

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED BY ON THE DECEPTIVE SIMPLICITY IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

ZONGYING HUANG



PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

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**To Professor Luorui Zhao, Shiren Wang and Yiqing Liu In
Grateful Appreciation
And
To My Parents, My Wife and Son In
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Introduction

“... I was a very hard person to make out.... I might easily be most deceiving when most bent on telling the truth” (Thompson, 1966: xv).

— Robert Frost

Robert Frost was one of the greatest poets of this century — or any century. Only T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens could be regarded as challenging voices in Frost’s lifetime (Parini, 1993: 260). For about half a century, until his death in 1963 at age eighty-nine, Robert Frost was the unofficial poet laureate of America, recipient of more than forty honorary degrees from colleges and universities, including two highly esteemed ones from Oxford and Cambridge in the same year, 1957. Even at age eighty-five, his public reading of his own poetry in a quivering, hardly audible voice still attracted thousands of listeners, who were satisfied with just being there with him, enjoying the cadence of the verse. Although his poems can be read as a culmination of Wordsworthian tradition of plain-spoken poetry, Frost was original in his own extraordinary ways. The charm of his poetry was heightened by his manner of seeming to be natural, direct, and simple; yet actually, Frost was almost never as natural, direct and simple as he appeared to be. There are few poems by Frost that do not yield to long and careful meditation. In other words, his poems resist easy explanation, as if the poet designed his work to fool the innocent reader into taking the “easy gold” of a quick interpretation. “Even as the majority of his admirers misunderstood the apparently simple artistry of his poems, so they failed to recognize the dramatic masks he wore” (Thompson, 1964: vii).

The quest for “alteriority”^① constructs the whole of the Frostian world and brings him a unique and almost isolated position in the history of American literature. Although Frost’s career fully

spans the modern period and it is unreasonable to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet, but it is also difficult to place him in the main trend of modern poetry. In a sense, Frost stands at the crossroads of nineteenth-century American poetry and the modernism of the twentieth century, for the reader can detect in his poetry revelations of many nineteenth-century inclinations as well as parallel tendencies of his twentieth-century contemporaries. On the one hand, Frost has developed an original, modern poetic language and a sense of directness that responds to what imagist poets called the "direct treatment of the 'thing'"^②. On the other, his poetry, unlike that of such contemporaries as T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, "shows no marked departure from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century" (Locher, 187). In terms of poetic form, Frost stays content with the old-fashioned way to be new. Even when he was in London, he also displayed a masterful dedication to the formal and technical possibilities of English verse. His sonnets, for example, are among the best ever written in the language, and include variations using thirteen lines, as in "The Line-Gang"^③, and fifteen, as in "Hyla Brook"^④. He composed occasional epigrams and also wrote two masques: *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). In his great dramatic-narrative poems, he deeply impresses his readers with "a great and beautiful simplicity of phrase, the inheritance of a race brought up on the English Bible" (Lowell, 25). This evident devotion to the craft, the traditions, and the forms of poetry makes his poetry all the more peculiar so that many readers even now tend to think of him as in some ways less sophisticated, less allusive or learned than are comparable figures like Eliot, Pound, and Stevens. Frost, however, stood firm in the face of criticism from those who insisted that modern poetry had to be different and difficult.^⑤ He refused to publish essays on theory and technique in an effort to educate an audience about what was then called the new poetry. If we try to draw a line of demarcation in respect of this preoccupation with calculated obscurity, we will see that Eliot, and Pound are on one side, while Frost stands alone on the other. "Frost", however, " was the first American who could

be honestly reckoned a master-poet by world standards," claims Robert Graves in his introduction to *Selected Poems of Robert Frost* (1963). "Frost has won the title fairly, not by turning his back on ancient European tradition, nor by imitating its successes, but by developing it in a way that at last matches the American climate and the American language" (Graves, ix).

Frost has long been considered a poet of simplicity. Recognizing the "very American" qualities of Frost's verse, Ezra Pound, in his review of *A Boy's Will* in 1913, praised the poet for his avoidance of "the circumplectious polysyllable" and his "good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it" (Eliot, 1935: 382). Other English reviewers were attracted by Frost's unaffected lyrics, with his simple vocabulary and sharp observation, most of all with his way of turning usually forgotten thoughts into unforgettable phrases. But if the critics were enthusiastic about *A Boy's Will*, they were exuberant about *North of Boston*, which appeared nearly a year later. Frost himself called this book "epoch making" (*Selected Letters*, 151). The critics praised the second volume for many reasons. Wilfrid Wilson Gibson wrote, "Mr. Frost has turned the living speech of men and women into poetry. . . . Tales that might be mere anecdotes in the hands of another poet take on universal significance because of their native veracity and truth to local character" (Untermeyer, 1944:15). The book was praised as being "unaffectedly expressive of rustic New England" (Cox, 1962: 4) by William Dean Howells, the aging patriarch of American letters. And Ezra Pound, the rebellious exponent of the new poetry, also reviewed the book and praised Frost for daring to write "in the natural speech of New England; in natural spoken speech, which is very different from the 'natural' speech of the newspapers, and of many professors" (Eliot, 1935:384).

Throughout the early years of his public career, Frost's verse and his personality were intricately interwoven. He was regarded as an idealist, and an optimist, a good-natured man with all qualities, which Americans respected and desired both for themselves and for their nation. Amidst the bustle of a rich yet increasingly ugly indus-

trialism in America, here came a true son of the soil who kindled a desperate yearning for an age, which had disappeared so rapidly into the past that Americans had to regret its disappearing. Frost brought to his people a greener America, a land less sophisticated than that in which most of them lived. Abroad the world was not in peace. The Great War of 1914 – 1918 threatened fiercely any lingering dreams of pastoral Eden for Americans. Frost, however, responded to all this upheaval with a sense of pure serenity, which assured people that the eternal truth might never be disturbed no matter how the surface of life might roil. Frost's name thus began to get lodged permanently in the history of American literature.

Amy Lowell, in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), indicated Frost's relative significance by discussing his poetry in a separate chapter.⁶ Two years later, Louis Untermeyer, a fast friend and always a booster of Frost, gave him the lead chapter in his *New Era in American Poetry* (1919), the first volume of the book being a survey of the modern poetry. Untermeyer considered the dramatic dialogues from Frost's *North of Boston* as the most powerful and original to have come out of America. In Frost, more than in any other poet of the day, he found the modern expression of the poetic feeling for ordinary life. Accordingly, Frost's early poems were noted for their simplicity both in expression and in subject matter.

The 1920s proved to be boom years for Robert Frost. His service as Poet in Residence from 1921 to 1923 at the University of Michigan, and his subsequent Professorship at Amherst from 1923 to 1938 (with an interval of being Fellow in Letters from 1925 to 1926 at the University of Michigan) were but two of the outstanding academic posts which helped to enlarge his audience. Frost's reading tours to many places of the nation widened his visibility. He displayed his winning personality in public recitations and lectures. Louis Untermeyer, in his preface to *Modern American Poetry* (1919), says, "Notice, for instance, the direct and fully-flavored blank verse of Robert Frost, how the words are so chosen and arranged that the speaker is almost heard on the printed page. Observe, how beneath these native sounds, we hear the accents of his

people walking the New England farms and hillsides" (Untermeyer, 1919: ix). Taking the word "Yankee" as the key to Frost both as a man and as a poet, such a critic as Carl Van Doren discussed all the best Yankee traits in Frost's poetry (Gerber, 68 - 75). In 1923, Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize for *New Hampshire*, especially for the plain and prosy style which was appropriate to its intentions.

The next few decades during his lifetime, however, witnessed ups and downs in Frost's reputation as a major American poet. The financial collapse of 1929 stimulated a revival of politics as a reliable criterion for judging writers and their works. The 1920s had constituted to a spirit of individualism and experimentation in which Frost had become famous. But because of the new and radically different times, Frost now began to suffer as a poet who had written without evident political concerns. Critical derogation of Frost accelerated noticeably following his third Pulitzer Prize for *A Further Range* (1936). Here and there, but in quite a range of journals, there appeared some charges against him. Critics such as Malcolm Cowley questioned the propriety of regarding Frost as a suitable representative of New England. They argued that Frost's chief flaw lay in the fact that he rejected the modern in favor of an older, simpler, and more cheerful way of life. Yvor Winters, however, while concluding that Frost failed to deal properly with the man-society relationship, argued a contrary view: "I see no reason why poetry should be called upon to imitate conversation. Conversation is the most careless and formless of human utterance; it is spontaneous and unrevised, and its vocabulary is commonly limited. Poetry is the most difficult form of human utterance; we revise poems carefully in order to make them more nearly perfect. The two forms of expression are extremes; they are not close to each other. . . . We do not understand difficult matters 'naturally'" (Cox, 1962: 59). This argument sounds much like Eliot's insistence on "a refined sensibility" (Trilling, 1970: 374) for a poet.

Two critics must be specially mentioned here. George W. Nitchie and John F. Lynen both published a significant work summing up two different attitudes in Frostian criticism. In Nitchie's

Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, which is evaluated by James M. Cox as "the most coherent and responsible statement of the case against Frost" (Cox, 1962: 9). Nitchie argues that Frost's weakness lies in his restricting himself to the simpler, easier task of presenting a simplified rural world so as to avoid probing deeply into his central theme of the man-nature relationship. According to him, this results in an ultimate reduction of human values in his poetry. Lynen's *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* presents a different understanding of Frost's use of nature. Lynen understands Frost not as a rustic, or a poet-farmer, but as a sophisticated artist whose poetry enjoys a coherent myth—a myth of New England expressed through a pastoral mode in which is implied a comparison between an explicit rural and an implicit urban world. In addition, the simplicity and remoteness of the rural world often transform Frost's New England into a symbolic vista.

Ever since then, evaluation of Frostian scholarship has been in full swing. Critics explored Frost's conscious artistry and his significance in the history of literature. Most of the essays which appeared during the later years of Frost's career served to evaluate Frost's craftsmanship in verse, to analyze Frost's use of literary devices and symbols, to clarify Frost's relationship to other writers in the Anglo-American tradition, and to distinguish among the important themes running throughout Frost's work.

Among the scholarly studies of Frost's poetry, Richard Poirier's *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977) is outstanding. He succeeds in interpreting Frost's poetry as an organic whole of poetic art. In this book Poirier first of all focuses on the poetry rather than on other correlative subjects such as political ideology and social issues. Second, he reads a Frost poem sensitively in the light of poems by other poets. Third, he discusses rewardingly such lesser poems as "Waiting", "In a Vale", and "A Dream Pang". Fourth, he does not avoid sensitive elements such as Frost's nuanced sexuality in "Putting in the Seed" and "The Subverted Flower". Fifth, he makes adept use of the background resources of English and American literature in discussing both Frost's prose and poetry, and re-

lates Frost to the chief literary movements of the twentieth century.

In terms of theory and method, Elaine Barry's *Robert Frost on Writing* (1973) is a book-length presentation of Frost's practical criticism and critical theory. It assembles and remarks upon Frost's statements about writing collected from his lectures, prefaces, essays, and letters. It aims to give the essence of Frost's aesthetic theories and judgments, while demonstrating the variety of his critical expression. As a critical theorist, Frost is shown to be a sophisticated and self-conscious innovator whose theories range from early ideas about the "sound of sense" and a craftsman's concern for metrics to a later more abstract, conceptual awareness of language and of the meaning of meaning. Frost is described as canny rather than profound in his critical attitude.

Thematically speaking, numerous essays focus on the discussion of the relationship between man and nature in Frost's poetry. Marie Borroff argues that Frost's greatest gift may be inherent in his method — the ability "to develop symbolic meaning with cumulative force seemingly without art or effort, in naturalistically portrayed scene and action" (Tharpe, 1976: 30). Samuel Coale selected "The Wood Pile" to show that Frost's emblems do represent visible tokens of "the very presence of existence itself" (Tharpe, 1974: 98). And Robert W. French points out that "if Frost's poetry insists on anything. . . it insists on the impenetrable barriers between man and nature; we live in a world that we cannot know, for it will not reveal itself; and yet we yearn for some sort of communion" (Gerber, 159). Frost's religious views are complex. Robert Francis, his friend, says in *A Time to Talk* (1972) that "the God in Frost's poems is always outside humanity and sometimes very far outside. . ." (Francis, 86 – 87). Yvor Winters calls Frost a "spiritual drifter" (Cox, 1962:58). It seems that Frost purposely obscures the nature of his religious opinions in his work. Although quite a lot of discussions have been occasioned over the theme of religion in his poetry, there is still little unanimity about it. Besides, even the most general overview of biographical studies of the poet reveals an inconstant spirit as intractable as a pebble at the bottom of a well, just close

enough to reveal itself, yet still beyond reach and far enough away to tantalize the reader ceaselessly.

But one thing is clear. Theoretically, Frost, unlike most of his contemporaries, did not try to "run wild in the quest of new ways to be new" (*Selected Prose*, 59). He never tried to become "more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect" as T. S. Eliot suggested a contemporary poet should be. Instead, Frost believed that the poet "must not be afraid of the ordinary—must call a broom a broom. . . . Attempts to heighten or dignify the facts do not succeed. It is a shame to rely upon classical allusion" (Evans, 111). Moreover, Frost said that "originality and initiative are what I ask for my country" (*Selected Prose*, 20). But originality, to him, does not mean that "poetry was tried without punctuation. . . without capital letters. . . without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. . . without any images. . . [without] dramatic tones of voice. . . without content, etc" (*Selected Prose*, 59 - 60). For Frost, "the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom" (*Selected Prose*, 20). Here in his most important essay "The Figure a Poem Makes", Frost reminds the reader that a poem, like love, begins in surprise, delight and tears, and ends in wisdom. Surprise always clings to a real poem, no matter how often it is read; but surprise must come naturally, and can never be achieved by the cunning formula of a short story or detective thriller. Frost seems to take delight as a means to reach the end of wisdom in his philosophy of poetic composition. Taking a road less traveled, Frost deliberately makes his poetry apparently simple. Therefore, the pastoral America manifests in his poetry is almost always accompanied with the actual and more complicated America which Lionel Trilling calls "a terrifying universe" (Cox, 1962: 157).

In fact, by emphasizing that a poem ends in wisdom, Frost means that a poem "ends in a clarification of life — not necessarily a great clarification. . . , but in a momentary stay against confusion" (*Selected Prose*, 18). The last five words here comprise Frost's most famous and important statement about poetry. The poet sees a

poem as originating in an emotional impulse—a delight in a person or an experience—and, through the poet's acceptance of that impulse, resulting in a wise apprehension of the love object or the experience, no matter how temporary. Frost often uses the pastoral mode as a vehicle for his inquiries into the nature and true meaning of life. For Frost, life is a mystery; poetry may penetrate a little way into that mystery, but even so it will never discover the whole truth. As a result, like the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Frost's best poems aim at the kind of wisdom that is reached *aslant*.^⑦

Frost's philosophy of composition, therefore, dictates that his simplicity is deceptive, which gradually has also become the critical consensus. By the time that Jay Parini said in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988) that "Robert Frost was a canny poet... quite willing to mislead sentimental readers into thinking that they understood his poems", and that the "'real' Robert Frost... was a complex, even difficult poet of extraordinary power and lasting importance" (Elliott, 1988: 937). Frost had been at last accepted universally as one of the major poets in this century in the sense that we apply that term to, say, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. The characteristic of "complexity-beyond-simplicity" (Egmond, 1991: xii) has finally been recognized as one of the most conspicuous principles of Frost's poetic practice, and as such, is well worth our attention and research.

Frost has been called many things — a symbolist, a realist, a spiritual drifter, a homespun philosopher, a moralizer, a lyricist, an emblemist and a farmer-poet. It is perhaps the surface simplicity of his poetry which has given rise to such a variety of critical speculations of what Frost is upon his poetry. Yet one thing is obvious, that nobody can overlook the warm reception Frost has received among the populace. His poetry does yield something, even to uninitiated and casual readers. But what is this "something", the quality that is responsible for Frost's great popularity?

In general, Frost's poetry shows an honest, steady attitude toward the reader, a willingness to allow the reader to understand and