

ROBERT Frost has been discovering America all his life. He has also been discovering the world; and since he is a really wise poet, the one thing has been the same thing as the other. He is more than a New England poet: he is more than an American poet; he is a poet who can be understood anywhere by readers versed in matters more ancient and universal than the customs of one country, whatever that country is. Frost's country is the country of human sense: of experience, of imagination, and of thought. His poems start at home, as all good poems do; as Homer's did, as Shakespeare's, as Goethe's, and as Baudelaire's; but they end up everywhere, as only the best poems do. This is partly because his wisdom is native to him, and could not have been suppressed by any circumstance; it is partly, too, because his education has been right. He is our least provincial poet because he is the best grounded in those ideas--Greek, Hebrew, modern Europeans and even Oriental--which make for well-built art at any time. He does not parade his learning, and may in fact not know that he has it: but there in his poems it is, and it is what makes them so solid, so humorous, and so satisfying.

His many poems have been different from one another and yet alike. They are the work of a man who has never stopped exploring himself--or, if you like, America, or better yet, the world. He has been able to believe, as any good artist must, that the things he knows best because they are his own will turn out to be true for other people. He trusts his own feelings, his own doubts, his own certainties, his own excitements. And there is absolutely no end to these, given the skill he needs to state them and the strength never to be wearied by his subject matter. "The object in writing poetry" Frost has said, "is to make all poems sound as different as

possible from each other." But for this, in addition to the tricks any poet knows, "we need the help of context--meaning--subject matter. That is the greatest help towards variety. All that can be done with words is soon told. So also with meters. . . . The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless. And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience."

Frost is one of the most subtle of modern poets in that department where so much criticism rests, the department called technique; but the reason for his subtlety is seldom noticed. It is there because it has to be, in the service of something infinitely more important: a report of the world by one who lives in it without any cause to believe that he is different from other persons except for the leisure he has given himself to walk about and think as well as possible concerning all the things he sees; and to take accurate note of the way they strike him as he looks. What they are in themselves is not to be known; or who he is, either, if all his thought is of himself; but when the two come together in a poem, testimony may result. This is what Frost means by subject matter, and what any poet had better mean if he expects to be read.

Frost is more and more read, by old readers and by young, because in this crucial and natural sense he has so much to say. He is a generous poet. His book confides many discoveries, and shares with its readers a world as wild as it is wide--a dangerous world, hard to live in, yet the familiar world that is the only one we shall ever have, and that we can somehow love for the bad things in it as well as the good, the unintelligible as well as the intelligible.

Frost is a laconic New Englander: that is to say, he talks more than anybody. He talks all the time. The inhabitants of New England accuse one another of talking too much, but all are guilty together, all are human; for man is a talking animal, and never more so than when he is trying to prove that silence is best. Frost has expressed the virtue of silence in hundreds of poems, each one of them more ingenious than the last in the way it takes of suggesting that it should not have been written at all. The greatest people keep still.

There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

Joking aside, Frost is a generous giver. He is not, thank heaven, one of those
exiguous modern poets--Joseph Wood Krutch has called them costive--who hope
to be loved because they have delivered so little: the fewer the poems the
better the
poet. The fact is that the greatest poets have been, among other things,
prolific:
they have had much to say, and nothing has prevented them from keeping at it
till
they died.

Contrary to a certain legend, good poets get better with age, as Thomas
Hardy for
another instance did. The Collected Poems of Hardy are a universe through
which
the reader may travel forever, entertained as he goes by the same paradox as
that
which appears in the Complete Poems of Frost: the universe in question is
presented as a grim, bleak place, but the longer one stares at it the warmer
it
seems, and the more capable of justifying itself beneath the stars. By an
almost
illicit process it manages in the end to sing sweetly of itself--not
sentimentally, or
as if it leaned upon illusion, but with a deep sweetness that truth cannot
disturb.
For truth is in the sweetness: a bittersweetness, shall we say, but all the
better
preserved for being so.

And this is the case, whether with Hardy or with Frost, because the poet has
never
grown tired of his function; has always known more, and known it better, as
time
passed; and has found it the most natural thing in the world to say so in
new terms.

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation.

The poet in Frost has never been different from the man, or the man from the
poet;
he has lived in his poetry at the same time that he has lived outside of it,
and
neither life has interfered with the other. Indeed it has helped; which is
why we
know that his poems mean exactly what he means, and might say in some other
language if he chose. But he has chosen this language as the most personal
he
could find, toward the end that what it conveys should be personal for us
too. We
need not agree with everything he says in order to think him wise. It is
rather that
he sounds and feels wise, because he is sure of what he knows. And the
extent of

what he knows would never be guessed by one who met him only in anthologies. He is powerful there, but in the Complete Poems we find a universe of many recesses, and few readers have found their way into all of these. Some of them are very narrow, it would seem, and out of the ordinary way; in the language of criticism they might even be dismissed as little "conceits"; but the narrowest of them is likely to lead further in than we suspected, toward the central room where Frost's understanding is at home.

The sign that he is at home is that his language is plain; it is the human vernacular, as simple on the surface as monosyllables can make it. Strangely enough this is what makes some readers say he is hard--he is always referring to things he does not name, at any rate in the long words they suppose proper. He seems to be saying less than he does; it is only when we read close and listen well, and think between the sentences, that we become aware of what his poems are about. What they are about is the important thing--more important, we are tempted to think, than the words themselves, though it was the words that brought the subject on. The subject is the world: a huge and ruthless place which men will never quite understand, any more than they will understand themselves; and yet it is the same old place that men have always been trying to understand, and to this extent it is as familiar as an old boot or an old back door, lovable for what it is in spite of the fact that it does not speak up and identify itself in the idiom of abstraction. Frost is a philosopher, but his ideas are behind his poems, not in them--buried well, for us to guess at if we please.

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We can guess that his own philosopher is Heraclitus, who said: "If you do not expect it, you will not find out the unexpected. . . . Let us not make random guesses about the greatest things.... The attunement of the world is of opposite tensions, as is that of the harp or bow. . . . What agrees disagrees. . . . Strife is justice. . . . The road up and the road down is one and the same. . . . The beginning and the end are common. . . . A dry soul is wisest and best. . . . For all men to know themselves and to be sober-minded. . . . A fool is wont to be in a flutter at every word." Yet the guess could be wrong, for Frost does not say these things,

however strongly his poems suggest them. The suggestion may be nothing but a coincidence: the two men see the same world, and its end is like its beginning;
down is up and up is down, the new is old and the old is new, and strife is justice.

At least we know nothing of justice if we know nothing of strife. It is tension that maintains our equilibrium; if opposites could not feel each other in the dark there would be no possibility of light. Good fences make good neighbors--each knows where he is and what confines him. Without a wall between them, each would confuse himself with the other and cease to exist; or if there were fighting, it would be too close--a mere scramble, in which neither party could be made out. Distance is a good thing, and so is admitted difference, even when it sounds like hostility. For there can be a harmony of separate sounds that seem to be at war with another, but one sound is like no sound at all, or else it is like death. Let each thing know its limits even as it strains to pass them. No limit will ever be passed, since indeed it is a limit. Which does not mean that we shall never stare across the void between ourselves and others. People, for instance, who look at the sea--

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

It is human to want to know more than we can. But it is most human to know what "cannot" means.

Frost never says these things either; his poems only suggest them, and suggest further things that contradict them. His muse, like the truth, is cantankerous; it keeps on turning up fresh evidence against itself. And yet we cannot miss the always electric presence of opposition--two things or persons staring at each other across some kind of wall. Frost has no interest in doors that do not lock, in friends who do not know they are enemies too, or in enemies who do not know how to pretend they are friends, and even believe it as far as things can go. His drumlin woodchuck sits forth from his habitation like one who invites the world to come and visit him; but he never forgets the two-door burrow at his back. So Frost himself can reflect upon the triple bronze that guards him from infinity: his skin, his house, and his country. If he is greatly interested in the stars, and no poet is

more so, the reason is that they are another world which he can see from this one,
and accept or challenge as the mood of the moment dictates. They burn in their
places as he burns in his, and it is just as well that neither fire can consume the
other; yet each of them is a fire, and secretly longs to mingle with its far neighbor.

The great thing about man for Frost is that he has the power of standing still where
he is. He is on the earth, and it is only one of many places, and perhaps every
other place is better. But this is his place, where in spite of his longing to leave it
he can stay till his time comes. Like any other distinguished person, Frost lives in
two worlds at once: this one, and another one which only makes it more attractive.
The superiority of the other one is what proves the goodness of the one we have,
which doggedly we keep on loving, as doggedly it tolerates and educates us if we
let it do so. Wisdom is enduring it exactly as it is; courage is being familiar with it
and afraid of it in the right proportions; temperance is the skill to let it be; and
justice is the knowledge that between it and you there will always be a lover's
quarrel, never to die into cold silence and never to be made up. The main thing is
the mutual respect.

Not that Frost wants us to think he knows everything.

If, as they say, some dust thrown in my eyes
Will keep my talk from getting overwise,
I'm not the one for putting off the proof.
Let it be overwhelming, off a roof
And round a corner, blizzard snow for dust,
And blind me to a standstill if it must.

His vision is the comic vision that doubts even itself. But it remembers all it can of
what it always knew, and rests, in so far as the mind can ever rest, on the sum of
its memories. The comic genius ignores nothing that seems true, however inconvenient it may be for something else that seems as true.

The groundwork of all faith is human woe. . . .
There's nothing but injustice to be had,
No choice is left a poet you might add,
But how to take the curse, tragic or comic.

The choice of Frost is clear. His humor, an indispensable thing in any great poet,
is in his case the sign that he has decided to see everything that he can see. No man
of course sees all the world, but the poorest man is the one who blinds

himself.

The man with his eyes open has the best chance to understand things,
including those things his ancestors have said. The minister says of the old lady who
used to live in The Black Cottage:--

One wasn't long in learning that she thought
Whatever else the Civil War was for,
It wasn't just to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
She wouldn't have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
Her giving somehow touched the principle
That all men are created free and equal.
And to hear her quaint phrases--so removed
From the world's view today of all those things.
That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn't true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it. . . .
For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.

There it is. One couldn't say half so much if one were tragic.

Froast

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