CHAPTER - V

THE ART OF ROBERT FROST

Robert Frost is a great artist with words. His words are carefully chosen both with reference to their sense and their sound. He painstakingly revised and polished what he wrote and tried to express himself with utmost economy, with the result that many of his lines have an epigrammatic terseness and condensation and can easily be memorized and often quoted. Frost possesses the Yankee habit of understatement.

The first quality which strikes the eye in Frost's poetry is its extreme simplicity and clarity. He was well-learned in the classics and other literatures, but his diction is never burdened with this learning. There are few references and allusions in his poetry. He does not have the obscurity and difficulty. As Laurance Thompson points out,

"Frost's poet concerns are akin to those which led Wordsworth to choose incidents and situations from common life and then to present them in a language
actually used by the common present man, whose heartfelt passions are not rest-rained. Like Wordsworth, and like many other poets before and after Wordsworth, Frost has particularly emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. He uses, a simple colloquial diction, which is, however, purified, in the manner of Wordsworth, of all that is slangy, coarse and vulgar."

Frost’s art is the result of an art that conceals art. There is constant shifting, selecting and ordering of material till perfection is attained. His poems are remarkably flawless as far as technique is concerned; there are few cracks either in rhythm or verbal texture. Further, the simple texture of his verse conceals within it layer within layer of meaning. His imagery is drawn from the most common and familiar objects of nature, but it is used symbolically and hence arise the richness of his texture; Frost’s language is simple but highly suggestive.
Frost's ambition was to write in the natural, everyday speech of New Englanders, to capture the speaking voice with all its rich inflections and intonations. Frost again and again emphasized the value of the speaking tone of voice. Through a proper arrangement and choice of words, he tried to convey the sense of humour, pathos, hysteria, anger, and all kinds of effects. He believed that every meaning has a particular sound. In this way, he stressed that in speech the movement of a sentence is an expression of its sense, the accents, the pauses, the voice's rise and fall, evoking a feeling – which exactly fits the tenor of what is said. Further, he believed that real poetry consists of words that have become deeds and that words are worse than nothing unless they do something. In conversation, the tone, the inflections, the into-nations, the accents vary from speaker to speaker, and thus his fiction has this variety. It is dramatic, it varies from character to character and also according to a change in the mood, thought, emotions, and situation of the same character.
Besides this, the speech-syntax is broken and loose. There is parenthesis; pauses, breaks, ellipses, unfinished sentences, halting measures, sudden ejaculations, repetitions and abrupt openings, and all these qualities characterize Frost's style. Sometimes the speaker has no patience to round off a sentence, but breaks it up at a point where he feels that his meaning conveyed. At other times, the speaker is too much excited to complete his meaning and breaks in the middle. Sometimes, the speaker abruptly interrupts his speech to talk about something else, or to throw in a side comment or an interjection. The most important things in the diction of poems like The Home Burial, Directive, are the breaks, the dashes, the asides and exclamation marks. However, in his short lyrics, the language is not so broken. It is smooth, continuous and direct.

The regional quality of Frost's diction is seen not in the choice of words, but in their arrangement. It is seen in his phrasing and idiom. The impression of regionalism is also created by the fact that Frost's idiom and phrasing grow out from the meaning and emotion which the poem conveys.
The style is not distinct but a part of the content of poetry. The meaning is reflected in, and symbolized by, the details of language. The speakers in his poems are Yankees, and their moral sense, their attitudes and values, their mental states, are conveyed by their manner of speaking. There is a perfect fusion of style and content, and so the style acquires a peculiar local of flavour. The Yankee pride and sense of self-respect are expressed through the reticence and understatement peculiar to the rural dwellers in the region north of Boston. As a record of colloquial English, the poem is a tour de force. His ironic, casual manner manifests a more than normal sensitivity of thought. Frost's style acquires a symbolic significance.

The conversational colloquial quality of Frost's poetry is also seen in his rhythms. He has never tried his hand at free verse like Yeats, Eliot and Pound. His talking rhythms result from a close balancing of looseness and flexibility with regularity, reiteration and tightness.

Frost is a great metrical artist, a great experimenter with satanic - forms and verse-forms, but he is in no sense
an innovator. His skill is seen in his adaptation of old traditional metres to his own uses. He has experimented with odes, eclogues, satires, dramatics monologues and dialogues and masques. He has employed ballad metre, sonnets and sonnet variants, terza rima, heroic couplets, blank verse and free invented forms.

Frost's verse is formal, even at time, stately; its movements are often easily anticipated. Yet, despite this, his technique is so flexible, his handling of language and cadence so fateful and delicate, that he is able to give his most elegant poems the air of spontaneity. He believed that poetry is more skilled and enjoyable when written within the limits of forms and conventions. So he avoids the formlessness and eccentricity of modern free verse, and keeps the appropriate form and shape. His blank verse is amazing, flexible and full of variety. It is colloquial, allusively humourous and reflective. However, some critics are of the opinion that Frost's blanks verse is incept, undistinguished and monotonous. But Frost's greatness and skill is seen in his mastery over the difficult art of
handling conversation in verse forms. His poems are conceived as a source of comfort and inspiration.

Robert Frost did what was necessary, for him, to achieve what he did, at times risking the welfare of others, even his own. Each major poem was, in the complex circumstances of his life, a feat of rescued sanity as well as "a momentary stay against confusion", as he memorably put it. Each class brilliantly taught, each vivid public reading, each child comforted or cared for, each tender moment with his wife was accomplished by steadiness of vision and hard spiritual work. In this thesis, an effort has been made to understand how Frost got from day to day and from poem to poem, tracing his rich, always developing, intellectual and artistic life over many decades.

Frost set out the ambition "to be a poet for all sorts and kinds". How he succeeded, and with what losses as well as gains, is a story dramatized in the poems themselves. From the outset, he valued above all else in poetry what he called "the pleasure of anteriority" – that is, "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in
terms of another”. His double speaking allowed him to address multiple audiences at the same time. Laurance Thompson recounts a talk Frost gave in 1953:

He said that in writing a poem, he was aware of saying two things at once; but of wanting to say the first thing so well that any reader who liked that part of the poem might feel free to settle for that part of the poem as sufficient in itself. But, he added, it was of the nature of poetry to say two things at once, and it was of the nature of literary appreciation to perceive that an ulterior meaning had been included in the particular meaning.4

As far as Frost was concerned, the best “literary appreciation” was that which travelled far enough, but no farther, and in the right direction. This he considered to be “the ultimate refinement”.5

Frost’s emphasis on the ability of poetry to say one thing and mean another created tensions between his audiences. Lionel Trilling confessed himself alienated by Frost’s “great canon” of poetry because it “seemed to
denigrate the work of the critical intellect or ... gave to its admires the ground for making the denigration”.6 A number of respondents used the pages of the New York Times to criticize the scholar for – among other crimes – failing to know when he is out of his field or his depth and being part of a New York critical movement which had gone whoring after European gods.

The two constituencies of admirers should have turned on each other so prominently indicates both the breadth of Frost’s appeal and the risks of its fracture. Many of the contradictions in the poet’s public image were caused by the struggle to remain a favourite both of a broad reading public and of the University professors.

Frost admitted that “to be studied is the great thing in life.”7 In person as in poetry, Frost seems to have developed the same quality which Thomas hardy detected in Biblical narratives – “the simplicity of the highest cunning.”8

Frost’s poetry invests heavily in a myth of nationhood which eschews the city in favour of the frontier and the homestead. Let urban sophistcates go whoring after strange
European gods. Frost focuses his attention on isolated individuals and small communities struggle to subsist amid the harsh grandeur of the natural landscape. In Frost’s work, the characters were the vibrantly unschooled, whose speech was alive with rhythms and idioms which an excess of education might have removed.

Frost would have found little to dispute in Wordsworth’s argument that poets separate themselves from the sympathies of men to the extent to which they indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” at the expense of the simple and unelaborated. Frost himself points out:

*I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am that the national is the root of all thought and art.*

Frost’s comment to Regis Michaud in January 1918 offers yet another defense of the sound of sense against bookish tones; it also implies an equation between the colloquial and the national, or a belief that the colloquial is the means by which the national might be realized. Yet the
colloquial as heard by Frost is local or, at most, regional. These concerns over metrical traditions and colloquialism become bound up for Frost, as for Walt Whitman before him, with ideas of nation building and nationhood. Whitman, Frost argued, had sacrificed art in favour of scope; and in that criticism can be distantly heard the self-justification of a writer who chose to advertise so prominently his regional attachments.

Frost advocated an American poetry more openly receptive to European traditions than Whitman ever allowed or acknowledged. Emerson had stated that "all educated Americans, first or last, go to Europe." Frost, characteristically, chose to go first. From September 1912 to February 1915, he and his family lived in England. There he met Ezra Pound, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, the poet laureate, Robert Bridges. He was inspired to formulate his theory of the "sound of sense" there.

Let us choose poems according to two criteria: their quality and their variety. "A Poem", Frost tells us, "is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written". Frost
further adds and claims for all great poetry: “It begins in
delight and ends in wisdom”.11 His first full-length
collection, A Boy’s Will, published in 1913 and it contained
poems written over the previous two decades. The volume
would not appear in the United States until 1915, when
Holt issued it alongside Frost’s Next book; North of Boston.

Frost took his title from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s
poem, “My Lost Youth”:

“A boys’ will is the wind’s will,

And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

The wind’s will is a force of nature which cannot be
resisted, but it is also inconsistent and subject to
sudden change. The allusion to Longfellow therefore
provided an apology for Frost’s own lost youth, which
the poems mapped in all its cariousness. On
Christmas Day 1912, Frost wrote and described the
volume as “pretty near being the story of five years of
[his] life.”12 The coherence of A Boy’s Will was
essential: although he had already finished several of
the dramatic monologues which would eventually be
published in *North of Boston* or his third volume *Mountain Interval*. *A Boys' will* was widely and positively reviewed, and a number of influential figures championed Frost's cause. Ezra Pound wrote a laudatory review for *Poetry*, but made Frost jittery by excoriating American editors for having failed to discover Frost themselves. W.B. Yeats was reported to have called *A Boy's Will* "the best poetry written in America for a long time". Frost himself described it, with a modesty not entirely false, as "a good book in spots" and although in later years he retained his enthusiasm for "the few lyrics (he) ever really liked in his first book", he warned that the others should not be read "on any account".

The present work includes only seven poems among which only "Mowing" and "The Tuft of Flowers" bear comparison with Frost's best work. Even so, it is remarkable how many themes and motifs span his writing career, "Into My Own" and "Reluctance", the first and last poems of *A Boy's Will*, establish a pattern
of departure and return which will be repeated in book after book; "Ghost House" marks the first appearance of the ruined homestead which will reappear so much more powerfully in later poems like "The Generations of Men" and "Directive"; and "Rose Pagonis" joins with "Mowing" and "The Tuft of Flowers" as early expressions of Frost's interlinked concerns over ownership and poetic originality. The opening lines of the poem "Into My Own" begins with homage to the Master in view of Phraseology,

"One of my wishes is that those dark trees,

So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,

Were not, as' there, the merest mask of gloom,

But stretched away unto the edge of doom"

Frost's couplets rhyme too predictably, with heavy end-stops accentuating the fact not only that "Trees" must rhyme with "breeze", but "gloom" with "doom". The phrase "edge of doom" is taken from Shakespeare's sonnet 116, as the tyro sounder pays homage to the Master, Shakespeare.
The expression is verbose and archaic. "Into My Own" merits attention because it broaches, for the first time, themes and metaphors which will be more subtly explored elsewhere. In the poem, the youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world. The poem's first person voice, and the title's emphatic possessives, does suggest an autobiographical impulse. *A Boy's will* is Frost's oblique portrait of the artist as a Youngman, with "Indo My Own" representing what he is reported to have called "his first desire to escape from something his fear of something."17

Fear is one of Frost's great subjects. This poem's fear of fear is portrayed through the wish - fulfilling fantasy of the self-reliant individuals "Fearless" escape into the dark trees. Lost in the midst of a dark wood, Dante could rely on an emissary to guide him on his journey. Frost's speakers, by contrast, are typically isolated and must fall back on their own resources. The forswearing of human society with its associated fear, and the consequent journey into wilderness which is also an inner journey toward
knowledge, of what Harold Bloom has called “the American religion.”

“Into My Own” foreshadows a later and greater poem like “stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, in which “those dark trees” have became the “lovely”, dark and deep:” woods of the poem’s title, or “The Sound of the Trees”, with its vague yet nagging desire to “set forth (that phrase again) for ‘somewhere’ and in doing so, to “make the reckless choice”. As frost would argue in an essay from 1959 on Emerson:

“Freedom is nothing but departure – setting forth leaving thins behind, brave origination of the courage to be new”. It would be a journey of confirmation, not discovery.

“Into My own” had fantasized about “steal(ing) away” from human company into the wilderness. “Ghost House” acts out that fantasy, but in unexpected ways:

In dwell with a strangely aching heart
In that vanished abode there far apart
On that disused and forgotten road
That has no dust-bath now for the toad.

Night comes; the black bats tumble and dart;

Only the reference to the speaker’s “strangely aching heart”, and the suggestion of a transferred epithet in the phrase “lonely house”, hint at any regret for a solitude otherwise presented as entirely desirable. The poem exposes the vanity of – as well as the temporary damage caused by – human wishes. Ghosts may linger. But their names will be lost. The “lass and lad” are no Adam and Eve, despite the paradise connotations of the orchard tree; Eden can be Eden only in the absence of mankind. “The Ghost House”, then, is an early example of what Randall Farrell\textsuperscript{20} identified as one of Frost’s per menial subjects: “the wiping-out of man, his replacement by the nature of which he arose.”\textsuperscript{21}

The polysyndeton of the first stanza (“And ... And ... And”) brings to mind Yeats “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, with its six uses of the conjunction in its first eight lines. Even though Frost worried that Yeats came “perilously near” to believing in fairies, he admired the older poet and considered him to be “the greatest talker” he had ever met.\textsuperscript{22}
Yeats has been a major influence not just here but throughout *A Boy's Will*: the authorial notes sound like the titles of early Yeats poem.

"Ghost House" comes toward the start of a volume which traces Frost's gradual realization that he "liked people even when (he) believed (he) detested them". Consequently, it cultivates deprivation and isolation rather than the complex tones of the speaking voice which characterize Frost's second book, *North of Boston* - a "book of people", as the dedication puts it. The poem conspicuously lacks people, offering instead an impoverished and dehumanized mindscape in which the poet's imagination self-denyingly squats: even the ghosts are "mute folk". His speech rhythms make his great work memorable.

Frost ensures that each reading speaks differently to the relationship between poetic tradition and the modern poet, and between the brevity of human life and the longevity of art.
"Mowing" is, by its author's and by common consent, the most impressive poem in A Boy's Will. It is also the most enigmatic:

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows. My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make."

Frost's delight in the poet's gift for saying one thing and meaning another is here allegorized, albeit with little confidence in the poet's ability to control the ulterior meaning. His "labour" creates a whisper which proves enigmatic; he is both the originator of it and the first audience for its mystery.

"There was never a sound beside the wood, but one": "never" is absolutist, signaling that the landscape of "Mowing" is not real but literary and imaginary. The sounds of nature- the singing of birds, the wind in the trees- are nowhere to be heard, a point stressed in line five's "lack of sound". 'Mowing' is a sonnet which broadcasts an allusion to Shakespeare: "the heat of the sun" recalls "Fear no more the heat O' the sun", the death song of Cymbeline. The poem also encourages readers to think about love. Jai Parini's
claim that mowing equals love making may it first glance seem fare-fetched, yet it finds support from a traditional folk song called “The Mover”, which makes exactly the erotic parallel.

Reluctance, the final poem of A Boy’s Will, remained one of Frost’s favourites, although he was quick to concede that it could hardly be said to herald “a new force in literature”. The poem marks the end of a book and a journey. It is a fundamentally perplexed poem. The question is so loaded is so loaded as to seem rhetorical:

Ah, when to heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season.

‘Ah’ is the knowing expression of one who trumps a limited with a superior wisdom. To “go with the drift of
things" may be the reasonable option, but its quietism offends the heart's instinct: "reason", after all, rhymes with (and is the large part of) "treason". The parallel drawn between the human heart and the cycles of the natural world only risks encouraging a new fatalism.

Frost once proposed that in "Reluctance", as in "The Tuft of Flowers", he had explored his "position ... between socialism and individualism". That imposes on the poem a political dimension which the text nowhere justifies. But the poem is strange – augury of Frost's later achievement, because the continuing attractions of a pericipateric solitude run counter to the inspiration which his poetry will learn to find at home and among people.

North of Boston (1914) was hailed by the readers as well as critics and poets. The poet, Edward Thomas celebrates it as "one of the most revolutionary books of modern times" and Ford Maddox Ford finds Frost's poetry "superior even to that of Whitman". Frost was confident of his achievement, calling North of Boston "epoch making". It contains some of the best-loved pours of the twentieth

One of the most loved and anthologized of Frost's poems, "Mending Wall" was written in England probably during the latter half of 1913. The poem also lends itself to debates about nationhood and internationalism, selfhood, neighboursliness, the rituals of labour, the interactions between man and nature, and any number of related subjects which, according to context, can seem equally possibly and equally partial. But allegorical readings ought not to overwhelm the poem's precisely physical descriptions.

"Mending Wall" also happens to be about mending a wall. The poem is framed by two aphorisms: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" occurs twice, and is thought and spoken by the poem's first-person voice; "Good fences make good neighbours", spoken by the neighbor who lives "beyond the hill", also occurs twice. Each man uses his aphorism combatively. Robert Faggen^{32} has stated that
“Mending wall” reanimates “a kind of poem found in Virgil’s
ten Eclogues, known as amoeba-con dialogue, a type of
competition between shepherds”. Yet the poem ensures that
the competition becomes a rout, the dialogue virtually a
monologue:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall

Something there is that does and after all

Oh guileless children house and pastures

Can’t you be taught that since the world began

All life upon it has been cellular

Inside and outside cells are all we are.

Walls are inherent in creation and creativity. While
critical attention has tended to focus on the macrocosmic
possibilities for readings of “Mending Wall” – such as wars
and the nation state – Frost here and elsewhere in his note-
books dwells on the microcosmic, the cellular. Dynamic
balance is key to the poem – a balance which is achievable
only if the speaker and his neighbor work together to keep
them apart.
Like "Mending Wall", "The Death of the Hired Man" is a rhetorical contest, except that now the antagonism has been replaced by love. It is the poems great irony that while husband and wife (Warren and Mary) debase at considerable length how best to deal with Silas, an unreliable hired man who has returned sick to the farm, the hired man dies alone in the next room. By the time they are agreed that they should help him, he is beyond help. But it is also a fatal delaying of action; when Silas most needs companionship and possibly even medical intervention, they are busy next door exchanging aphorisms about the meaning of home. Frost raises questions of value and cost.

The poem's most famous passage crystallizes debates about prerogative and deserving:

"Home it the place where, when you have together,

They have to take you in."

"I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve."
Frost would later characterize the first position (spoken by Warren) as the manly and Republican way, and the second as maternal and Democratic. Mark Richardson has complained that the passage sums up the poem's attitude to gender, in which masculinity includes "justice and reason" and femininity "mercy and emotion". Thus Richardson attributes the popularity of the poem in "genteel American culture."

"The Mountain" is the most Wordsworthian poem in North of Boston, not just in its everyday diction and blank verse, but also in characterization. The slow-moving farmer who describes the locality is a direct descendant of Wordsworth's old Cumberland beggar and especially his leech-gatherer, figures whose intimacy with their environment grants them an intuitive wisdom "the Mountain explores the limitations as well as the depths of the farmer's knowledge, and explores, ultimately, the nature of knowledge itself.

"Home Burial" is yet another conversation poem. It is positioned in North of Boston so as to break patterns. Home
that is, any sense of home as a place of comfort, security, love, and mutual respect – has been buried, and its occupants with it. The phrase “home burial” fuses (and confuses) inside and outside, invigoration and suffocation, life and death. The graveyard is “Not so much larger than a bedroom,” and if that metaphor recalls the familiar idea of the dead lying at rest in their narrow bed, it also hints at the likelihood that the marital bedroom has become a graveyard. Frost portrays so sympathetically a character unsympathetic to everything he holds dear.

*North of Boston* was replaced by *Mountain Interval* ((1916) with poems like *Christmas Trees, Hula Brook, Birches, the Vanishing Red* and *The Sound of the Trees* etc. His collection of verse *New Hampshire* (1923) contains the most famous poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. Frost considered “Stopping by Woods” to be his “best bid for remembrance”. The poem is at once disarmingly simple and temptingly ulterior: we are invited to understand that much more is at stake, but we may be less certain about how to define or characterize that ulterior
meaning, or even on what textual basis we are entitled to try. Frost himself is reported to have given a biographical source, describing how he once broke down in tears on the way back from market during a difficult winter. As they passed some woods, his horse slowed and then stopped: It knew what (Frost) had to do. He had to cry, and he did."35 Yet there are no tears shed during “Stopping by Woods.” The poem may be set in the “darkest evening of the year”, but if “darkest” is meant to imply depression and despair a dark night of the soul – it seems strange that the woods should be described as “lovely, dark and deep.”

Frost’s Keatsian cadences lack purposeful well-being: the woods may be filling with snow, but they are more appealing, and certainly less chilly, than those “promises” which need to be kept. The repented is a formal dramatization of the poem’s conflict between motion and stasis and (if we should allow the ulterior meaning) between life and death.

Among his ‘Later Poems’ have been selected from four of Frost’s later volumes. “Acquainted with the Night” was

“The Gift Outright” is linked with a particular political and historical moment. The uncertainty about goals and destinations brings the poem into conflict with the occasion which recruits it: if the project is complete, what can a new presidency achieve? Frost’s supplement indulges in the paradox that the project is complete and yet on going.

“The Gift Outright” partakes of myth making and nation building: in proper Frostian fashion, its words have the ambition to become deeds. A land which had been “artless” is here celebrated through art, as the processional iambics of the opening line formally convey the progress from
east to west and from the colonial to a proud independence. The poem leaves unreached the question of whether, through conquest and assimilation, those other groups have now qualified as full members of the poem's imagined community, or whether they continue to stand outside the nation - building project as described by Frost. Frost's parenthetical aside acknowledges as much: the nicety of the legal phrase "deed of gift" is ironic, as nations are forged out of "many deeds of war".

Often considered to be the last of Frost's major poems, "Directive" offers itself as a *summa poetica* because it runs through so many of the motifs which have sustained his work. The past, which the poem figures is a lost and only partially retrievable world. It is also a childhood world, incorporating some of the rhythms of nursery rhyme. Acknowledging Wordsworth's complaint that "The world is too much with us", Frost's poem signals its agreement by seeking refuge in a 'simple' time. Frost in "Directive" seems at first to express a clear preference: those who miss the anteriority of his parables "can't get saved". Salvation comes
from being a good reader. The poem's final line, sitting with
tonal uncertainty between invitation and command, risks
bringing about the very confusion from which it claims to
redeem us.
References


