not all his letters have been published and almost none of his lectures, which would seem to be an important primary source. Any assessment, therefore, will have to change, as new material becomes public. But in the material that is at present available, Frost's criticism covers three distinct areas: judgments about his own poetry, about the poetry of his contemporaries, and about the poetry of the past.

Unfortunately there is far too little record of Frost's comments on his own poetry. His criticism here is restricted mostly to his early work, and is almost wholly concerned with technique. The same diffidence that kept him from commenting on his major contemporaries also kept him out of controversy over his own poetry. "I have written to keep the over curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verse and in my letters to such as you," he wrote to Sidney Cox. (1) Or perhaps the reason for a lack of self-analysis was simply that, since a poem had been an act of clarification for him, it did not bear further clarification; he was usually sure about what he had written. There is barely restrained impatience in the tone of his letter to Leonidas W. Payne Jr ., chairman of the English Department at the University of Texas, when Payne, with misguided good will, sent Frost a list of "errors" found in his Collected Poems. There is no room for self-doubt here; he was not to be misled by standards of "school-girl English."

Most of Frost's self-criticism, probably because it deals with the early poetry, is directed at his major preoccupations at that time - sound, and tones of voice. In a conversation with Louis Mertins, he talks of the problem of diction:

> When I first began to write poetry - before the illumination of what possibilities there are in the sound of sense came to me - I was writing largely, though not exclusively, after the pattern of the past. For every poet begins that way - following some pattern, or group of patterns. It is only when he has outgrown the pattern, and sees clearly for himself his own way that he has really started to become. You may go back to all those early poems of mine in *A Boy's Will*, and some that are left out of it. You will find me there using the traditional cliches. Even "Into My Own" has an ''as't were." In "Stars" there is a line "O'er the tumultuous snow"; while in my very first poem "My Butterfly ," I was even guilty of "theeing" and "thouing," a crime I have not committed since. (2)

But this is mostly hindsight. He expresses less consciousness of words as cliches, and more concern for the relation of sound to logic in the following 1894 letter to Susan Hayes Ward about the first poem ("My Butterfly") that she accepted for *The Independent*:

> I have not succeeded in revising the poem as you requested. That Aztec consonant syllable of mine, "l," spoils a word I am very sorry to dispense with. The only one I think of to substitute for it is "eddying" which of course weakens the impression - although I am not sure but that it merely changes it. The would-be cadence howe'er may be incorrect also, but I did not suspect it at the time. It is used in the same sense as "at any rate" would be in that case. But I cannot sustain the usage by any example I have in mind: and when once I doubt an idiom my ear hesitates to vouch for it thereafter. The line, "These were the unlearned things," is wretched. It refers directly to the two lines preceeding and indirectly to the answer inevitable to that question " And did you think etc." which answer would be, God did nevertheless! Yet the line is manifestly redundant as well as retruse and I must invent one to supplant it. (3)

This concern for the relation of sound to sense is even more evident in his criticism of slightly later poems, which more directly embody his theories of intonation. His analysis of the value of " A Patch of Snow," for example, is based on the dual criteria of "certain points of recognition" and "the very special tone." And one of his fullest criticisms of his own poetry, in his own critical terms, occurs in an unpublished lecture that he gave to the Browne and Nichols School in 1915; his "terms" are wholly those of intonation:

> ...the Sound in the mouths of men I found to be the basis of all effective expression, - not merely words or phrases, but sentences, - living things flying round, -the vital parts of speech. And my poems are to be read in the appreciative tones of this live speech. For example, there are five tones in this first stanza,
>
> "The Pasture"
>
> I'm going out to clean the pasture spring; (light, informing tone)
> I'll only stop to rake the leaves away ("only" tone - reservation)
> (And wait to watch the water clear, I may) : (supplementary, possibility)
> I sha'n't be gone long. - You come too. (free tone, assuring)
> (afterthought, inviting)
>
> I'm going out to fetch the little calf (similar, free, persuasive, assur-
> That's standing by the mother. It's so young, ing, and inviting tones in second stanza)
> It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
> I sha'n't be gone long. - You come too.

Yet if intonation is the chief criterion in Frost's self-criticism, it rests on a thorough knowledge of metrics. In a letter to John Erskine, he reads lines in terms of their meter, and admits to having a "sophisticated ear." There is, moreover, a critical judgment at work in the very ordering of the poems in A Boy's Will, and especially in the rubrics that accompanied the poems in the first edition. There is an element of self-parody, of irony, of critical objectivity, and an awareness of over-all structure in this random selection from the original table of contents:

> INTO MY OWN The youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world.
> MY NOVEMBER GUEST He is in love with being misunderstood.
>
> IN NEGLECT He is scornful of folk his scorn cannot reach.
>
> MOWING He takes up life simply with the small tasks.
>
> REVELATION He resolves to become intelligible, at least to himself, since there's no help else.

> NOW CLOSE THE WINDOWS It is time to make an end of speaking.
>
> MY BUTTERFLY There are things that can never be the same.

The rubrics in fact shift the "voice" in each poem from that of adolescent romanticism close to that of the ironic monologues of the early Eliot. It seems a pity they were removed from later editions, though they are restored in the notes of the 1969 edition by Edward Connery Lathem. Perhaps Frost thought they were too obvious, or perhaps he came to think that the "voice" had to validate itself from within the poem.

On the whole, although Frost's judgments about his own poetry were very sure, he rarely indulged in self-justification. About "The Road Not Taken," for example, which he knew was being misread by most readers, he remained enigmatically noncommital. Commenting on the preference of Maine publisher Thomas Mosher for "Reluctance," Frost notes: "Nevertheless the book contains a dozen poems that are at least good in the same kind and for the same reason. In Mowing, for instance, I come so near what I long to get that I almost despair of coming nearer." (4) "Mowing" is indeed the one poem in *A Boy's Will* that stands out as something stronger than a Romantic lyric, and that prefigures the best of Frost's poetry; one would love to hear him analyze what it was he came so close to "getting," as Poe analyzed the composition of "The Raven." But Frost gives little away.

The bulk of his criticism is directed rather toward his contemporaries, and the criteria he employs here are only slightly broader than those involved in his self-criticism. Again, although the time span is larger, his primary emphasis is on technique and craftsmanship. His praise goes to any demonstration of technical mastery, as in his comment on Mark Van Doren's "Winter Diary": "I believe I saw how you got every turn of phrase and word-shift in it. I delighted in the way you took your rhymes." (5) His praise goes also to any work that illustrates his own theories, as the "speaking tones" do in Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The Porcupine*. His condemnation goes to anything that runs counter to his practical knowledge of the way poetry works. Thus he is skeptical of Bridges' syllabic theory of metrics. In a marginal comment beside a poem of Bridges' in the 1913 issue of *Poetry and Drama*, Frost writes:

> I heard this great man in a brave theory of rhythm at lunch at the Vienna Cafe not long since. He holds that our syllables are to be treated in verse as having quantities of many shades. That is to say they are quarter, third and fifth notes as the case may be. Who knows not that, nor acts upon it, is no poet. Well here we have him acting upon it, we are to presume. Poor old man. (6)

Yet even here Frost has enough tolerance to admit: "Mind you he has done good things." He is more scathing toward sheer incompetence. Note his emphasis on structure, as well as on "recognition," in this comment on Wilfred Gibson's "Solway Ford":

> It is a good poem. But it is oh terribly made up. You know very well that at most all he had to go on was some tale he had heard of a man who had gone mad from fear and another of a man who had been pinned and overtaken by the tide in Solway. I am even inclined to think he invented the latter. It hardly sounds plausible. The details of what he asks you to believe his hallucinations were are poetical but not very convincing. And then look at the way the sentences run on. They are not sentences at all in my sense of the word.(7)

Although the tone of a letter Frost wrote to Harold Monro about Monro's poetry is jocular and tactful, he plainly cannot bring himself to accept exaggerated diction: "You turn life rather too terrible by the use of such words over a cat drinking milk as 'creeping lust,' 'transfigured with love,' 'dim ecstasy,' 'her world is an infinite shapeless white,' 'holy drop,' and 'lies defeated.' " (8)

Gibson and Monro were friends of Frost. The tone is less tactful and the attack on technical incompetence more direct and specific in his letters on Clement Wood and James Agee. Frost insists on traditional grammar and logic in his criticism of Agee's poem. Delicacy of tone could never cover up

sloppiness in thinking; form must lead to clarification, or it belies itself.

This emphasis on technique as a critical yardstick has firmness and practicality, but it excludes a great deal. Predating the New Criticism, it has some of the limitations of that approach. On the whole, it pays too little attention to the psychological and moral values that go into writing, to a writer's intention, or to his relation to his culture. Frost's critical approach thus lacks a philosophical center; he tends to get drowned in the shallows. At one extreme, this lack prevents his seeing the importance of Eliot's innovations; at the other extreme, it lets in a certain personal peevishness, as in many of his comments on Pound. The inscription that Pound wrote in a copy of *Cantos LII-LXXI* which he presented to Frost shrewdly touches on this restrictiveness: "For R.F. who w'd like it -- if he w'd like it - E.P." (9)

There is a significant exception to this limitation in Frost's critical vision - enough to prove that his critical capabilities were broader than the bulk of his criticism would indicate. That exception is the preface to Robinson's *King Jasper*, one of the few pieces of formal criticism that Frost attempted. The second half of that preface is devoted to particularized analysis of individual poems; but the second half was an appendage, added only after the publisher asked Frost for a few more pages. Frost's essential approach to Robinson is through the latter's subject matter - his "griefs," "Robinsonianly profound" - and through his "style," the inner toughness by which he prevented his griefs from becoming mere yelping grievances. Frost reveals a touching sensitivity to Robinson's lost aching spirit, and a generosity that, through a "recognition" that is more literary than biographical, allows him to identify with it. It is a sound humanistic piece of criticism that enters fully into the spirit of its subject.

Frost rarely brought this sense of wholeness to his critical judgments. His best qualities as a critic exist on a level below this, and they illustrate his astuteness rather than his profundity. His criticism springs from a commitment to a definite attitude; it has discrimination, particularity, and range.

If commitment to a well-defined attitude carries with it the danger, in Frost, of leading to criticism that is simply opinionated and often wrongheaded, it also has the balancing virtue of letting us know where he stands. He had opinions on most of his contemporaries, and he aired them forcefully. "I always hold that we get forward as much by hating as by loving," (10) he once noted, and many of his critical judgments are simply concerned with separating sheep from goats. He is impatient, for example, with Untermeyer's critical pussyfooting:

> Anybody can tell you are cunning by the way you phrase yourself on the subject of Braithwaite's five best poems. The selection "staggers you." That is to say you don't say it is not good and you won't say you don't know what good is. You seem to allow that the poems have merit, though you don't see it. They have none! (11)

Such definiteness only becomes a critical merit by virtue of the fact that Frost usually reveals a fine sense of discrimination in his judgments. Certainly, there are some alarming lapses in his critical insight. His assessment of Pound is obscured by a personal antagonism toward him. He casts Wallace Stevens off as "bric-a-brac." (12) His judgments on Eliot - even when one makes allowances for the facetiousness of casual expression - are fatuous:

> [Eliot] is a pessimistic Christian; I am an optimistic pagan! (13) I play euchre. [Eliot] plays Eucharist. We both play (14)

Or simply whimsical:

> Such news reaches me from the great world as that common sense is now considered plebean and any sense at all only less so: the aristocrat will spurn both this season; one American poet living in England has made an Anthology of the Best Lines in Poetry. He has run the lines loosely together in a sort of narrative and copyrighted them so that anyone using them again will have to enclose them in double quotation marks thus: " 'I say no harm and I mean no harm.' " (15)

Such oversimplification is particularly disappointing when one considers how close some of Frost's theories about art are to those explored in *Four Quartets*. Perhaps the most puzzling limitation of all is his apparent neglect of the later Yeats; there seems to be no mention of Yeats in Frost's criticism after 1915. Nevertheless, despite these major lapses, Frost's judgments of contemporary sheep and goats reveal a sharp discrimination. He senses that Masters, with all his "false realism," and Sandburg, with his affectations and post-Whitman effusions, are minor figures. Amy Lowell is little better, though she is saved somewhat by her Brahmin rigor. But he responds with generous conviction to the stronger talents of Robinson, Edward Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, Hardy, and the early Yeats. His response to D. H. Lawrence is typical. At the end of a letter to Edward Garnett he writes: "I'll tell you a poet with a method that is a method: Lawrence. I came across a poem of his in a new Imagiste Anthology just published here, and it was such a poem that I wanted to go right to the man that wrote it and say something." (16) And at a time when contemporary judgment was unbelievably confusing the talents of Alfred Noyes and W. B. Yeats, Frost wrote a shrewd clarification of their respective merits. Living in the midst of the English Georgians, he could distinguish their relative value:

> The nineties produced no single poem to put beside [De la Mare's] "Listeners." Really the nineties had very little on these degenerate days when you consider. Yeats, Jonson [Lionel Johnson] and Dowson they had, and that is about all. De la Mare and Davies are the equal of any of them in lyric and Abercrombie ...leaves them all behind in the sublime imaginative sort of thing.(17)

The same sense of generous and sane discrimination is revealed in Frost's comments on the individual poems in the *Miscellany of American Poetry*, or in the Preface to *The Arts Anthology: Dartmouth Verse 1925.*

In several of his letters and conversations Frost creates the image of a reader who runs his finger down a page of a poem and notes, at a certain line, "There you've hit it." The image could perhaps be taken as a paradigm of Frost's critical method, for the quality of particularity thus illustrated was one of its strongest points. Such particularity has some relation, as Frost himself noted, to Poe's idea that poetic excellence comes in short bursts, that in a long poem the high points are necessarily strung together by patches of mediocrity. But it does suggest, also, that both careful reading and sharp judgment go into Frost's critical statements, for he was fond of singling out particular lines. "You never wrote better lines than the last three in The Innkeeper," he wrote John Erskine! (18) In a tactful criticism of a poem by his son Carol, after commenting on its subject matter and general approach, he singles out particular lines:

> How I like the smooth clarity and high sentiment of
>
> "The place for me"
>
> "And me"
>
> and from there on a way. I think the best of all may be the passage
>
> "replenished clear
> And cold from mountain streams that ever hear
> Proceeding waters calling from below."

And in a breezy series of snap judgments on the "best" poems of various contributors to Untermeyer's 1925 *Miscellany of American Poetry*, he is careful to comment on single lines:

> The best Aiken poem is probably Arachne, ...the best HD the Recording Angel. ..the best Eliot I or II or possibly III, the best Fletcher To Hell with Whores (line 21) , ...the best Vachel Buffaloes, ...the best Edna Saint I (the rest are pretty bad except for line 8 in V and stanza 2 in VII) (19)

One of the most marked characteristics of Frost's practical criticism is its range. It embraces the poetry of

students (e.g., his preface to the Dartmouth anthology), of family (all his children wrote poems), of personal friends like Untermeyer or John Erskine or Mark Van Doren. In discussing such poetry Frost reveals tact, constructiveness, discrimination, and a tolerance for poetic attitudes not his own. To one student, for example, he writes:

> The book has come and I have read your poems first. They are good. They have loveliness - they surely have that. They are carried high. What you long for is in them. You wish the world better than it is, more poetical. You are that kind of poet. I would rate as the other kind. ...We can be friends across the difference. (20)

Beyond the work of immediate friends, Frost's criticism embraces most of the poetic schools of the 1910's and 1920's, such as the Imagists and the *Vers-Librists*, though here he was more objective and antagonistic. Although he did not automatically classify and condemn individual members of these schools ("Fletcher is a whole lot better than I expected him to be. I have mixed him up too much with Amy to be fair to him"), yet he was opposed to "schools" in general, and to these two in particular. His main quarrel with the Imagists was that they concentrated too much on the visual imagination, consequently neglecting the essential "vocal imagination," and that their poetry was too cerebral. Sending a copy of *Mountain Interval* to Edward Garnett, Frost commented:

> I can hear Edward Thomas saying in defense of "In the Home Stretch" that it would cut just as it is into a dozen or more of your Chinese impressionistic poems and perhaps gain something by the cutting for the reader whose taste had been formed on the kiln-dried tabule poetry of your Pounds and Masterses. I look on theirs as synthetical chemical products put together after a formula. It's too long a story to go into with anyone I'm not sure it wouldn't bore. There's something in the living sentence (in the shape of it) that is more important than any phrasing or chosen word. And it's something you can only achieve when going free. The Hill Wife ought to be some sort of answer to you. (21)

With the "free-versters," as he called them, his quarrel was deeper, since he regarded form as a philosophical as well as a technical necessity. Since the basic discipline of straining the meter against the rhythm was not required, free verse, he claimed, could be written by any fool. In a letter to Leonidas W. Payne Jr., commenting on the slowness of Texas trains, Frost tosses off his own parody:

> And yet speed is a thing I can see the beauty of and intend to write a poem in free verse on if ever I am tempted to write anything in free verse. Let's see how do you write the stuff:
>
> Oh thou that spin nest the wheel
>
> Give speed
> Give such speed
> That in going from point A
>
> To point B
> I may not have had time to forget A
>
> Before I arrive at B
> And there may result comparison
>
> And metaphor
> From the presence in the mind
> Of two images at the same instant practically. (22)

A more bitter parody was the free-verse letter Frost wrote to Pound, but never sent.

A "school" or rather a literary attitude that became increasingly popular during the 1920's and 1930's was one that sought to bring literature to the service of politics. Frost was equally disdainful of this. To

Archibald MacLeish's view that originality in art can precipitate revolution in politics, Frost's rebuttal was characteristically pragmatic:

> Tell me any poetic or belle lettre originality of any day that became the revolution of any day following. Let's talk sense. Wordsworth and Emerson both wrote some politics into their verse. Their poetic originality by which they live was quite another thing. So of Shelley. His originality was sufficient to give him his place. His politics were of the order of Godwins and Orages. If you want to play with the word revolution, every day and every new poem of a poet is a revolution of the spirit: that is to say it is a freshening. But it leads to nothing on the lower plane of politics. On the lower plane of thought and opinion the poet is a follower. Generally he keeps pretty well off that plane for that reason. (23)

Disdaining such "grievances" in favor of "griefs" as material for poetry, Frost stayed clear of propagandist verse. He could no more write for a specific cause than he could write for a specific occasion. The poem he actually wrote for President Kennedy's inauguration was little better than doggerel, and there is a strong suspicion current among Frost's friends that the inability to read this poem and the on-the-spot substitution of "The Gift Outright" was a well-calculated piece of acting. Yet Frost was always interested in politics and more than one of his poems can be read in political terms. Although he was chary of having "Mending Wall" interpreted as a confrontation of a nationalist and an internationalist point of view, and although he openly denied that "To a Thinker in Office" dealt with President Roosevelt, yet he himself offers a "political" reading of "The Death of the Hired Man" in his *Paris Review* interview:

> They think I'm no New Dealer. But really and truly I'm not, you know, all that clear on it. In *The Death of the Hired Man* that I wrote long, long ago, long before the New Deal, I put it two ways about home. One would be the manly way: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in." That's the man's feeling about it. And then the wife says, "I should have called it/ Something you somehow hadn't to deserve." That's the New Deal, the feminine way of it, the mother way. You don't have to deserve your mother's love. You have to deserve your father's. He's more particular. One's a Republican, one's a Democrat. The father is always a Republican toward his son, and his mother's always a Democrat. Very few have noticed that second thing; they've always noticed the sarcasm, the hardness of the male one. (24)

Besides Edwin Arlington Robinson, the two contemporaries to whom Frost gave greatest critical attention were Edward Thomas and Amy Lowell. Though he wrote no formal tribute to Thomas' poetry, as he did to Robinson's, his "criticism" lay in urging Thomas to give up prose and cultivate the distinctive poetic quality of his mind. The story of their friendship is a moving one. Of all the poets he met in England, Thomas was his only soul mate, "the only brother I ever had," and they were bound as much by their temperamental melancholy as by their love of nature. Thomas had been grinding out a living writing hack prose. Frost started him on poetry, and, after Thomas' death, helped to spread the appreciation of his work. Frost sets out the role he played in an unpublished letter to Ben Miller:

> Dear Mr. Miller:
>
> Of course I am pleased to have Edward Thomas' name connected with mine, as I think he would be; one has to be careful to put it just the right way. I didn't show him how to write. All I did was show him himself in what he had already written. I made him see that much of his prose is poetry, that only had to declare itself in form to win him a place where he belonged among the poets. Van Doren comes near enough to the facts of our relationship and he is absolutely perfect in his description of Thomas' kind of poetry. J. C. Squire (Editor of Mercury) said to me the other day he thought Thomas the best of recent British poets. I am glad it has come to that. ...
> Always yours faithfully,

> Robert Frost (25)

Toward Amy Lowell, his attitude is far more ambivalent. He comes to her not by way of friendship (as with Thomas), nor by way of similar poetic theories and values (as with Robinson), but by way of a curious mixture of rivalry and condescension. When he arrived back in America, after his years in England, the first review of his work that he saw was one by Amy Lowell in the New Republic. A few days later he called on her in Boston, where her social and poetic prominence were awesome. From an initial dependence, his attitude to her went through many phases. A letter to her in 1915 is a careful blend of conciliation (". ..I liked your book when I was a free agent"), reservation ("I wish sometimes you would leave to Browning some of the broader intonations. .."), and conspiratorial chumminess ("We have busted 'em up as with cavalry. We have, we have we have"). Clearly, his critical standpoint here is ambivalent. The same mixture of dependence and independence is present in a letter in 1917, shortly after Miss Lowell had devoted to Frost a chapter in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. "Your generosity from the first has had so much to do with making me," he wrote to her, "that if from now on you reversed yourself and tried to unmake me, I should never be brought to believe you were anything but my friend." Yet there is a testiness in the way he corrects some of her "errors of fact":

> Please spell it *Elinor* Frost in the two places where you name my wife. The word should be "shock" instead of "shook" in the quotation from A Hundred Collars. ...Even if you don't care to bother with the correction in your next edition, I wish you would make a marginal note of the fact that I didn't meet Gibson till I was putting the last touches on North of Boston and I didn't meet Abercrombie till after the MS was in David Nutt's hands. (26)

A couple of weeks later, Frost wrote to Untermeyer about the same book, giving him "one or two facts that Amy leaves out of my account," and the testiness is more evident. One assertion in her book that justifiably rankled with Frost was that he lacked a sense of humor:

> I doubt if she is right in making me so grim, not to say morbid. I may not be funny enough for Life or Punch, but I have sense of humor enough, I must believe, to laugh when the joke is on me as it is in some of this book of Amy's.
> I really like least her mistake about Elinor. That's an unpardonable attempt to do her as the conventional helpmeet of genius. ...What a cheap common unindividualized picture Amy makes of her . (27)

Yet the awe and a tentative liking are still there too: "Amy means well and perhaps you will come to our rescue without coming in conflict with Amy or contradicting her to her face."

By 1920, both the awe and the liking had disappeared, and Frost's independence asserts itself emphatically:

> But I'll whisper you something that by and by I mean to say above a whisper: I have about decided to throw off the light mask I wear in public when Amy is the theme of conversation. I don't believe she is anything but a fake, and I refuse longer to let her wealth, social position, and the influence she has been able to purchase and cozen, keep me from honestly bawling her out - that is, when I am called on to speak! I shan't go out of my way to deal with her yet awhile, though before all is done I shouldn't wonder if I tried my hand at exposing her for a fool as well as fraud. Think of saying that as the French have based their free verse on Alexandrines so she has based her polyphonic prose on the rhythms of the periodic sentence of oratory. She couldn't get away with that if she hadn't us all corralled by her wealth and social position. What could "periodic" have to do with it. Periodic sentences have no particular rhythm. Periodic sentences are sentences in which the interest is suspended as in a plot story. Nonsense and charlatanry - that's all that kind of talk amounts to. I'm sure she guessed without looking it up that there must be something recurrent like beat or pulse implied in periodic. She knew ladies were periodic because they recurred monthly. She's loony - and so periodic by the moon herself. Feeling as I do you don't think it would be

> honester for me to refuse to be bound between the covers of the same book with her, do you? (28)

In April 1925, Miss Lowell gave a gala party in Boston to launch her badly reviewed Keats biography. Frost and Unterrneyer declined to go to what Frost called her "Keats Eats." Yet it is a mark of Frost's maturity and critical perspective that when she died a month later he refused to let any feelings of guilt sentimentalize his judgment:

I didn't rise to verse, but I did write a little compunctious prose to her ashes. And I did go before the assembled college to say in effect that really no one minded her outrageousness because it never thrust home: in life she didn't know where the feelings were to hurt them, any more than in poetry she knew where they were to touch them. I refused to weaken abjectly. (29)

The "little compunctious prose" was a review published in The Christian Science Monitor, and it reveals some of Frost's best critical qualities - not the warm insights of identification that he gave to Robinson, but tact, positiveness, and careful discrimination. And if we can read his reservations between the lines, the review nevertheless provides a genuine clarification of her poetic value, and an acknowledgment that poetry, like religion, has many varieties of experience.

Finally, there is the criticism that Frost directs at earlier poets. This is small in bulk and, except for two essays on Emerson, even more casually indicated than his other practical criticism. But it is important as showing the range and selectivity of his reading, and - if "criticism" can include a simple declaration of what one likes - the direction of his poetic preferences.

In English poetry, he frequently quoted Chaucer and Shakespeare for the virility of their language, and the force of their speaking tones. (30) Wordsworth he liked for his attempt to get back to a speaking diction (indeed the ideas expressed in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads have much in common with Frost's own theories) as well as for his appreciation of the natural world. (31) He admired Browning for the "intonations" of his dramatic monologues. When Frost's daughter Marjorie died, it was, Arnold's Cadmus and Harmonia with which he plaintively identified. He read widely in English poetry, and, if much of his reading was through Palgrave's Golden Treasury, the battered state of his personal volumes of Wordsworth, Browning, and Arnold carry at least some evidence of more extended enthusiasms. (32)

He read even more widely, and directed more critical attention, to his American heritage, and not only to its poetry. Throughout his life he extolled Twain's "Jumping Frog" for capturing vernacular rhythms. He paid tribute to William Dean Howells: "My obligation to him. ..is not for the particular things he did in verse form, but for the perennial poetry of all his writing in all forms. I learned from him a long time ago that the loveliest theme of poetry was the voices of people." (33) His comment on the early style of Melville is perceptive: "He tried to be elegant without having first got sophisticated." (34) And he speaks with enthusiasm of the chiseled, Flaubertian prose of Willa Cather ("I wept for the sheer perfection" 35). In poetry he admired Longfellow enough to pay him the tribute of his first book title ("Longfellow was a true poet for anyone with the ears to judge poetry by ear" 36). Whitman he held in some suspicion, as much for his spurious ideas about democracy and the unity of man, as for his freedom with form. In the letter to Untermeyer on style, he makes a comparative assessment of certain nineteenth-century poets:

> Emerson had one of the noblest least egotistical of styles. By comparison with it Thoreau's was conceited, Whitman's bumptious. ...Longfellow took himself with the gentlest twinkle- ... Whittier, when he shows any style at all, is probably a greater person than Longfellow as he is lifted priestlike above consideration of the scornful.

But the three American poets who were the most important to him were Emily Dickinson, Thoreau, and

Emerson. Emily Dickinson was "the best of all women poets who ever wrote." (37) If, to a feminist, this seems backhanded praise, there is some compensation in the biographical evidence that one of his first gifts to Elinor, when they were both in high school, was a book of Emily Dickinson's poems, and in the bibliographical evidence of his own much-used copy of her poetry, which is filled with short pencil marks beside favorite poems. (38) One wishes that Frost had been more of a scribbler in margins. The full examination of his debt to her - and it would include her creation of a dramatic situation in a poem, as well as her rhythms - has yet to be made. Walden also remained one of his favorite books, partly for the same reason that Robinson Crusoe was ("I never tire of being shown how the limited can make snug in the limitless" 39) , but partly for its unversified poetry.

Frost would have agreed with Thoreau that "a true account of the actual is the rarest poetry"; and he gave the greatest possible extension of meaning to the "actual" :

> I'm sure Im glad of all the unversified poetry of Walden - and not merely nature-descriptive, but narrative as in the chapter on the play with the loon on the lake, and character-descriptive as in the beautiful passage about the French-Canadian wood- chopper. That last alone with some things in Turgenieff must have had a good deal to do with the making of me. (40)

But it was Emerson who remained Frost's great mentor, and Emerson who earned his most ungrudging and respectful praise. Enough has been written about Frost's philosophical relation to Emerson, and the difference in their attitudes toward the physical world. (41) Here we are concerned only with Frost's literary appraisal of him, which occurs in a review, "The Prerequisites," originally published in the New York Times in 1954, and an address "On Emerson," first delivered to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1959.

"The Prerequisites" is a cryptic analysis of Emerson's poem "Brahma," and reveals some important aspects of Frost's critical method: the need, in appreciating a poem, to wait until experience has caught up with intellectual understanding; the stress on "meaning," yet with a careful differentiation between "meaning" and "information"; the importance given to "recognition"; the lack of any mention of technique; and that enigmatic final sentence: "He was a confirmed symbolist." What, then, are the "prerequisites"? The ability to live in a state of "negative capability" with a poem, waiting until it works its effects? The capacity for "recognition"? Simple humility, perhaps emphasized by the fairy-tale quality of the prose?

One is reminded of the image of the waterspout in which Frost had discussed poetry nearly thirty years earlier, in his preface to the Dartmouth anthology. The point of view there was that of the poet who, in the act of creation, carries something up from the water around him ("all the life he ever lived outside of books") and something down from the cloud above ("all the other poets he ever read"). The point of view here is that of the reader, but the analogy holds; poet and reader are united, after all, by the moment of "recognition." Whatever the "prerequisites" are, Frost comes to the poem from within it and grows with it; and in the process he genuinely elucidates it and pays tribute to its value.

In the address "On Emerson," Frost acknowledges two debts to him. The first relates to Emerson's philosophical ideas, especially his ideas about freedom ("freedom is nothing but departure"). For both poets the word is far more than a political cliche; yet for both, too, the American political heritage lies behind the individual concept of freedom. Unlike many later critics, Frost is willing to be tolerant of Emerson's monism, his cheerful ignoring of evil: "A melancholy dualism is the only soundness. The question is: is soundness of the essence"? Certainly it is hardly "of the essence" in Frost's greater debt to Emerson - his literary debt. "Some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian," he writes. And he goes on to quote the lines from "Monadnoc" that he quoted many times and in many places as being the source of his theories on diction and speech intonation:

Yet wouldst thou learn our ancient speech
These the masters that can teach.
Fourscore or a hundred words
All their vocal muse affords.
Yet they turn them in a fashion
Past the statesmen's art and passion.
Rude poets of the tavern hearth
Squandering your unquoted mirth,
That keeps the ground and never soars,
While Jake retorts and Reuben roars.
Scoff of yeoman, strong and stark,
Goes like bullet to the mark;
And the solid curse and jeer
Never balk the waiting ear.

These lines, he notes, "came pretty near making me an antivocabularian." yet they anchor Frost securely to the American colloquial tradition.

On the whole, Frost's practical criticism is of more limited value than his critical theories. Even when gathered in one place, his practical criticism is too scattered, too casual, often too personal, and has too many lapses in judgment. It does justice to wide and comparative reading rather than to a single attitude toward literature. At its best, however, it has sophistication and wit, and gives an increased awareness that behind Frost's sense of "locality" and "colloquiality" lies a solid knowledge of the great tradition of English poetry.

FROST AS A PRACTICAL CRITIC - Footnotes

1. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 385.
2. Mertins, Life and Talks-Walking, p. 197.
3. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 21.
4. lbid., 83.
5. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to Mark Van Doren, December 1, 1935 (Special Collections Library, Columbia University).
6. Thompson, Selected Letters, pp. 103-104.
7. lbid., 151.
8. lbid., 142.
9. This book is in the Special Collections Library, New York University .
10. Untermeyer, Letters, p. 75.
11. lbid., 17.
12. Poirier, Paris Review interview, p. 99.
13. Mertins, Life and Talks-Walking, p. 353.
14. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), p. 363.
15. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to John Erskine, January 18, 1923 (Special Collections Library, Columbia University) .
16. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 179. There are seven poems by Lawrance in the anthology to which

Frost was referring - Some Imagiste Poems: An Anthology (Boston: Houghton MifHin Co., 1915). They are: "Ballad of Another Ophelia," "Illicit," "Fireflies in the Corn," "A Woman and her Dead Husband," "The Mowers," "Scent of Irises," and "Green."
17. Ibid., 139.
18. Unpublished letter from Robert Frost to John Erskine, n.d. (Special Collections Library, Columbia University).
19. Untermeyer, Letters, pp. 175-176.
20. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 369.
21. Ibid.,217.
22. Ibid., 306.
23. Untermeyer, Letters, p. 255.
24. Poirier, *Paris Review* interview, p. 109.
25. Ben Miller sent a copy of this letter to Mark Van Doren. The copy is now in the Special Collections Library, Columbia University.
26. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 219.
27. Untermeyer, Letters, pp. 62-63.
28. Ibid., 106-107.
29. Ibid., 174.
30. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 291.
31. Robert Frost, "Robert Frost, New American Poet," Interviews, p.7.
32. Frost's personal library - at least what it contained at the time of his death - is now in the Special Collections Library, New York University.
33. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 265.
34. Ibid.,554.
35. Quoted by Untermeyer, Letters, p. 130.
36. Ibid.,203.
37. Mertins, Life and Talks-Walking, p. 385.
38. In the Special Collections Library, New York University.
39. Thompson, Lawrance, Robert Frost: The Early Years,1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 549.
40. Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 182.
41. See, for example, the excellent study by Reuben Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), Chap. 3.

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