CHAPTER – III
3 FROST’S POETRY – A STUDY

Frost, in some of his basic critical presuppositions, is very much part of the most important early twentieth century theorizing. As a theorist, frost was not only sophisticated; he was a self-conscious innovator, dedicated, practical. His theories cover many aspects of poetry and have a flexibility that allows them to develop without losing their initial relevance. His theories are rarely stated in formal terms – they occur incidentally in letters, prefaces, interviews, lectures – yet taken as a whole, they form one of the most significant bodies of poetical theory by any American poet, more profound and wide ranging than Poe’s, more poetical and technical than Emerson’s. As a poet, Frost sought to bring out the heroism in daily life of “the unconsidered person” . . . give him his due. It even “takes a hero to make a poem,” he made bold to say. And so the reader ought to honor that heroism and the poet’s perilously fulfilled intentions by doing “nothing to the poem that it never was written to have done to it.”

Robert Frost is early taught as the essential American poet. Half of us memorized the silky and magical tones of Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.

No poet is better known; his verse echoes in our speech. We know Frost’s road not taken, the good fences that make good neighbors, home as the place where they have to take you in, and those woods - so lovely, dark, and deep.

We can picture Frost’s iconographic thatch of white hair and grainy face framed by a gray-black New England barn. No poet since Walt Whitman has been so public. In 1943, 50,000 copies of Frost’s verse were mailed to soldiers overseas. The peak was President Kennedy’s inaugural on national TV: Frost at age 89 read The Gift
Outright on the Capitol steps, lost his way in the bright sun, and recited the poem from memory.

Still, Frost’s place in American art is not yet set in stone. Joseph Brodsky, for one, writes that he can’t get Frost off his mind and feels the poet deserves a deeper look. Clearly, Frost is more than a folksy speaker of country things – a saint with an apple bucket in his hands. He had an awareness of pain and grief, of promises not kept, of creation seemingly at endless odds with itself. Frost was a secret bitter chronicler of the dark side, as some say.

Actually, there is a persistent undercurrent of spiritual questioning in Frost - something rarely noted. The poems, in a gentle way, are about the most serious issues of life and death; the poet has an interest in things divine. He is too much a New Englander, a Yankee, and a human to announce this flatly. Not announcing it, in fact, is where his art lies.

How well a pre-Vietnam era poet can fare in a postmodern age is a question. But at a time when people are hungering for authenticity and light, partly because these seem increasingly unavailable, Frost has much to give. For example, West Running Brook is a poem about trusting oneself to “go by contraries,” this little gem:

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.²

Much of the renewed appreciation of Frost is due to a remarkable little book, The Rabbi and the Poet. Written by Andrew Marks, “The Rabbi and the Poet” is a cluster of simple but vital exchanges between Frost and a little-known rabbi from Cincinnati, Victor Reichert, who was close to Frost for 20 years and lived near him in Vermont. The book
even contains a heretofore unpublished sermon Frost gave at the rabbi’s synagogue in 1946.

The two men exchanged something rare, and Rabbi Reichert’s special view of Frost gives the book its character. This friendship is the kind people truly have, but which a high-powered biographer traveling along the main avenues of a life might miss the importance of. Reichert thinks Frost is the most religious man he ever knew; the book is a kind of prayer about matters of the spirit and about sharing unseen evidence of the divine.

In his own sermon on Frost as an Old Testament Christian, the rabbi notes that the poet yearns for heaven but wants life acted out concretely on this planet. He refers to lines from Birches, a poem used in countless Sunday sermons:

It’s when I’m weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
I’d like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
But, the poet continues,
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.³

The rabbi and the poet ask each other basic questions that go past ethnic or religious boundaries to something universal. Those imagining Frost to be a cranky atheist might think again. At the beginning of The Rabbi and the Poet, Reichert recounts an exchange prior to the poet’s passing in 1963 about the possibility of life after death. Frost comments:
‘With so many ladders going up everywhere there must be something for them to lean against.’

When Mr. Marks found him some years ago, the rabbi was still living on a Vermont hillside. Over brook trout and poetry, Reichert talked about Frost. The rabbi, who loved the poet without it being hero worship, asked: “What could be more opposite than Robert Frost, with several hundred years of America on his side, and myself - first generation American with several generations of tailors, horse thieves, ex-convicts, and rabbis from Poland and Germany?”

Yet as it happened, the rabbi’s own faith and Jewish tradition, itself no stranger to suffering helped him appreciate Frost. The poet did have a dark side. He faced personal tragedy. His father died early; his sister became insane; his son committed suicide, and two other children died young. The rabbi says Frost wept about this in his presence. Yet Frost did not whine - he sought to transform his hardship into art of beauty and depth.

Frost’s sermon may be the highlight of The Rabbi and the Poet. He wrote it, fortified with two raw eggs, the evening before its delivery. He describes the religious life as a straining of the spirit forward to wisdom beyond wisdom. This man who made a virtue of unstinting Job-like questioning also accepts in some fashion the notion of God’s sovereignty. What is important is not what I think or you think - but what God thinks, he says, quoting the Scriptures: “And none can say, unto Thee, ‘What doest Thou?”

Frost has always had his defenders, however, from Ezra Pound to Dana Gioia. The latest is Tim Kendall in The Art of Robert Frost. He sees in Frost a trait common to all great artists: the ability, as Frost himself put it, to be a poet for all sorts and kinds. Frost’s best poems, according to Kendall, have at least two meanings – ‘a particular
and an ulterior one. This may be true of all art, but great artists are those whose ‘particular’ meaning is expressed so well that readers, as Frost is reported to have said, might feel free to settle for that part of the poem as sufficient in itself.

Frost places a great deal of importance on Nature in all of his collections. Because of the time he spent in New England, the majority of pastoral scenes that he describes are inspired by specific locations in New England. However, Frost does not limit himself to stereotypical pastoral themes such as sheep and shepherds. Instead, he focuses on the dramatic struggles that occur within the natural world, such as the conflict of the changing of seasons (as in After Apple-Picking). Frost also presents the natural world as one that inspires deep metaphysical thought in the individuals who are exposed to it (as in Birches). For Frost, Nature is not simply a background for poetry, but rather a central character in his works.

Communication or the lack thereof, appears as a significant theme in several of Frost’s poems, as Frost presents it as the only possible escape from isolation and despair of everyday life.

Frost is very interested in the activities of everyday life, because it is this side of humanity that is the most ‘real’ to him. Even the most basic act in a normal day can have numerous hidden meanings that need only to be explored by a poetic mind. For example, in the poem Mowing, the simple act of mowing hay with a scythe is transformed into a discussion of the value of hard work and the traditions of the New England countryside. As Frost argues in the poem, by focusing on ‘reality,’ the real actions of real people, a poet can sift through the unnecessary elements of fantasy and discover “Truth.” Moreover, Frost believes that the emphasis on everyday life allows him to communicate with his readers more clearly; they can empathize with the struggles and
emotions that are expressed in his poems and come to a greater understanding of ‘truth’ themselves.

The theme of isolation of the Individual is closely related to the theme of communication. The majority of the characters in Frost’s poems are isolated in one way or another. Even the characters that show no sign of depression or loneliness, such as the narrators in The Sound of Trees or Fire and Ice, are still presented as detached from the rest of society, isolated because of their unique perspective. In some cases, the isolation is a far more destructive force. For example, in The Lockless Door, the narrator has remained in a ‘cage’ of isolation for so many years that he is too terrified to answer the door when he hears a knock. This heightened isolation keeps the character from fulfilling his potential as an individual and ultimately makes him a prisoner of his own making. Yet, as Frost suggests, this isolation can be avoided by interactions with other members of society; if the character in The Lockless Door could have brought himself to open the door and face an invasion of his isolation, he could have achieved a greater level of personal happiness.

Duty is a very important value in the rural communities of New England, so it is not surprising that Frost employs it as one of the primary themes of his poetry. Frost describes conflicts between desire and duty as if the two must always be mutually exclusive; in order to support his family, a farmer must acknowledge his responsibilities rather than indulge in his personal desires. This conflict is particularly clear in Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, when the narrator expresses his wish to stay in the woods and watch the snow continue to fall. However, he is unable to deny his obligation to his family and his community; he cannot remain in the woods because of his ‘promises to keep,’ and so he continues on his way. Similarly, in The Sound of Tree, Frost describes a character who wants to follow the advice of the
trees and make the ‘reckless’ decision to leave his community. At the end of the poem, the character does not choose to leave (yet) because his sense of duty to those around him serves as the roots that keep him firmly grounded.

The theme of rationality versus imagination is similar to the theme of duty where the hardworking people whom Frost describes in his poetry are forced to choose between rationality and imagination; the two cannot exist simultaneously. The adults in Frost’s poetry generally maintain their rationality as a burden of duty, but there are certain cases when the hint of imagination is almost too seductive to bear. For example, in Birches, the narrator wishes that he could climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood and leave the rational world behind, if only for a moment. This ability to escape rationality and indulge in the liberation of imagination is limited to the years of childhood. After reaching adulthood, the traditions of New England life require strict rationality and an acceptance of responsibility. As a result of this conflict, Frost makes the poem Out, Out - even more tragic, describing a young boy who is forced to leave his childhood behind to work at a man’s job and ultimately dies in the process.

The theme of rural life versus urban life relates to Frost’s interest in Nature and everyday life. Frost’s experience growing up in New England exposed him to a particular way of life that seemed less complicated and yet more meaningful than the life of a city dweller. The farmers whom Frost describes in his poetry have a unique perspective on the world as well as a certain sense of honor and duty in terms of their work and their community. Frost is not averse to examining urban life in his poetry; in Acquainted with the Night, the narrator is described as being someone who lives in a large city. However, Frost has more opportunities to find ‘metaphysical meaning in everyday tasks and explore the relationship between mankind and nature
through the glimpses of rural life and farming communities that he expresses in his poetry. Urban life is ‘real,’ but it lacks the quality and clarity of life that is so fascinating to Frost in his work.
REFERENCES:


2. https://www.internal.org/Robert_Frost/West_Running_Brook Web


5. Ibid
