

THE SENSIBILITY OF MODERNISM IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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Abstract:

The term 'poetry' itself signifies as the greatest, innovative, imaginative, artistic and stylistic form of expression. Today's world is called digital world because of its rapid growth and development in technology and discovery. We are very well aware that the poetry has been the source of the healthy food for now and then. Its fragrance energizes our brain and makes it fresh and alive even in this digital world where we are completely lost in earning and making our life luxurious and comfortable. Despite the above facts, poetry still stands supreme and sublime in its own beauty and charm where we can express our innermost feelings and emotions through a limited amount of golden words which touch the beauty of our soul and hearts. It is very tough task for a poet to make alive its stylistic and artistic beauty in this post-modern era but still an artist and a poet creates something extra ordinary which makes impossible possible by fetching a garland of pearls from the depth of ocean to give a new and innovative mode of expression. Robert Frost is a great modern poet. He is the contemporary of T S Eliot W B Yeats, W H Auden, Ezra Pound etc. There is a controversy among a series of critics who interpret or misinterpret Frost. Some critics like Granville Hicks, William van O cannon think that Frost is not a modern-day poet but a traditional poet because his poetry manifests his traditional inheritance of American civilization. Granville Hicks while discussing the modern elements of Frost poetry says: "Frost has bound himself to a literary tradition that is out of fashion and has lost its meaning in modern texts".

Keywords: Poetry, modernism, innovations, American civilization and realism

Introduction

A poem is commonly defined as a composition written in verse (although verse has been equally used for epic and dramatic fiction) Poems rely heavily on imagery, precise word choice, and metaphor; or they make take the form of measures consisting of pattern of stress (metric feet) or the pattern of different length syllables (as in classical prosody); and they may or may not utilize rhyme. One cannot readily characterize poetry precisely. Typically, though, Poetry is a form of literature that makes some significant use of the formal properties of the words its uses-the properties attached to the written or spoken form of the words, rather than their meaning. Metre depends on syllables and on rhythms of speech; rhyme and alliteration depend on words that have similar pronunciation. Some recent poets, such as E. E. Cummings made extensive use of word's visual form. Poetry perhaps predates other forms of literature; early known examples include the *Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh* (dated form around 700B.C) parts of *The Bible*, the surviving works of Homer (the *Iliad and Odyssey*), and the Indian epics '*Ramayana*' and '*Mahabharata*'. In culture based primarily on oral tradition the formal characteristics of poetry often have a mnemonic function, and important text; legal, genealogical or moral, for example, may appear first in verse form. Much poetry uses specific forms: the haiku, the limerick, or the sonnet, for example, a traditional haiku is written in Japanese, must have something do with 'nature' contain seventeen onji (syllables), distributed over three lines in groups of five, seven and five, and should also have a kigo, a specific word indicating a season. A rhyme scheme of AABBA, and the lengths of 3,3,2,2,3 stressed syllables. It traditionally has a less reverent attitude towards nature. Language and tradition dictate some poetic norms: Persian poetry

always rhymes, Greek poetry rarely rhymes, Italian or French poetry often does, English and German can go either way (although modern non-rhyming poetry often, perhaps unfairly, has a more “serious” aura). Perhaps the most paradigmatic style of English poetry, blank verse, as exemplified in the works of Shakespeare and Milton, Consisting of unrhymed iambic pentameters. Some language prefers longer lines; some shorter ones. Some of these conventions result from the ease of fitting a specific language's vocabulary and grammar into certain structure, rather than into others; for example, some languages contain more rhyming words than others, typically have longer words. Other structural conventions come about as the result of historical accidents, where many speak of a language associate good poetry with a verse form preferred by a particular skilled or popular poet. Frost studies life reduced to its elemental simplicity, and this elemental life is his norm with reference to which he judges urban life and even life in general, life as it has been in all ages and countries. It is the same method of indirection as is used by such modern poets as T. S. Eliot. Just as Eliot in his poems, for example, *The Waste Land*, juxtaposes the present and the past to reveal and interpret the present, so also in his poetry

Discussion

Frost juxtaposes the rural and the urban, the rural serving as a comment on the urban. And, as in T. S. Eliot, the comment is implicit rather than explicit. A simple everyday situation from rural life is presented and the situation is such that it serves to illuminate and clarify some aspect or problem peculiar to the modern age. Thus, in *Mending Wall*, the necessity of fences is emphasized - “Good fences make good neighbours” - and thus we get an implicit comment of the modern craze for pulling down barriers. Moreover, Frost is a modern in his attitudes towards nature as well. The nineteenth century poets picture nature as benevolent and kindly with a, “holy plan” and emphasized the harmony, the oneness, of man and nature. Modern science, on the other hand conceives of nature as merely matter, soul-less and mechanical, and so entirely different from, and alien to, man. Frost, too, is constantly emphasizing this, ... otherness. Of nature. He is a great poet of boundaries, and he shows at every step that some fence or boundary ever separates man from nature. That is why he teaches in poems like *Most of It*. The rural world, the world of nature into which he withdraws, is not a world of dream a pleasant fanciful Arcadia. But harsher and more demanding than the urban world. As Lionel Trilling stresses the world which he depicts is a terrifying one, more terrifying than the urban world, depicted by poets who are generally regarded as modern. A few lines of Trilling are worth quoting in this connection:

“So radical a work, I need scarcely say, is not carried out by reassurance, nor by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties. It is carried out by the representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way. I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet... The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called *Design* and see if you sleep the better for it. Read *Neither out Far nor in Deep*, which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived... talk of the disintegration and sloughing off of the old consciousness! The people of Robert Frost's poems have done that with a vengeance... in the interests of what great other thing these people have made this rejection, we cannot know for certain. But we can guess that it was in the interest of truth, of some truth of the self... they affirm this of themselves; that they are what they are, that this is their truth, and that if the truth be bare, as truth often is, it is far better than a lie. For me the process by which they arrive at that truth is always terrifying.”

One of the great virtues of Trilling's speech is that in it he has made clear the essential way in which Frost's poetry reflects modern life. Frost does not depict the outward events and scenery of urban life, but the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, are there and seem, if nothing more bleakly apparent in that their social and economic manifestations have been stripped away. Frost may not depict the scenery of modern life - its chimneys and factories, its railways, and automobiles,

but he certainly deals with the basic problems and the basic facts of modern life. The ache of modernism finds its fullest expression in his poetry. The modern note of frustration, loneliness, isolation and disillusionment is often struck. Brooks has made critical analysis of some of Frost's poems and has also explained as to how far the elements of modernity are to be found in them. Here is an analysis of *Mending Wall*. *Mending Wall* is a symbolic poem in which the poet symbolizes the conflict between the new trend of bringing down barriers between men and nations and the old view that for good neighbourly relations, fences and boundaries are essential. The poem relates an anecdote typical of the conservative approach of the rural people in New England, but its implication has universal application. In this way, the poem becomes a symbol of the modern conflict in the minds of the people. The poet simply portrays that conflict, and does not give his judgment on it, because in spite of his standing for the bringing down of barriers, he appreciates the view of his neighbour who insists on following the old principle of his fore fathers:

I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness, as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, „Good fences make good neighbour”

Another sense in which Frost is a truly modern poet is his portrayal of the disintegration of values in modern life, disillusionment of the modern man. Most of his poems deal with characters who suffer from frustration, isolation and helplessness - diseases of modern life. For example, in *The Hill Wife*, Frost has portrayed obliquely the cumulative sense of fear, loneliness and marital estrangement of an isolated woman who is so completely misunderstood by her husband that he is baffled when she disappears, irrevocably, and without warning. Both the husband and wife feel lonely in the house and are afraid of entering it:

“Always - I tell you this they learned -
 Always at night when they returned
 To the lonely house from far away
 To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,
 They learned to rattle the lock and key
 To give whatever might chance to be
 And preferring the out to the in-door night,
 They learned to leave the house-door wide
 Until they had lit the lamp inside.”

It is as clear as crystal that Frost's poetry is rich in shades and lights. It affects people in different ways. The common man reads it for deriving the pleasures of simplicity, of rural scenery and life that it portrays. Some might see, in Frost's poetry, a refuge from the urban muck and roar. The erudite sophisticated urban dweller may go to Frost's poetry for his presentation of human predicament in an alien, perhaps even a hostile environment. Some read it for the clarifications and illuminations it provides. The apparent simplicity of Frost's poetry is very deceptive. It conceals layers and layers of meaning. As a matter of fact, the extreme expressiveness and rich texture of Frost's poetry becomes a viable reality, because the great moderns have bequeathed to Frost, the metaphysical symbolist technique. Like metaphysical poets and their admiring inheritors of the twentieth century, Frost juxtaposes opposites. He puts side-by-side man and nature, rural and urban, regional and urban and is able to achieve a rare richness and an effect of

variety, vividness and deep meanings through it. He generally tries to synthesize and reconcile opposites. For this, he often takes to the symbolic mode and the method of indirection. The poems that confine to the symbolic mode leap beyond their regional locales and acquire universal meaning and importance. The symbolic strain is noteworthy in poems such as *Fire and Ice*. To all appearances, *Mending Wall* relates an anecdote typical of the conservative New Englanders. But read with a little depth, the poem stands out as symbolic of the conflict prevalent throughout the world the conflict between the modern trend of raising all barriers to the ground and the view that we have inherited from our fore-fathers, that barriers are essential for good neighbourly relations. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, besides being an obviously personal experience, expresses the conflict that every sensitive individual must have felt sometime or other - the conflict between the demands of practical life with its obligations to others, and the intense and poignant desire to escape into a land of reverie, where consciousness is free to breathe and the senses are free from all shackles of necessity. Indeed, the level of meaning offered by this poem goes to prove that the simple fact and surrounding mystery in a Frost poem make it metaphysical. The simple fact of a traveler watching the woods filled up with snow becomes the eternal human situation. A few lines of Rexford Stamper should be quoted in this regard "Frost is a modern poet concerned with the same problems of self, identity, the regenerating power of art, and the need for a basis for action that concern Eliot or Yeats. Frost wrote as a result of his individual reaction to the world around him, not because he was inspired by the memory of a lost Eden, not because he expected to create a new Utopia, but because he lived in a world which forced him to create his own verities. These nineteenth century metaphors have little value in helping a reader make an assessment of Frost's art. However, the connection between the various zones that compose his view of reality and the vantage points he presents so that the creative imagination can grasp the reality of these zones do have significance. Frost, as much as other twentieth century writer, realized that a loss of certitude led to fragmentation; but he unlike many of his contemporaries points out how a juxtaposition of the various views the artist takes of reality might provide a basis for significant human action. Ultimately, one must conclude that Robert Frost is a major twentieth century artist.: "The Frost poem, like other typically modern poems, differs from earlier periods in that it not only actually functions in this way, but intentionally defines itself as a poem that would be in these terms. Its indeterminacy is not only a consequence of its rich complexity of meaning, that being of the very essence of all poetry; it is an indeterminacy that announces itself as a confessed enigma by an imperious confidence of tone, full of Miltonic organ notes so inflating to the reader's expectations as to make explicit their non-fulfillment. The promise to bring the reader to a state "beyond confusion" leaves him in the dark as to just what such a state would be like. The plentiful advice he receives gives him no practical enlightenment as to what to do. But if this induces the "blank wall" feelings that Pearce has mentioned; it also reveals some procedural truths. We learn, for example, that the contradictions of experience are not miscellaneous collision, but contrasts between opposed limits within a system, that meaning can be a spectrum joining contrary thoughts, like old-new, or imaginary-real, and that therefore, even the most harmonious thought naturally displays some tension within the elements of its system, and must generate some measure of doubt and of formlessness. To quote Pound again: "There is in inferior minds a passion for unity, that is, for a confusion and melting together of things which a good mind wants to keep distinct." Even the greatest organizing cultural statements - *The Odyssey*, *The Divine comedy*, *Paradise Lost* - give only putative answers concerning the unity of the world and the oneness of man's duty and his nature, answers which, when we try to specify their exact meanings, turn into fields of exploration, and cease to be answers at all. *Directive*, as a modern poem, gives us answers designed to make the question as to, the nature of answers and the conditions for finding them its central theme.

Conclusion

Thus, in the final analysis, all the arguments, all the illustrations, logically lead to the conclusion that Frost is modern beyond any doubt. Frost is modern not in any overt and obvious manner. He is modern through and through; and his modernism naturally gets confirmed by getting a proper perspective of layers of meaning that wraps poetry and the sensitivity that runs through it. He may not depict the outward conditions and events of modern life, but the central facts of modern experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, the disintegration and confusion of values, the frustration and disillusionment, are all there, and they seem more bleak and terrifying because they are presented in their nakedness stripped of all their social, political and economic manifestations. Thus, even as far as sensibility is concerned, Frost is modern, or perhaps one should say, of universal sensibility.

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