

Chapter Seven

Summing Up

Robert Frost is a poet of affirmation. Our study of his poetry, letters, interviews and various other pronouncements in the foregoing chapters bears out this.

But the kind of affirmation that obtains in Frost's poetry is something that is hard-won. There are aspects of terror that unmistakably characterize his work. There is, first of all, the terror inherent in nature. In the face of nature's immensity and power, individual man looks small and insignificant. Nature has a terribly destructive power, and it can destroy him easily when he least expects it. There are also other forms of terror stemming from the human condition. Death, loneliness, fear, mental agonies and tensions, all these make man's life here a tough affair. The question of evil baffles him and he even contemplates the possibility of an absurd universe, a universe which is perhaps governed by an evil design or by no design at all. Frost's poetry contains all these forms of terror, and thus it does terrify as Trilling pointed out.

But despite the terrors that lurk at the centre of Frost's work, he is not a pessimistic poet. The kind of pessimism that obtains in the work of Hardy, for instance, is not to be found in Frost. If his poetry terrifies, it does not stop there, but takes us beyond the terror vindicating in a sure manner faith in life. As against the terror inherent in nature, Frost presents a courageous, enduring human spirit which fights back with an indomitable will. Nature can destroy man physically, true. But it cannot suppress his spirit. The immensity and power of nature are more than matched by the unyielding resistance offered by the human spirit. The same note of optimism runs through other forms of terror too. As against the terror of death, there is life eternal and the hope of salvation which comes to us not through any merit of ours but through the infinite mercy of God. And if men are tormented at times by mental or physical agonies, they are not to lose heart. Even suffering has its place in the scheme of things. And after all, individual man is not absolutely alone in his sufferings. The terror of loneliness is not that terrifying when we realize that there is the unfailing

hand of God supporting and sustaining us when all seems lost and no help whatsoever seems available. Everything has a meaning and purpose. Only we may not always be able to see the connection between what we get and what we deserve. The fault is not in the way things happen, but in our expecting to understand everything through reason. All things in the universe move according to plan. There is thus design, meaning and direction for the universe.

Frost's man is a free individual who has the capacity to shape his own destiny through free and careful choices. This freedom of choice is a valuable asset man possesses and it distinguishes him from other living creatures on earth and raises him to a higher level of existence. His life here in this world is a journey fraught with obstacles, But despite the obstacles he goes ahead with his journey with determination and courage. Through the storm and the darkness he pushes forward, determined to reach his destination. He is not carried away by the deceptive attractions of nature; nor can the numerous other obstacles on the way dissuade him.

Poetry like Robert Frost's is an act of faith. He is no pessimist. He has faith in man's capabilities; he has trust in the justice and mercy of God. Life, as he sees it, has meaning and purpose. In the face of the confusion and chaos of the world, man has the capacity to establish meaning and order. He can look beyond the darkness of the world and can find light. Like the white wave in "West-Running Brook," he can resist the downward motion of existence into nothingness. While this counter movement towards the source is true of all things it is most true of man. In his case it means a resistance offered by the spirit against matter, by the rational against the irrational. The constant drift of matter into waste and decay is successfully checked by this resistance and triumph of the spiritual against the material and irrational.

Terror is an undeniable quality of Frost's poetry. In the very predicament of man in the universe we see terror, and man must live, strive and die here. He must hence learn to live with it through all strains and stresses.

But if there is terror all around, man has not to lose heart. He is well equipped for the battle which he is called upon to fight. There is no surrender, no giving way to despair.

In Frost, terror is not a terminal though often an envelope. Man's predicament in the universe is beset with all kinds of terror within and without — the terror of the vast unknown, the terror that stems from some profound metaphysical anguish or the terror of the forces that operate with continual hostility against him. But it is the greatness and glory of man that he refuses to be struck down by terror of any sort and sets forth beyond terror with a heart full of faith for any fate. It is in this step beyond the terror that a Frost protagonist takes that we have not merely an act of courage but a testament of affirmation as well.